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*American Individualism and the Social Adaptation of Unauthorized Mayan Youth
in Los Angeles*

ABSTRACT

Segmented assimilation theory proposes immigrant children and children of immigrants must retain collectivistic orientations to their family and co-ethnic community to be buffered from downward assimilation. This framework assumes children migrate as members of an intact family unit and that individualism threatens adaptation and socioeconomic mobility, as it impedes community collectivism. My research prompts a re-examination of segmented assimilation by investigating the social adaptation of unauthorized Guatemalan Maya youth who arrive to the US as unaccompanied minors to work while their families remain in the country of origin. Youth struggle with poverty, fear of discrimination, and social isolation as they live and work in the US and maintain collectivist orientations to their families from afar. Based on ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews with unauthorized Guatemalan Maya young-adult participants of a Los Angeles support group, this study suggests that although they lack the traditional supportive institutions of family and school, alternative resources for adaptation exist. I find that participation in psychotherapeutic culture equips youth growing up without parents or supportive social institutions with the rhetoric and behaviors of self-responsibility necessary for emotional, psychological, and financial stability, and aspirations for socioeconomic mobility. As youth become expressive individuals, their social commitments are not severed but move from the transnational family to the local community.

INTRODUCTION

Each week, in the dimly lit dining room of a co-operative housing complex in Pico Union, Los Angeles, a group of unauthorized Guatemalan Maya young-adults meet. Arriving from ten-hour workdays throughout Los Angeles, ten to twenty youth gather and shake hands with those who have already arrived. Young-men greet me with a, “Hello, Chep!” and a chuckle. *Chep* is the Mayan K’iche translation for Stephanie. Young-women greet me with a timid hug and a soft smile. Dining room chairs are clustered together to make a circle at the center of the room and we make small talk until the group meeting begins. One night Gabriel, a twenty year old from El Quiche, Guatemala, was asked to open the meeting. He stood up to introduce himself and

welcome others to an “alternative group” founded on “honesty and an open mind.” This group, herein Voices of Hope, is oriented toward promoting individualism and bolstering Maya identity. Customary to weekly group introductions, Gabriel began explaining how this weekly support group meeting helped him cope with the traumas of migration and settlement in a new society.

Gabriel arrived in Los Angeles from Guatemala at sixteen years of age to provide for his mother who remains in El Quiche. As an unauthorized youth with few job prospects, he began working in downtown Los Angeles’ garment industry. Like others, he was disappointed to find that Los Angeles was not the land of opportunity that was described to him by his older brother. Rather than finding wealth and opportunity, wages were low and the cost of living was high, leaving very little of his salary to remit to his expectant family. Gabriel’s older brother, who also lived in Los Angeles at the time of this meeting¹, migrated some years prior to Gabriel to support his wife and child but eventually became an alcoholic. Since then, Gabriel has taken on the additional burden of financially supporting his brother’s family.

That night, as Gabriel’s eyes shifted from one side of the room to the other, he shared that he spent close to one year in a deep depression induced by loneliness and fear. Although Gabriel lived with his brothers, he lacked a social support network that could buffer against intense feelings of loneliness and isolation. As Menjivar (2000) demonstrates in her study of Salvadoran immigrants, social ties, including familial ties, are fragmented under severe conditions of poverty and disadvantage. Gabriel’s desperation eventually led him to the edge of a Los Angeles bridge where he contemplated his death. His mother’s words to “always fight” echoed in his mind and he returned home that night. Gabriel recalled that in that moment he thought, “there is no hope for me. There is no life for me.” Gabriel described that after nearly a year of attending Voices of Hope he was able to tell his story to “*desahogar* (vent).” He explains, “There is healing in talking. My life is different now.” Voices of Hope participants detail similar experiences week after week as their mentor, Wil, encourages them to “share [their] story” with others because “dialogue will bring healing.”

In Los Angeles, Gabriel appears to be a typical Latino young man; yet, he is one of the many Maya young-adults who arrive as unaccompanied minors to support families that remain in

¹ Some weeks later Gabriel told the group he gathered money to send his brother back to Guatemala because his alcoholism became unbearable

their home countries. English and Spanish language news media has recently highlighted the growing number of unauthorized, unaccompanied minors entering the United States (Jimenez 2013, Sethi 2013). While some unaccompanied minors migrate for the purpose of family reunification (Chavez and Menjivar 2010), many, like Gabriel, are economic migrants to global cities such as Los Angeles (Chinchilla and Hamilton 2001). The US Customs and Border Enforcement reports that in 2008, 8,041 unaccompanied minors (ages 0-17) were apprehended at the US/Mexico border. By 2012, this number nearly tripled to 24,481 (US Customs and Border Enforcement 2013). Garnering the attention of popular media and scholars is the migration of Central America children and youth fleeing violence and diminished opportunities for mobility (Schmalzbauer 2008, Wolseth 2008). The increase in unaccompanied migrants has drawn scholars' attention to the paucity of research addressing the migration and adaptation experiences of unaccompanied immigrant minors, but few have made them central to their inquiry (Chavez and Menjivar 2010, Foner and Dreby 2011).

