

## **Re-Thinking Illegality as a Violence *Against*, not by Mexican Immigrants, Children, and Youth**

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*Sociohistorical theory was used to examine illegality as a form of state violence that bears upon the formation of undocumented Mexican immigrants. This article proposes a theory of dialectical violence that integrates societal with personal enactments of violence through case illustrations of Mexican youth. In a grassroots association defending immigrants' rights, youth develop within conflicting discourses about undocumented immigrants proposed by society, family, and community. Methods included ethnographic analysis of the association's documents, a workshop in which five participants authored a booklet with texts and illustrations about their lives in the city, and an interview with their mothers. Findings illustrate how Mexican youth enter a cycle of violence as a result of their undocumented status, socioeconomic class, language and ethnic-racial memberships.*

The study of youth violence has persistently focused on members of minority groups from lower income backgrounds (Eron, Gentry, & Schlegel, 1994). This is an institutional injustice in research literature that produces a notion of minorities as worthy objects of inquiry only when they are emblematic of undesirable characteristics: being marginalized, poor, and likely to fail according to society's standards. Understandably, much research has addressed this institutional bias by portraying minorities in something other than in a deficit model, with a more positive light around a number of issues, such as language (Labov, 1968; Zentella, 1997), education (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Trueba, 1999; Valdes, 1997), or identity (Cross, 1995; Matute-Bianchi, 1991), and by re-conceptualizing

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violence as resistance to social injustice (hooks, 1994; Walsh, 1987). Such previous research has attempted to portray its subjects from within their own complex set of cultural lenses. This article presents innovative theory and methods based on case illustrations of Mexican youth that address violence as a potential outcome of societal-individual dialectical relationships.

### **Illegality as a Societal-Institutional Violence**

Research on violence in relation to the lives of minority youth needs to discuss critically the origins and development of violence within the particular situation of the population under investigation. In this article, I examine notions of illegality as an identity from the perspective of undocumented Mexican immigrants, particularly through the perspectives of children and youth. As I will describe, illegality is one kind of societal violence with which Mexican immigrants and their children are faced; I argue that illegality is produced on a societal level through social structures such as the mass media, immigration laws, and popular opinion where undocumented immigrants are “illegal” subjects worthy of disparagement in popular discourse, and of exploitation in popular practice (Espenshade & Belanger, 1998).

This article, however, posits that undocumented Mexican youth and the children of undocumented parents must confront conflicting perspectives that define who undocumented immigrants are. The arguments I present in this article are drawn from empirical research conducted in a grassroots organization defending the rights of Mexican immigrants. Within this special context, Mexican children and youth develop their identities through discourses of illegality proposed by society, family, and community. This article illustrates how a *dialectical* relationship of violence is formed as institutionally-assaulted Mexican youth become violent youth themselves.

Drawing from sociohistorical psychology (Scribner, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978), the original focus of the study involved examining the formation of identity in societal/institutional and individual contexts of illegality. Following from this premise, identity was conceptualized as a dialectical activity operationalized in the activities of a community-based organization and its individual members. This article intends to expand the theoretical and methodological literature on identity that only relatively recently began to take sociopolitical context and cultural variability into account (Harré & Gillett, 1994; Parker, 1997). Moreover, it expands the work of previous studies that stress the importance of race, ethnicity, and gender (Cross, 1995; Deaux, 2000; Hurtado, 1996) by adding a focus on immigration status as another institutional structure upon which identity may be based.

Vygotskian sociohistorical theory (1978) proposes that psychological forms emerge through cultural tools that mediate between material and psychological activity. In this sense, it is essential to locate the tools that are available for the formation of individuals' identities. I theorize that societal-institutional structures

of immigration status, race, ethnicity, and language are available to Mexican immigrants and children in the context of U.S. relations of power; they are potential tools for meaningful, dialectical, psychological-material activity. This article presents initial steps toward considering whether personal acts of violence can be explained according to this theoretical premise, illustrated through case examples of Mexican youth.

### Research Methods

This study traced youths' psychological development through societal and individual histories. Ethnographic fieldwork including participant observation of a grassroots organization in New York City took place during the years 1999–2000; during this time, I collected field notes, public documents such as brochures and press releases, as well as 16 issues of an information bulletin published monthly. As a participant of the organization, I continue to work with the staff on the writing of grant proposals, translations of important documents, and the planning of special projects. I also assist a number of cultural events, rallies, and manifestations.