The study of immigrant children focuses on the factors that promote or hinder adaptation and mobility trajectories of the 1.5 and second generations. Segmented assimilation theory maintains that immigrant children and children of immigrants, mainly those raised in urban areas, must retain collectivistic orientations with their family and co-ethnic community to be buffered from downward mobility (Portes and Zhou 1993). In this way, literature assumes immigrant children are members of a local family unit with the potential to sustain strong ties to the co-ethnic community, and posits that adopting American individualism is a threat to incorporation and socioeconomic mobility (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, Rumbaut and Komaie 2010, Waters 2000, Zhou and Bankston 1998). Yet these scholars have only explored individualism as the pursuit of material goods and wealth (utilitarian individualism) while ignoring the pursuit of self-fulfillment and good feelings (expressive individualism). Scholars draw particular attention to the complexity of the experiences of unauthorized adolescent populations (Abrego 2006, Abrego and Gonzales 2010, Gonzales 2011, Gonzales et al. 2013, Suárez-Orozco et al. 2001, 2007). This literature highlights the various stressors undocumented youth face in coming of age, primarily the emotional and mental health risks associated with "awakening to the a nightmare" of one's undocumented status (Gonzales 2011, Gonzales et al. 2013). Until now, sociologists have largely ignored the experiences of those children and youth who knowingly enter the US without authorization.

A small but growing body of literature examines why unaccompanied youth are migrating; however, data is gathered primarily from those detained (Aldarondo and Becker 2011, Chavez and Menjivar 2010) or legally recognized refugees (Goodman 2004). This results in data bias and limits what we know about this population. Moreover, despite the detailing of unaccompanied minor migration through film and journalism projects such as *Sin Nombre* (2009) and *Enrique's Journey* (Nazario 2007), empirical sociological studies of transnational or separated families have yet to include lone child migrants. Transnational family research focuses on the experiences of parents, particularly mothers, who leave their children and must cope with and negotiate the physical and emotional labor of family separation (Abrego 2009, Dreby 2010, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, Menjivar and Abrego 2009, Montes 2013). The study of children in these families is from the perspective of those left behind with a caretaker (Parreñas 2005). Evidently, the adaptation of unaccompanied youth workers in American society does not fit into the existing framework of immigrant youth incorporation. This investigation broadens the literature by focusing on Mayan youth who knowingly migrated without authorization, successfully entered without detection, and who have lived and worked in the U.S. between four and twelve years while supporting their parents and siblings from afar.

Given the limited resources these youth possess, this investigation asks four guiding questions: First, what challenges do unaccompanied Mayan youth face as they come of age in the US? Second, what resources do youth utilize to navigate these challenges? Third, do Mayan youth support group participants adopt the rhetoric and behavior of the host society? Finally, what are the potential outcomes of doing so for unaccompanied youth with transnational social ties? While previous studies of immigrant youth have focused on integration as cultural or structural incorporation and prospects for mobility of the 1.5 and second generation coming of age in American society and who are influenced by American peers and media, I examine the socialization of a unique group of working Mayan youth via a support group to garner financial, emotional and psychological stability, and make inroads to socioeconomic mobility.

This study suggests that a support group may serve as a socializing agent for immigrant youth growing up without parents or access to traditional supportive social institutions. Participation in psychotherapeutic culture equips unauthorized Mayan youth with individualistic language and behaviors necessary for garnering self-responsibility and establishing emotional, psychological, and financial stability, and shapes aspirations for socioeconomic mobility.

Adopting personalistic language causes youth's self-identity to move from the transnational to the local whereby the collectivist ideologies born out of the socioeconomic conditions of the sending country are transformed to ones of independence and individualism that characterizes the host country (Hochschild 1995, 2000; Lamont 2000, Lipset 1996). I find that adopting expressive individualism through a support group setting does not result in severed social commitments. Instead, it causes a reorientation of social commitments from the transnational to the local community, which facilitates Mayan youth's social adaptation and shapes aspirations for mobility.

PREVIOUS LITERATURE

Immigrant Incorporation

Migration inherently causes immigrant transformations as they enter a new society. Cultural adaptation, or acculturation, includes adopting the values and practices of the new cultural context through daily interactions (Padilla and Perez 2003, Talbani and Hasanali 2000). This process occurs within a "dual frame of reference" where people compare their home and host societies (Suarez-Orozco 1991, Zavella 2011). One component of acculturation is socialization, a process for regulating behavior and educating people into procedures for social interaction based on core cultural values of the host society (Rosenthal and Feldman 1990). Socialization occurs in finding oneself and one's relationship to the larger society as they come into contact with social institutions (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, Suarez-Orozco et al. 2007). This process also breeds psychological acculturation, or the "internal processes of change that immigrants experience when they come into direct contact with members of the host culture." Acculturation can be negatively affected if one must navigate social stigma based on skin color, language, ethnicity, religion, and way of dress (Padilla and Perez 2003, 35).