The organization operates at the grassroots level for the purpose of defending the legal and human rights of Mexican immigrants in the city. All members are volunteers, primarily undocumented Mexican immigrants organized in community-based groups that convene in their neighborhood's parishes around the city's five boroughs. The organization estimates the population to currently stand at about 500,000 people, and it claims to reach over 10,000 Mexican immigrants through its 40 affiliate groups. At present, the organization is the largest Mexican institution in the city; in spite of its recent inception in 1997, it is a highly public organization that maintains close and frequent contact with the media.

In addition to such ethnographic methods, I designed an audio-taped writing workshop for children and youth in which 16 participants authored a booklet with written texts and illustrations about their lives in the city. (Titles of written documents [e.g., booklet, bulletins] produced by the organization, and proper names of participants have been avoided or changed in this article to protect confidentiality.) The purpose was to write this booklet for other Mexican children and youth whose families planned to migrate to New York. The mothers of five core participants were interviewed together after its completion.

The research questions raised in this article are:

- (1) How do Mexican children and youth experience, understand, and discuss illegality?
- (2) What kinds of violence are Mexican youth exposed to and how do they respond?
- (3) What are the consequences of violence on youths' identities and general development?

My analysis rests primarily on triangulation methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) that verified the general ideology and political position of the organization through both its general activities and local testimonies across participants. However, individual variability was also examined across adult and child participants, as well as within the group of children and youth with whom I worked closely to underscore the individuals' characterizations of illegality. In this chapter I focus on data classified under the general theme of violence, a grounded category among several (others included literacy, citizenship, and religion) that emerged in descriptions of Mexican youth, as well as the youths' descriptions of their own experiences of life in the city.

### **Insider Institutional Responses to Illegality**

The community organization where the research was conducted was a critical site for youths' development as it provides an institutional re-framing of illegality as a societal violence *against* undocumented Mexican immigrants. The *Asociación Tepeyac* organizes Mexican immigrants so they can learn about and publicly defend their human and legal rights, maintain their cultural identity, and publicly expose the societal hypocrisy that underlies discourses about undocumented immigrants. Through its public rallies, protests, cultural events, and monthly information bulletin, it affords immigrants a common discourse with which to contest multiple acts of violence (such as human rights infractions, labor abuse, and racial discrimination) that result from both unfair practices and erroneous grounds upon which the identities particular to undocumented immigrants emerge on the societal level. The association attempts also to curtail personal acts of violence that are seen as consequences of these hardships by publishing texts that raise awareness about common problems and resources in the community. In this way, the association constructs both the cause and solution for Mexican migrants' violence externally. Its common discourse, emerging through the communication of shared experiences and practices during community meetings and published texts, portrays violence *toward* Mexican immigrants as a cause of acts of violence *by* Mexican immigrants, a cycle that begins with the actual immigration experience.

Although crossing over the Mexican–U.S. border is a potential solution to their severe economic hardships (Smith, 1996), crossing the border illegally is a traumatic experience for many immigrants. Hagan (1998) documents the physical dangers Mexican migrants face when they cross into the United States which include getting caught by the Border Patrol, swindled by smugglers, and robbed or killed by border bandits. Others become lost or lose their children who were accompanying them; some die of dehydration or hypothermia in desert areas (Hagan, 1998). Another harsh reality that I have observed the association address is the widespread violence against women who state they have been sexually abused in their attempt to cross the border. Their testimonies claim that their aggressors range

from border bandits or “cholos” and smugglers, to Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) officers.

This is a reality of abuse fostered by discriminatory immigration laws and economic relations that force Mexican migrants to enter an illegal underground culture of violence later reinforced by labor abuse and even racial or physical maltreatment, along with other problems more common to poor immigrants in general (see Suarez-Orozco, 1998 for a volume of research on Mexican immigration that discusses the range of hardships this population endures). I argue that the adaptation of Mexican immigrants in New York is a process grounded in special circumstances and experiences having to do with being poor, undocumented people of color. *Asociación Tepeyac* addresses such acts of violence against Mexican immigrants by raising awareness about border perils, pressuring civically both U.S. and Mexican governments to take actions to protect migrants’ human rights, and defending migrants threatened with deportation by employers, landlords, or others as they live and work in substandard conditions. In addition, the association seeks services and alternative activities (that are both legal and non-violent) for those immigrants who become involved in gangs, who abuse substances and alcohol, or those affected by domestic violence. In the process, personal acts of violence against themselves and others are construed as consequences of their specially difficult life circumstances in the city.

The association’s monthly information bulletins, for example, contain articles in which violence in the community is consistently explained as youths’ reactions to violence and mistreatment directed toward them. For example, in one such article the Executive Director wrote that some immigrants take their anger out on others, even innocent victims, when they, themselves, have been exploited, mistreated, or paid unfairly. Such explanations point to a dialectical relationship: a cycle between the societal abuse *faced* by Mexican immigrants, and the personal acts of violence and abuse *enacted* by Mexican immigrants. The association seeks to involve youth in constructive activities that build a sense of community and empowerment, and that raise consciousness to motivate peaceful yet forceful action. In the next section I examine youths’ narrations of violence, how they understand and respond to social violence, and how their personal experiences intersect with their own psychological formation and identities. I propose that illegality is one possible source of violent expression among Mexican youth when the societal violence imposed on them becomes a psychological tool with which they can re-define or relate to themselves and others.

### **Mexican Children and Youths’ Experiences of Violence and Notions of Illegality**

Mexican children’s and youths’ experiences of violence emerged indirectly as part of the audiotaped booklet project having to do with their general experiences

of life in New York. They were primarily recruited through the “snowballing” method; although I met a total of 16 children and teenagers over the course of this project, five of them participated consistently. By examining their interpersonal relationships, youths’ own experiences of violence inevitably emerged. Children and youth described their own confrontations with different kinds of violence, ranging from physical and verbal to racial and psychological. Therefore, my analysis of children’s development examined the social positions of power (Harré & Gillett, 1994) they adopted with respect to themselves and their communities in order to understand how they identified themselves and others. Rather than limit my examination to their social role, I was interested in their specific position within a status and power hierarchy. Wherever possible, I also compared their power positions with information gathered from the audiotaped group interview with their mothers to further place their lives in a historical context; their opinions represented another kind of institution (the family) whose point of view children and youth are exposed to in a profound way. As the illustrations below will demonstrate, violence is afforded by society as a tool youth use to make sense of themselves, other people, and institutions. They use violence to make sense of their own and others’ identities, and in their interpersonal relations and actions.

Since my intent is to portray the different kinds of violence youth experienced, even one mention of violence in their lives by one child or teenager was sufficient. In my analysis I subdivided findings according to institutional, inter-ethnic, intra-ethnic, reactive, and unexplained violence. Other researchers have similarly described aggression in terms of relational, proactive, or reactive terms (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), but in this study I place equal importance on the violent acts exerted by youth as to those directed toward them within the dialectical framework outlined above. In a Vygotskian sense (1978), a psychological tool develops from cultural artifacts and eventually mediates a dialectical relationship between individuals’ cognitive and material functions. Therefore, I also examined whether violence carried psychological functions for Mexican children or youth.

The youths described their experiences of violence in relation to their race, ethnicity, language background, and immigration status. For example, some children mentioned having to defend their parents or themselves as English language learners when they first arrived in the United States. In addition, children and youth narrated stories of ethnic conflict, as they talked about fights they had with other Latinos or other Mexicans. A thirteen year-old girl narrated the following:

*Se creen mucho los puertorriqueños* [Puerto Ricans think they’re all that]. In my school, I had a fight with this Puerto Rican girl but all the girls, all of them, came up to me. I was like “What you want?” They were like “Oh why you talking shit.” We had a fight. She called me a lesbian and stuff like that so I got mad, right? I started cursing at her, *todas me vieron* [all of them saw me], right? And they were like “Oh why you calling her this and that, you call her mother-.” I was like no. My friends was like “Yo, what’s wrong with you?” Then they wanted to suspend me. I was like “No, *deja eso* [drop that] . . . I got sick of it . . . I

usually like—all my friends are Puerto Rican. All of them. I'm like, I don't get it. I fight with Puerto Ricans, I have friends [who are] Puerto Rican."