Institutional membership and resources are important factors in socialization (Padilla and Perez 2003). The family is considered the single most important socializing institution as it provides a sense of personal identity and belonging (Portes et al. 2005, Zhou 1997). For immigrant children, schools are the second most important socializing influence since schools

are the first sustained meaningful and enduring form of institutional participation (Suarez Orozco et al. 2007). Scholars find “it is in schools that immigrant youth develop academic knowledge, and, just as important, form perceptions of where they fit in the social reality and cultural imagination of their new nation” (Suarez Orozco et al. *ibid*, 2-3). Furthermore, education is associated with health, mobility, and greater economic security. Religious institutions, particularly those that enforce Western practices, are also considered socializers for immigrant youth (Cau 2005). Though youth’s church attendance is not compulsory as is American schooling, relationships at church may be more intimate than school relationships and are therefore important influences in immigrant youth socialization (Cau *ibid*).

Social contexts and degrees of socialization shape how immigrant groups will eventually incorporate into the United States. Immigrant children and youth assimilation research asks to what extent immigrants are incorporating, and what factors promote or hinder that process (Alba and Nee 2003, Kasinitz, et al. 2008, Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Segmented assimilation theory outlines three trajectories of socioeconomic incorporation. The first path is that of upward assimilation into the white middle-class mainstream. Second, immigrants may incorporate into the minority underclass. Finally, Portes and Zhou (1993) propose a delayed or selective assimilation pathway where children remain embedded in the immigrant community while drawing on its “moral and material resources” to achieve social, economic, and political incorporation (Neckerman et al. 1999). Selective assimilation theory emphasizes the parents’ role in providing resources of aid and mobility to their children, slowing acculturation and ultimately exposure to discrimination from the cultural mainstream (Neckerman et al. 1999, Portes and Zhou 1993). Parents do this by embedding their children in a supportive co-ethnic community in order to delay Americanization, maintain parental authority and prevent downward assimilation into a minority underclass (Portes and Zhou 1993). Children are at risk of downward mobility, or dissonant acculturation, when they Americanize more quickly than their parents by learning the English language at a faster rate, as well as by adopting American ideals of individualism and meritocracy that oppose the collectivistic orientation of immigrant parents (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

Waters (2000) finds that for immigrant children and children of immigrants, Americanization entails adopting visible expressions of youth culture as they embrace core ideologies of consumption, materialism, and individualism. American individualism is bound in

competitiveness and children view success in American society as synonymous with the acquisition of material goods. Meanwhile, immigrant parents view success as synonymous with educational attainment and upward mobility. These intergenerational differences in Americanization result in familial conflict wherein parents lose authority over their children, family ties are ruptured, and children abandon their co-ethnic community. Scholars argue parents must maintain authority over their children to sanction deviant behavior characteristic of inner cities and ultimately delay the assimilation of immigrant children into the minority underclass (Portes and Zhou 1993). Thus, scholars engage the adoption of core American ideologies such as individualism as a way to determine variable degrees of immigrant incorporation (Agius Vallejo 2012, Waters 2000). The adoption of American individualism is seen as opposing immigrants' collectivistic orientations since it replaces familial respect and responsibility with meritocratic self-duty (Agius Vallejo and Lee 2009, Zhou and Bankston 2008). In this way, keeping Americanization at bay can be helpful for immigrant children and children of immigrants in achieving mobility (Kasinitz, et al. 2008).

Immigration scholars take particular interest in Latino immigrants who are believed to be more family oriented and filial in their responsibilities to their elders. A study of 1.5- and second-generation Mexican-Americans finds collectivistic behavior cannot be explained by culture nor shared experiences of discrimination, but by "the immigrant struggle for upward mobility and the fact that close kin continue to struggle economically" (Agius Vallejo 2012, 89). Those who are exposed to the immigrant narrative and come from disadvantaged backgrounds are compelled to give back, particularly to their parents. Conversely, those who come from middle-class privilege adopt an ethos of middle-class white meritocratic individualism and are less likely to give back to their parents (Agius Vallejo and Lee 2009). The immigrant narrative was also found to motivate Central American youth's collective orientations as their academic motivational dynamics are linked to "a remarkable sense of duty to the parents and family members for their suffering" (Suarez-Orozco 1987, 293; see also Louie 2012). Conversely to the ethnic retention model of segmented assimilation, collectivist family orientations may hinder wealth accumulation and upward mobility for this group (Agius Vallejo 2012).

American Individualism

Until now, studies of immigrant groups' orientations regarding collectivism and individualism examine individualism as a focus on acquiring material goods. Cultural sociologists refer to this form of individualism as "utilitarian individualism," which has affinities to economic advancement and maximized self-interest (Bellah et al 1996, Lipset 1996). However, they neglect a second strand of individualism known as "expressive individualism." This strand of individualism arose in opposition to the utilitarian perspective and highlights that the personal self is the ultimate reality and that self-fulfillment is reached when one follows their intuition to express that reality (Bellah et al. 1996, Wuthnow 1994). Expressive individualism is a language that describes self-duty in doing what feels good and right for the individual. Questions related to the adoption of expressive individualism in the immigrant youth socialization and adaptation process have yet to be sociologically explored. This study analyses the outcomes of learning and adopting expressive individualism among Mayan immigrant youth.