Based on her description, it would seem that such conflicts, however irrational, stemmed from inter-ethnic rivalry. However, in the continuation of her narrative, we see that this is only one kind of ethnic rivalry, and that violence seems to be used as a means to address other, inexplicit and unresolved issues:

Actually, *con los que peleo más son con mi propia raza porque hay unos que, este, like, otras chamacas, mi misma edad, igual, tienen* [those I fight with the most are other Mexicans because there are some, like other girls my same age] 13, 14, whatever, right? *Traen pleito conmigo. Por nada. Son,* [They're carrying a fight with me. For nothing. They're,] um, *cholas.* I'm like, *ya van como dos veces que me paran diciendo que ando hablando de ellas* [already twice they've stopped me saying I'm talking about them], and I'm like *ni siquiera* [I didn't even] . . . *Yo una vez les dije, sí, o sea, ustedes dicen que yo hablo de ustedes y todo. O mejor si se quieren pelear conmigo ya díganme . . .* [Once I told them, ok, you say I'm talking about you and all. Better yet, if you're looking for a fight with me, tell me . . .] I'm like "shit!" *Eso me aburre ya* [I'm tired of it already]. I was like, *ya mejor se quedaron quietas* [then they finally stopped still].

This teenager resorted to violence, in light of having to defend herself and in her frustration at failing to understand why she was the object of others' hostility. From her narrative it seemed that she has had a great deal of contact with other Mexican youth, and had mentioned earlier that she was involved in organizing a folkloric dance group for the Mexican youth in gangs in her neighborhood. Wondering whether her contact with Mexicans and experiences of violence were taking place outside of the association's activities, I asked her if there were other Mexicans in her school to which she responded:

*En la mía sí. En la mía creo que hay más mexicanos pero la verdad son como muy callejeros. Pero, se creen, ves* [In mine there are. In mine I think there are mostly Mexicans, but the truth is they're really street kids. But they're snobs, see]. No, I don't get it. It's like, *mira*, in my school, *o sea ¿no?* [right?] In my school, *en todas partes, cuando hay bailes* [everywhere, when there are dances] and stuff, *todos vamos y cuando acaba el baile, a la mitad, en medio* [we all go and when the dance ends], in middle of the dance, there's fighting. Mexicans *con* [with] Mexicans. Mexicans, they try to kill each other. I'm like—they try to take knives out *y que pistolas y que* [and guns and], but I'm like "what the—?" That's why my mother doesn't take me to dances anymore.

Throughout her narrative, this teenager contrasted herself with other Latino and Mexican youth who start fights for no reason. She continually positioned herself as a (potential) victim of violence who resorted to violence as a personal defense against the harm toward which she was drawn under racial/ethnic segmentations and sub-divisions.

Aside from narrating such personal experiences of violence that children and youth faced and reacted to, others also discussed their exposure to risky conditions in their neighborhoods. After being questioned on one occasion about how one might meet other Mexicans in the city, an eleven year-old boy suggested youth in gangs in Mexican neighborhoods.

The particular experiences of violence that children narrated positioned them against other racial/ethnic groups as well as against members of their own ethnicity or nationality. Each of these youths' narrations of violence pointed to a circular or dialectal developmental pathway between societal and personal violence, that is, a society where racial and ethnic differences exist affords youth with racist means to address their conflicts. Without direct means and critical thinking skills to understand and address their conflicts, racial/ethnic violence is perpetuated.

However, my participants' confrontations with violence did not emerge from only racial/ethnic, or intra-ethnic conflicts, but were discussed also in relation to illegality. Therefore, I examined also how the children's individual experiences of violence intersected with their understanding of illegality according to institutional definitions of "illegal" immigrants. One must consider the impact that illegality as a societal violence can have on undocumented Mexican immigrants who, without organization, are silenced and easily exploited, as well as how this bears upon their children's development.

The children and teenagers who had lived in Mexico long enough to remember what it was like living there were well aware of the dangers of border-crossing and consequent injustices that Mexican immigrants faced in the United States. For instance, a fourteen year-old girl who participated only once in the booklet project narrated this knowledge. I had asked her if she had been born there and what she remembered about Mexico. She stated:

I remember some stuff. It was hard to live there. There was no money and . . . the food was a lot of money. You buy like four things and it was already two hundred something [pesos]. You can't survive there. [JOCELYN: That's why a lot of people come here.] But everyone's dying when they come over here, you know, they have to close that part [of the border]—the desert. When they come, you know, they have to pass by the desert 'cause they don't have papers so in the desert they say there's a lot of snow and everything and, you know, they don't survive in there.'

Using her personal experience of economic hardship and cultural knowledge of the dangers of border-crossing, this teenager juxtaposed Mexican migrants with an unidentified "they," an authority who had the power to close the border. She repeated the use of "survival," first to describe Mexicans' difficult economic situation, and later to describe the risk they took by crossing the border under hazardous conditions. Poverty and protected borders both lie outside of Mexican migrants' individual control, and work against them as societal barriers to their survival. She had commented earlier that she sometimes dislikes Americans who say they hate immigrants, but make them work hard for little pay. Thus, she was aware of the economic hardships and immigration-related violence that Mexican migrants faced, and used this knowledge to expose her understanding of social injustice and power imbalances.

Based on my reading of their collective experiences, Mexican children and youth must make sense of the illegitimate U.S. membership they, their families,



and/or communities are afforded as a result of their undocumented status, *and* racial, class, and language backgrounds. This is a violence that they must confront using whatever means they have available to them. “Violenced” children and youth, without appropriate tools to defend themselves, are set up to become violent youth themselves. In addition to becoming frustrated and angry as described in their narrations above, such violence may have consequences on their identities ranging from children’s affiliation with marginalized communities, to a complete rejection of Mexican identity and assimilation to mainstream beliefs.

### **A Case Study: The Emergence of David’s Critical Consciousness and Limitations**

To illustrate one particular case of how multiple kinds of violence intersect with an individual’s identity formation, I will discuss the case of David, one of the booklet project’s main participating youths. In our conversations, David, at 14, was the eldest participant who most frequently narrated experiences of violence, largely in relation to racial tensions and illegality. Interpersonal conflicts between David and his peers and teachers, who were not necessarily aware of his immigration status, were attributed to racial tensions taking place in school. Therefore, I begin by describing David’s narrations of violence in general and end specifically with his own experience and beliefs about illegality.

David was a freshman in a small all-boys Catholic high school whose population consisted primarily of African American and Latino youth with virtually no Mexicans. The school was located in a different borough from the one in which David lived. His home’s neighborhood was primarily Puerto Rican. According to his mother’s narration of her family’s history in the United States, David remembered when he crossed the border illegally with her and his two year-old sister, Karina, when he was four years old. He disliked talking about this experience openly because of the psychological turmoil that ensued; upon arriving in New York, his fears about his migration experience manifested themselves in nightmares re-enacting his own persecution by helicopters. Unaware of the circumstances under which they would cross the border, David knew only that he would soon be re-united with his father.

During our first meeting as a group when I introduced the booklet project, David was completely silent. However, over the course of the ten weeks we met he became the most talkative of the group, narrating many stories of experiences he had lived in the United States although he hesitated to write them down. He described himself as a student who did not often receive good grades and who was sure to end up in summer school because he was failing 9<sup>th</sup> grade math. He often spoke of being misunderstood by his teachers who would punish him for conflicts and physical fights he did not start, but that he engaged in frequently because of other students’ disrespect and outright racist remarks. In fact, David recalled one

occasion in which he felt ignored by a teacher who would not call on him in class. When David muttered something about his teacher being racist, he claimed the teacher conceded, “Yeah, I am.”

In the interview with my participants’ mothers, all of them agreed that racism was prevalent in their children’s schools, even though they admitted having had a hard time believing it at first. The mothers agreed that when they saw school authorities mistreating some students over others, or when they witnessed their own children’s racial confrontations with their teachers, they finally believed that their children’s accounts about racism in school were true.

Aside from racism on the part of school authorities that David narrated and that his mother confirmed, David also frequently narrated stories about racial conflicts with his peers to which he would react in a violent manner. Similarly to the teenage girl I quoted earlier, David’s uses of violence reported in our conversations also displayed a defensive function. He described his engagement in violent acts as a reaction to other people’s assaults or discrimination. However, he did not always describe himself as being provoked into violent confrontations. In addition to such acts of violence with unclear provocation, David reported other experiences of violence that seemed gratuitous. Although hard to judge their truthfulness, such seemingly irrational acts of violence were even more alarming in this dialogue:

DAVID: On the way back from school we was burning things. Yeah we—, I brought a lighter and then they was givin’ out flyers about clubs . . . I burned like three of them [laughs]. Threw them in the sewer. It was right next to the gas station too, that was hilarious.