The effects of expressive individualism in American society are contested. A study of the prevalence of expressive individualism in American culture predicted people would come to see the individual self as more meaningful than social responsibilities (Bellah et al. 1996). In this way, the focus on the individual is in "contradiction with society's need for order" and poses a liability for morality while constraining people's ability to think and act in a socially minded manner (Etzioni 1996). Etzioni (1998) describes the disjuncture between prioritizing individual and collective need as evidence of an "unbalanced society" where individual values dominate social values. Cultural sociological studies see individualism and collectivism as "riders on a historical seesaw—personalized expressiveness ascending, commitment descending" (Lichterman 1995, 276). Accordingly, the values of self-duty and commitment to a public good are incompatible. Critics of this "Seesaw Model" argue that while expressive individualism is growing in prominence there are multiple outcomes of adopting individualistic language. Rather than weakening social ties, personalized expressiveness, or the ways one speaks and acts that highlight "a unique, personal self" may supply the impetus for civic participation (Lichterman 1995; 276). In other words, public commitment does not deteriorate but is given personal meaning. Understanding motives for action in a personal light makes civic engagement feel safer and therefore draws people to the larger society and strengthens public commitment. Personal autonomy and social order are not necessarily at odds but may work together in achieving a society that "nourishes both social virtue and individual rights" (Etzioni 1996, 4).

Expressive individualism is closely associated with the rise of American therapeutic culture, with many middle-class Americans relying on self-help resources, therapists and psychologically oriented support groups. A study of support groups finds that while more people are speaking individualistic therapeutic language they are not withdrawing from the community, but developing a new type of commitment (Wuthnow 1994). This is because support groups allow people to practice expressive individualism through personal story telling through which individuals “turn their own experiences into a collective event” (Wuthnow *ibid*, 289). Therefore, people associate their construction or elaboration of personal self with the group and develop a commitment to that group in turn (Wuthnow 2001).

Immigration scholars have not considered expressive individualism – and the construction of the self as an individual within a support group – in social adaptation processes, or how the rhetoric that lends to individual self-construction is learned. Furthermore, segmented assimilation theory uses a model that emphasizes three parental background factors in predicting assimilation outcomes: parental human capital, modes of incorporation, and family structure (Cau 2005, Portes and Zhou 1993). Literature consistently points to a child’s socialization through family and school and the effects of a child’s Americanization on intergenerational dynamics, educational attainment, and prospects for mobility. The opposing ideals of collectivism and individualism, and the child’s acculturation to the former, are described as the root of intergenerational conflict and entrance into the minority underclass (Waters 2000, Zhou and Bankston 2008). However, when children knowingly enter the United States without parents or guardians and with the intention of working rather than as part of the family unit and following the traditional academic trajectory, the outcomes of Americanization may vary. Segmented assimilation theory should also account for alternative institutions such as support groups as possible agents that might counteract the weakness or non-existence of immigrant families and lack of parental resources as well as the irrelevance of schooling to these children’s lives. This is to say existing theories of immigrant youth adaptation must be reevaluated to consider the experiences of those who migrate alone.

As Mayan unaccompanied child migrant workers come of age in the U.S. they encounter unique challenges, as well as alternative socializing mechanisms that reinforce specific American values and practices. In this study, youth engage in a therapeutic support group that fosters American individualism and self-expression that shape social adaption to the host country.

DATA AND METHODS

Community Context

This study examines the adaptation of unauthorized Guatemalan Maya young-adults (18-34) who migrated as unaccompanied minors (0-17) and now live and work in Los Angeles, California. Current trends of unaccompanied minor migration coincide with pre-existing patterns of Latino immigration and settlement in the US. Mexican, Guatemalan and Salvadoran groups comprise 40% of the United States' 19 million first- and second- generation young adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four (Rumbaut and Komaie 2010). Among unaccompanied minors apprehended along the US' southern border (24,481), Mexican children represent the largest proportion (13,974; 57%), followed by Guatemalan (3,835; 16%) and Salvadoran (3,314; 14%) children (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2013). This study focuses specifically on unaccompanied Guatemalan immigrants.

The Pew Research Center reports that since 2000 the Guatemalan population has increased by 180%, the greatest Central American immigrant population growth (Lopez and Dockterman 2011). Original waves of Central American immigration began in the 1970s and 1980s and consisted of middle-class immigrants seeking economic opportunities. The massive migration of Guatemalans to Southern California during the 1980s resulted from political unrest throughout Central America including the counterinsurgency in Guatemala (Garcia 2006, Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). Today, Guatemalan immigrants represent one of the largest national origin groups among undocumented populations in the United States following Mexicans and Salvadorans (Abrego 2008).