JOCELYN: You could start a fire.

DAVID: It wasn’t gonna be my fault.

JOCELYN: I don’t know.

DAVID: I woulda thrown the lighter in the sewer or somethin’. Where do you see my fingerprints? Nobody saw nothin’.

Undoubtedly, David had been both a victim and a perpetrator of numerous kinds of violence. His case indicates that violent behavior is one means he has available to act upon the world. Violence toward others was aimed at societal institutions and its representatives as well. For example, David’s irreverence toward the severity of his own acts was displayed at other moments as irreverence toward certain authorities. Other than his teachers whom he often qualified as dumb because they could be outsmarted by his continual mischief, David also invoked the Immigration and Naturalization Service by drawing a maze from Mexico to New York with two dead ends labeled *la Migra* (the INS). In this situation and in others, David positioned himself in contempt of structures of control which were conversely positioned by David as repressive social means. This is illustrated further in the following narration:

I wanna go on my bike and all that joint . . . I go to this place . . . They have like a ramp . . . going down. It’s mad fast. It’s like a real steep hill. It’s like next to a police precinct. They

[the police] be kicking them out all the time. Last time they went after me. But I was on my bike and they was on foot, so who has the advantage?

David also questioned the practices of reporters, as he witnessed an occasion when journalists from a local television cable channel visited the offices of the association to interview one of the staff people. He witnessed how the reporters fabricated the piece of news they wanted to portray: "It was like a fake report cause they showed . . . M- . . . walking into a room talking. He wasn't even talking! They just . . . wanted like a shot of them. I don't know."

Although he later conceded that this was probably done to leave the public with a realistic activity of the association, one could argue that the media is one kind of authority whose word the public is supposed to trust, yet creates stories that often do not do justice, but injustice, to the people whose lives they are reporting. David's range of experiences lent themselves to his mistrust and irreverence toward authorities and structures of power. This is consistent with Fine, Freudenberg, Payne, Perkins, Smith, and Wanzer's finding (this issue) that Latino youth mistrust police, social workers, and other public servants. Much of David's experiences seemed to be disrespectful of authority figures, and in our meetings, he enacted this in playful ways. For instance, he consistently sought ways to outsmart me and the other participants by engaging us in power plays and playful teasing. He also inserted playful threats, usually directed at his sister, during our conversations: e.g., "I'm gonna go over there and slap her!" or "Smack her over the head, Jorge." At other moments, he used racism as discrimination to taunt his sister: "Oh this is my sister[']s drawing] . . . with her skinny-ass people . . . See, that's all she draws. Skinny people. She's racist against fat people" [laughter].

In the next example, Karina shamed her brother by tattling on his own racial epithets used as a means to bully her:

KARINA: for real, he bullies me! He[']s like [pretends to be pushed], "What, nigger? What, nigger? What you gonna do?" . . . He hits me. He goes, "Ow! [pretends to get pushed] What, nigger? Ow! What? What you gonna do?"

As one can see from these examples, even David's sense of humor was laden with violent undertones. While David could not react with violence directly toward the structures of power that impose illegality and other oppressive identifying markers on him, he could use violence to address other people in contexts where he occupied a dominant position of power, such as a brother toward his younger sister or a physically larger boy toward his smaller peer. This would not have been detected if David's multiple positionality and history had not been taken into account. During another session in which I suggested that the group co-author a story to accompany a drawing Margarita, a 6 year-old participant, had made of two children walking in front of tall buildings, David's suggestions also exemplified his dark sense of humor:

“They get mugged on the way home.”

“They meet the pimp who lives downstairs.”

“They start a fire in the elevator.”

Most of David’s suggestions were intended to tease Margarita who insisted that she wanted the story to be a “happy” one. On the other hand, David’s own illustrations sometimes conveyed the generalized negativity with which he associated the city. In one illustration, he drew the Hudson River as a waste dump including a car wreck, a dead body, a bomb, and dead fish.

In terms of illegality, David also consistently demonstrated a great amount of cultural knowledge about being “illegal” in his comments about new immigrants implicitly assumed to be poor and undocumented. He described them as being afraid of the police, easily exploited by employers, and hard-working, rather than abusive of government services. David positioned himself repeatedly as an advocate of immigrants, questioning both the ethics and authority of government control along the border. On one occasion, David criticized stereotypes about Mexicans depicted as natives slumped by a cactus sleeping with their heads bowed under a large sombrero. In response to a drawing, he asked me afterwards why “we” could not act similarly and close the border to keep Americans out of Mexico. After I explained that each country has its own immigration laws, and that Mexico’s weaker economy has something to gain by allowing Americans to enter and spend their money there, David simply shook his head in annoyance. He was aware that Mexican immigrants face injustices in the United States, and that being undocumented places constant barriers on him, his family, and his community. In our interview, his mother discussed how she had to confront her son about his undocumented status when he insisted that he wanted to work. Adamant about getting his working papers, his mother told David that he could not work legally in the country because of his undocumented status. In the process, she pointed to expectations both about herself and her children. While it is alright for her to work illegally in the United States as a means to support her family, she expected her children to surpass her own lifestyle in spite of their shared illegal immigration status. David is not allowed to work illegally, and must negotiate parental expectations to achieve academically along with the negative experiences that turn him against school, as well as the structural barriers he must face as an undocumented youth.

All of the mothers that I interviewed saw being undocumented as a necessity for economic survival and social mobility that was unattainable for them in Mexico. Although they had achieved some financial stability and saw the possibility for further mobility, living as undocumented immigrants was somehow functional to their goals. For this reason, they did not present themselves as being hostile toward Americans or to the country in spite of the injustices and hardships that they, themselves, faced. As David’s mother put it, her initial motivation to migrate had to do with her daughter’s health. Karina was becoming epileptic in Mexico where her family could not afford treatment. In New York, she found free medical

care for her daughter in spite of their undocumented status, and Karina eventually recovered completely. Only after this medical problem was resolved did Rosa begin planning her family's financial security. She also contrasted her position of gratitude with other Mexicans' hostility toward the United States.

For David, however, being undocumented was not functional; it was a barrier to the fulfillment of his goals and a source of violence against him. This, coupled with the racism he confronted in school and parental expectations to achieve academically, is a source of psychological conflict for him as seen in his ambivalence about going to college: "... Cause I don't wanna go to college but I do. But if I do go to college, I wanna go really far away. I swear. Really far away." In his answer to a peer-conducted interview in which we asked what he liked least about New York, he stated racism. Thus he associated school and New York City with a series of race and immigration-related assaults committed against him, and expressed this in his narratives, illustrations, power plays, and even in his sense of humor.

David's range of cultural knowledge and personal experiences provided a basis for him to understand himself and his community in relation to certain authorities. His participation in the *Asociación Tepeyac* had also served as an enabling means for him to develop a critical eye and a mistrust for authorities and structures of power. In addition, he counted on the cultural knowledge and expectations passed on to him by his parents, as well as exposure to both of his parents' involvement as community leaders in their own neighborhood. He, himself, has attended protests and demonstrations in defense of immigrants' rights.

David's experiences of violence and access to cultural knowledge, which mainstream U.S. society ignores, has placed him in a special position to think critically; he can detect conflicting perspectives and question public information or social practices that identify him, his family, and his community in disrespectful ways. He was aware that social *mis*-representations lead to violent outcomes such as death on the border, abuse in the workplace, or class and race discrimination. Social theories of identity should take into account not only how social representations mediate between individuals and societal beliefs (Augustinos & Walker, 1995), but also how individual identities are constructed through activities working within multiple and conflicting social representations. Although David's consciousness has liberatory potential (Freire, 1996) it will remain limited as long as violence continues to be lived privately and ignored publicly, *and* as long as the means to respond to violence other than with violence remain unfamiliar to him.