California has long been an immigrant receiving state. Los Angeles County alone contains nine percent (9%) of the nation's Hispanic population including the largest Guatemalan community outside of Guatemala (260,000) (Motel and Patten 2010). According to the Guatemalan Consulate in Los Angeles approximately fifty to sixty percent are Maya (Estrada 2013). Guatemalans reside in high concentrations in the Pico-Union/MacArthur Park areas of Los Angeles. The indigenous Guatemalan community is found predominately in the Westlake district, just west of downtown Los Angeles (Popkin 1999). Life in Los Angeles for many

Guatemalan immigrants and their children is characterized by the daily efforts to survive in violent neighborhoods rife with drugs, gangs and poverty (Batz 2010). Settlement in this community is particularly difficult for these young Guatemalan Mayas as they are racially and ethnically disparaged for their indigenous appearance, language, and practices (Popkin 1999). The Maya in Los Angeles are forced to deal with marginalization on two fronts: anti-immigrant sentiments from American society; and discrimination within the Guatemalan and Latino communities due to their darker skin tone, lower levels of education, and indigenous language preference (Castañeda et al. 2002, Bogin and Loucky 1997). The rise in unaccompanied Guatemalan Maya immigrants means more youth are facing intersectional exclusion without the guidance of family or access to traditional supporting institutions.

The Organization

Voices of Hope is an informal support group in Pico Union, Los Angeles. This group evolved in 2010 through an organic process founded on community need. Voices of Hope members are unaccompanied, unauthorized young adults who hail from indigenous Maya villages where the primary languages spoken are K'iche and Q'anjobal. Participants migrated between the ages of twelve and sixteen. The highest level of education earned among group members is fourth grade, with the exception of one young man who earned a GED after 10 years of study in the US. All respondents are now between eighteen to thirty-five (18-35) years old.

These young adults entered the United States with the intention of working to support their families that remained in their countries of origin. They work predominately in downtown Los Angeles garment factories, construction and maintenance. The latter are considered fortunate, as pay is slightly higher and labor is less tedious and repetitive. True to trends of labor migration from Central America since the 1980s, which has been dominated by young single men (Burns 1999), and a reported gender imbalance in Los Angeles' Maya community where men outnumber women by approximately three to one (Wellmeier 1998), Voices of Hope is about 90% male.

Now comprised of nearly 40 members and an organized weekly meeting time and space, Voices of Hope began with two young men seeking the advice of a local Catholic Church catechism instructor, Wil. The young men invited their close friends to come meet Wil, who

introduced youth to a younger church group leader named Jorge who then began assisting Wil in mentoring and advising youth. In large part, this group operates on the principle of homophily based on shared community of origin, ethnicity, language, age, migration experience and occupation (Stohlman 2007). The Voices of Hope mentors share similar migration experiences (both having been unauthorized upon migration) and religious affiliation but very little else in common. Voices of Hope meets once per week for two hours during which youth are encouraged to ‘develop’ seven areas: physical, intellectual, moral, emotional, spiritual, social, and sexual.

Meetings begin at seven in the evening to give the youth sufficient time to arrive after their workday, and end at nine at night. Dialogue opens with a greeting from a group member who reads a short blurb describing the group. This introduction leads into an explanation of how the group has helped the speaker. Next, one of the group coordinators poses the question, “how was your week?” If one of the youth does not readily address the question, the coordinator chooses someone in the group to begin the dialogue. The person sitting to the right or left of the first speaker will take the next turn, alternating until each person has spoken. Topics range from experiences at work, English classes, physical, mental or emotional health; a day spent with friends or in the community, or a reflection of a recent community event. Occasionally specific topics are introduced. During my time in the field such topics ranged from fear and self-esteem, safe sex practices and health care options, to the reactions to current events such as the earthquake in Guatemala in November 2012 or a Pico Union shooting in February 2013. After a few weeks of observing, I was asked to participate in the dialogue by also describing my week, as well as to offer my thoughts or insight when deemed appropriate. Interestingly, this usually occurred when men or women brought up the topic of relationships. As I spent more time in the field, questions regarding relationships became directed toward me. For example, a young man once asked if it was appropriate for his girlfriend to talk to other men and, of greater concern to him, if he could fight other men if they attempted to “take her” from him. Wil would often defer these questions to me, saying, “Stephanie is here! Take advantage and ask her!” This, I later learned, was a form of learning the “American perspective.” In all, its dialogue based setting makes Voices of Hope presents a social laboratory ripe with untold narratives of a segment of the unauthorized population that continues to live in margins of society.

Research Methods

This study employs ethnographic fieldwork and interview data collected during research with Voices of Hope and its participants. Research began with thirteen months of in-depth participant observation. I spent several hours each week attending general member and coordinator meetings, as well as community garden cleanups, book club gatherings and various cultural events. Given that the support group setting is centered on storytelling as a self-discovery, acceptance, and coping mechanism, I was immediately exposed to stories of daily life, hardships and triumphs. In all, I conducted nearly 200 hours of fieldwork where I interacted with anywhere between ten and thirty youth at each meeting. Extensive field notes were completed after every meeting and event. During weekly group meetings I kept a small notebook and pen with which I recorded interactions (Emerson, et al 1995). Field notes varied from keyword jottings, scenario paraphrasing, to verbatim quotes, where the latter were preferred and employed as often as possible. Notes centered on personal narratives and interactional responses in order to stay true to “indigenous meanings” (Emerson et al, 140). Keywords and paraphrasing were written in English, direct quotes were written in Spanish to strengthen interpretive validity. Quotes were translated into English after coding was complete. All field notes and interview transcripts were uploaded into an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved qualitative coding software, Dedoose, where open codes were applied to develop field hypotheses. The constant comparative method was used throughout the research process to guide subsequent field site observations and selective coding thereafter (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted starting five months after formal field observations began. A total of fifteen interviews were collected with Voices of Hope participants. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and lasted between forty and seventy-five minutes. All interviewees agreed to be audio recorded and selected personal pseudonyms. Each respondent received a ten-dollar honorarium for his or her time.

The field research revealed how expressive individualism is learned and used but the in-depth interviews were critical in that illuminated how this language causes a shift in commitments to community, family, and the self. Due to the vulnerability of this population and mistrust in the community, collecting fifteen interviews was an arduous process but, in all, provided insightful information about the Mayan youth community in Los Angeles. Group members often made comments about not wanting to be reported to *la migra* upon being interviewed. Questions of my intentions with the data and confidentiality arose when I attempted

to schedule an interview time and again at the onset of each interview. When someone agreed to an interview, I suggested exchanging phone numbers to confirm the meeting time and address questions or concerns the respondent had prior to the interview date. For many, these phone numbers may have been active one day and disconnected another. I learned many youth utilized pre-paid cellphones and struggled to maintain consistent service. What seems to be a reasonable expense for most proves to be an unsustainable burden for many unaccompanied, working youth.

Although I intended to interview an equal number of men and women, men were oversampled due to their more consistent participation in Voices of Hope. In total, I interviewed thirteen men, and two women. Scholars describe that women have limited access to public spaces because of the gender ideologies that keep women confined to private spaces (Hagan 1994, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz forthcoming, Menjivar 2000). The first obstacle I encountered in recruiting female respondents was the very few number of women who consistently attend Voices of Hope. The limited participation of women may be attributed to the insecurities that accompany the group meeting time (7PM-9PM) that makes it unsafe for women to walk or take public transportation home after a meeting, the location in Pico Union which is infamous for the rivalry of gangs MS-13 and 18th Street, or restrictions placed on women by their partners or parents. My inability to contact women who once participated in Voices of Hope goes hand-in-hand with the second obstacle I faced. Women often did not have their own cellphones, which made it difficult to recruit or follow-up on meeting plans. More than once I agreed to meet a young-woman at a local coffee shop or a Pico Union community garden but could not confirm our scheduled meeting during the week or follow-up when they did not show up at the predetermined location and time. Two married women, both twenty-one, had access to their husbands' cellphones. Even so, their husbands dictated when and often monitored whom they spoke to. Another young woman explained that her father, who lives in Guatemala, did not permit her to have a cellphone but insisted she connect a landline so that he could ensure she was home. Thus, future studies should aim to capture the gendered experiences of women who migrated as unaccompanied minors.

The vulnerability and clandestine nature of this population makes it hard to reach, which limits its participation in conventional random sampling procedures (Cornelius 1982). Voices of Hope presents a strategic research site that provides access to a highly vulnerable and therefore understudied segment of the undocumented population. Despite sampling limitations, employing

multiple qualitative methods allowed me to triangulate field observations to make findings more robust (King et al. 1994). Participant observation of weekly Voices of Hope meetings assuaged my ability to engage in “rap sessions,” where individuals candidly discuss salient issues that contribute to their narrative (Cornelius 1982, 399). Without probing, these rap sessions proved invaluable in gaining insight into the told experiences of the youth and through my participation in them I was able to gain trust necessary to conduct individual interviews. In a study of how unaccompanied Mayan immigrant youth are socialized to expressive individualism, Voices of Hope is a rich social laboratory to develop a critical profile of the unauthorized population and a new theoretical lens in the study of immigrant adaptation.

This paper explores a narrative that is neglected in sociological literature— that of unauthorized Maya Guatemalan young-adults who successfully entered the US and are now living and working in Los Angeles. First, I explore obstacles of adaptation as they are shaped by contexts of migration and settlement. Drawing primarily on ethnographic observations, I will then examine the role of a cultural broker, support group participation, and the adoption of expressive individualism as a catalyst for emotional and psychological stability. Finally, I will draw on interview data to investigate how social commitments might shift from the transnational to the local as youth are socialized to values and practices of American individualism, creating inroads to socioeconomic mobility.

RESULTS

Obstacles to Social Adaptation

Unaccompanied Mayan immigrants undergo the migration journey without the emotional and social support of parents, arrive in the United States with economic attachments to their home country, experience stigmas and fear of discrimination because they are phenotypically indigenous, and lack institutional support to counter these various challenges. Together these issues lead to psychological and emotional traumas that complicate their acculturation process (Padilla and Perez 2003). I argue that unaccompanied Mayan youth coming of age do not initially seek social integration and socioeconomic mobility, but social adaptation and emotional, psychological and financial stability. These aspirations may change with length of time in the US and as youth reconstruct their identity in the host society. Voices of Hope support group is a

catalyst for this process, as it teaches youth individualistic language and behaviors that cultivate individualism in order to overcome the psychological and mental traumas of migration, burdens of collective responsibility, and their own economic instability.