### Understanding the Dialectics of Violence

Where does the blame for violence lie? Rather than blaming the victim or blaming society as opposing sources of violence, I posit that violence needs to be understood as a dialectical process that is constantly unfolding between social structures and individuals. This article attempts to understand violence in relation

to identity formation through its social origins and psychological development. At first glance, David's case may seem typical of a working-class minority youth who demonstrates resistance to authorities and institutions representative of his group's oppression (Walsh, 1987). However, when his personal situation is examined in more detail, one can locate the particular experiences and multiple memberships in institutions that have fostered his own personal consciousness, knowledge, and actions. His defensive and destructive attitude, alienation by society, and contempt toward higher authorities are consequences of a social system of violence. While undocumented Mexican immigrants are positioned by society as unbelonging outsiders (Mirandé, 1985), the association's critical perspective re-positions them as victims of social injustice for the purpose of mobilization. On the other hand, the means that individuals like David can find to re-position themselves within these power struggles is exactly what the association tries to prevent: violence itself.

My analysis, based on triangulation of the youths' statements, the association's texts, and three years of my own participation in it indicates that society affords youth with violence as a tool to understand, reject, and defend their own and others' identities. In order to understand this development, one must look to the structural and institutional conditions that afford individuals both limitations and possibilities for further action. David's violent actions originate as a response to violence on a societal level and as a defense against personal, psychological harm, yet will continue and may be deployed upon those in weaker positions of power unless changes are made dialectically between him and the society in which he lives. That is, violence must be understood in its social origins, personal understanding and adoption, and consequent effects on both the individual and society (Mead, 1934; Wertsch, 1985). Without access to tools that allow David (and others like him) to address directly and effectively the violence with which they are confronted, children and youth will be positioned to become violent youth themselves. This is an alarming realization that begs for both personal and institutional levels of intervention.

### **Is Society Prepared for Mexican Children and Youth, Their Families, and Communities?**

The theoretical grounding laid forth in this article was drawn from ethnographic work and case examples of Mexican youths' direct experiences of violence. Empirical research needs to test this argument further by delving more deeply into the personal histories of youth, while simultaneously considering the potential responsibility of the state in making certain structures of power available to exert violence as a means of positioning oneself and relating to others. Therefore, we must first accept that violence has social origins rather than a natural, or inherently individual basis. Second, we must agree that societal violence may

be internalized, and that personal acts of violence are caused by multiple external factors. This implies that individually-exerted violence can be curbed by simultaneous interventions on both personal and societal-institutional levels that present alternative structures upon which self-understanding is formed. As long as borders remain closed to some, societal representatives (such as the immigration policy-makers or media that provide a popular conception of undocumented immigrants) must first acknowledge publicly the presence of undocumented immigrants as a steady, continuous population that exists, in part, for the sake of U.S. economic interests (Mirandé, 1985). Institutions of power must take responsibility for misrepresentations of the undocumented by ensuring that measures are taken to deter violence against undocumented immigrants, which, in turn, may serve to prevent the formation of violent youths. Otherwise, the repercussions will be long-term as Mexican families continue to settle permanently in the United States in spite of their undocumented status (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994).

Community-based organizations such as *Asociación Tepeyac* can structure collaborative projects between families and schools to inform each other about common problems their children face, to educate each other about their respective institutions' cultures, and to design together violence prevention programs that are culturally meaningful. The association has consistently sought ways to develop cultural and recreational programs through such activities as folkloric dance, soccer training, and other activities with the intention of providing a positive sense of community in safe spaces. Indirectly, this is a measure against violence through which youth develop social skills and community values in a supportive environment. However, mental health professionals could also aid the association in developing interventions or conflict resolution training that address explicitly violence-related problems and non-violent means to resolve them. Mexican youth need to be provided with cultural-psychological tools relevant to their own knowledge, experiences, and goals so they can identify personal and historical causes of emotional tensions and conflicts through critical reflection.

Also, teacher education programs should include curricula that prepare educators to recognize the special needs of students from immigrant populations. Educators need to be capable of understanding and recognizing potential sources of psychological conflict that affect students' identities, academic participation, and relationships with peers and teachers. Institutionally, schools should be prepared to reach out to their students as well as other institutions potentially involved and interested in their educational success. Finally, researchers must examine also how their work can facilitate such collaboration between institutions, and reflect on how their research is used to reproduce or transform the social standing of marginalized populations. By using multiple levels of historical analysis (in this case, of society, community organization, and individuals) through multiple design methodologies (ethnography, interviews, and case studies) to understand the psychosocial developmental trajectories of children and youth, we can achieve a

rich understanding of the complexity and variability of human development, its broad implications and possibilities.

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