Financial Commitments

During our interviews I asked respondents if Los Angeles is what they expected when exiting Guatemala. Most replied they did not think about it much nor did they have time to think about it upon arrival because they do not “come to visit, [but] come to work.” To begin sending remittances to their families, youth must first repay their debt to family members or neighbors who financed the migration journey. However, Maya youth hail from small villages where children do not have or need money in their day-to-day lives and arrive ill prepared to manage their finances. When I interviewed Francisco, a twenty-four year old garment worker, what his greatest challenge was upon arrival he explained,

I earned good money when I arrived. I earned like, \$400 dollars [biweekly]. What affected me was that I did not know... I never had money in my pocket. We didn't use money everyday. We never used money. We had water. We had a well where we would get water. Like that. We didn't need to spend anything. We didn't have to plan anything. When I got here I didn't know anything, anything about managing money. Even right now, I am just learning.

I pressed for how he spent his earnings and he replied,

I wasted it, yes! I do remember that. I started buying. If I craved an ice cream, I bought an ice cream. I didn't care much for clothes. A kid doesn't think about those things. I didn't know anything.

With wages such as Francisco's, it takes respondents no less than eighteen months to repay the costs of migration. Children come to the US with financial responsibilities to their families, but find few resources to meet those needs because they work in low-wage and exploitative jobs, most often in the garment industry, though sometimes in construction and maintenance or food services. During my time in the field I consistently heard of the daily challenges that weighed on group participants, particularly those related to limited work hours and wages. Even while at work, youth such as nineteen-year-old Omar battle financial worries. He left his parents, three brothers, and three sisters in Guatemala five years ago to work in Los Angeles. Omar, who stands about five feet tall with shaggy black hair and an oversized hooded sweatshirt, shared this experience as tears streamed down his face. My field notes read:

Omar stood up and explained there are thoughts that come to his mind that he can consciously control but there are others that he tries to control and they creep up on him. He says his inability to control these thoughts gives him a headache. He feels stressed that he is working as much as he is but does not make enough money. With all of these thoughts coming he has to take breaks so that he does not go crazy and he ends up not completing any work so he does not get paid. He said, "It's that... It's just that I don't know what's happening inside of me!" He immediately started crying and saying that he tries to think about it, he tries to figure it out but he does not know.

Omar struggles with making ends meet each week, not uncommon among unaccompanied minors. Since the age of fourteen he has worked in a Downtown LA garment factory, sewing buttons on blouses for five cents per button or sewing zippers for twenty-five cents for 60 hours per week. On good weeks he reports making \$250, but after setting money aside for rent and sending remittances to his family, only five dollars remain for himself.

Youth may also serve as a financial safety net for their families. During a conversation about financial responsibility, Martin shared that he typically feels very stressed about how little money he makes so he began saving as much as he could a few months prior, which made him feel more economically stable. He went on to say that earlier that week his mother called to tell him that she accumulated medical debt. Martin sighed, leaned forward in his chair and rested his elbows on his knees as he wrung his hands. He somberly explained he felt compelled to remit his meager savings to his mother to alleviate the debt, which left him with nothing. Much like Omar, Martin describes how this stress was causing pain in his chest and his left arm. The pain makes it difficult to breathe and results in further psychological distress as he worries for his own health.

In some cases children may naively remit money to family members who make false claims of debt to increase remittance flows. One night I drove a young woman home after a group meeting and shared a bit with her about my curiosity about how unaccompanied migration occurs. She shared a story about a thirteen-year-old girl who migrated to Los Angeles to support her father in Guatemala. She borrowed about \$4,500 to pay a *coyote*, or guide, to cross Mexico into the US. After completing her payments, her father reported the cost of migration was actually \$9,000. She continued sending a monthly payment, along with remittances, only to learn months later that her father was utilizing her remittances to maintain his mistress.

Ortmeyer and Quinn (2012) explain that the costs of entrance and the amount of remittances sent increase duration of the migration journey. As seen above, unexpected expenses may also lengthen duration of stay in the host country. As years pass, unaccompanied children

enter adolescence and young-adulthood in American society, become accustomed to life in the US, and report wanting to settle permanently. Because there are few opportunities to go to school and work in Guatemala, unaccompanied youth forego return migration. This is the case with Francisco who decided not return to his built and fully furnished home. “The truth is I am *acostumbrado* (accustomed),” he said with an ambivalent tone. While Francisco has become acclimated to the U.S. and has high hopes to open a business, youth’s transnational responsibilities to their families affect their adaptation process in two ways. At best Maya youth’s financial obligations complicate their ability to attend school; at worst, it impedes their ability to do so. Respondents reported that learning the English language is the first step toward adaptation yet they experience blocked paths toward education. Second, concerns for familial well-being also limit personal financial stability, consequently leading to psychological consequences such as stress, anxiety, and fear. Youth develop physical manifestations of these psychological issues such as migraines, chest pains, hot flashes, and what youth have described as the feeling of *hormigas* (ants) crawling up their spine.

Cultural Distance

Along with juggling transnational commitments and filial responsibility, these youth are also engaged in a multi-dimensional acculturation process. Indigenous immigrants bear stigmas associated with a darker complexion, indigenous language, lower levels of education, and styles of dress that do not conform to American society (Fabri 2000). Some arrive speaking Spanish, while others arrive with little to no knowledge of the Spanish language, making it especially difficult to develop social ties with other Latinos within the community subsequently leading to social isolation. Maya youth experience isolation because they fear discrimination in exposing their indigenous background in the host society (Popkin 1999). Their financial responsibilities, unauthorized status, and fear of discrimination may also present an obstacle to attending language or training schools that will facilitate acculturation. Moreover, parents instruct their children to employ social strategies of their native country to avoid mistreatment by insisting that their children stay clear of those who are not from their native village and are of lighter complexion. They also instruct their children to avoid public transportation in fear that ICE agents inspect trains and buses. Guatemalan social status hierarchies also influence how youth interact with others in the host society (Popkin *ibid*). When Voices of Hope began meeting,

participants would not enter the coffee shop or dare use the restroom. Instead they returned home. This practice arose from the discrimination of indigenous people in schools, restaurants, stores, and other public spaces in Guatemalan cities that excluded from using public facilities (Fabri 2000).

Aldarondo and Becker (2011) emphasize that unaccompanied minors experience a “disruption of social and cultural belonging [that] may result in social isolation, the loss of self-identification, and the loss of a sense of security and well-being” (197). Voices of Hope youth often describe feeling afraid, shy, embarrassed, or anxious when entering public spaces such as grocery stores, restaurants, coffee shops, parks and the like. Some resort to self-isolation because of the overwhelming emotions they feel at the prospect of interacting with others. In particular, their lack of familiarity with the English language may cause youth to feel insecure about what others may say or think about them. When I interviewed twenty-six year old Robert, he explained that he spent his first five years in the US in isolation because the fear of discrimination of *indios* (a derogatory term used for indigenous people) made him feel ashamed of his culture and produced low self-esteem. The fear of discrimination or ridicule impedes social participation and acculturation since they are less likely to frequent public spaces, interact with others, participate in local events, and ultimately garner social ties and cultural knowledge necessary to become incorporated into American society (Padilla and Perez 2003). Robert’s experience makes evident that simply being of indigenous descent complicates acculturation and adaptation in American society due to real and perceived discrimination. Absent parents attempt to buffer their children from inter-ethnic discrimination by instructing children to behave in various ways that may complicate daily interactions. Together, these factors contribute to youth’s expressions of depression, loneliness, fear, and anxiety.

Limited Institutional Resources

The various emotions associated with financial commitments and acculturation draw youth to seek out support. As low-wage workers, study participants lack the supportive peer and adult groups undocumented students obtain (Abrego 2006, Gonzales 2011). Voices of Hope is not associated with any particular Pico Union church, yet all but two group participants are members of a local Catholic Church. One member does not attend church and the other attends a

Protestant church also located in Pico Union. Though I did not observe the youth at church, reflections of their experiences in the church and sentiments toward those experiences were often brought up as people talked about their weeks in Voices of Hope gatherings. Research shows families are the primary influencing force on religiosity (Park and Ecklund 2007), and despite the distance between Voices of Hope youth and their families, parents continue to influence their religious affiliation and participation. Upon migration, unaccompanied minors are instructed by parents or grandparents to stay close to the church since it is believed that saints will keep children safe. Nanlai Cau (2005) posits that church can provide a surrogate family and spiritual leaders for immigrant children and youth that prevent downward assimilation by counteracting the loss of parental authority and control resulting from Americanization. For working class immigrant youth, adopting Western religious practices is positively associated with adaptation and assimilation to middle-class norms (Cau *ibid*). In the discussion that follows I do not wish to undermine the positive influence of the church, but highlight the unique challenges faced by Mayan youth as they draw on their very limited institutional resources to make sense of their lived experiences.

Through formal and informal conversations at weekly meetings it became clear that youth credit the church for providing them the space to overcome their “*soledad* (loneliness),” timidity, and shyness in public as it is a safe space for them to meet others. Churches in Pico Union expose socially isolated youth to their similarly situated peers, and provide a space for young men and women to interact in a safe and culturally accepted manner. Though the church fosters social interaction, its doctrine often complicates Mayan youth’s adaptation as it conflicts with indigenous spirituality and condemns or dismisses particular behaviors without much elaboration and counsel. For example, there are saints and traditional rituals within Mayan spirituality that have no place in the Catholic Church. This duality is expressed in the group as sentiments of confusion as to the morality of traditional beliefs and practices and whether abandoning long-held Mayan beliefs is considered parental defiance. Secondly, coming of age includes discovering one’s sexuality. Youth describe that in their villages people do not discuss sex or sexuality, nor do the churches in the US address their curiosity or concerns. One young man who confessed to not being able to get through a day of work without masturbating was told he was committing a sin and felt shame, guilt and helplessness because he did not receive advice about how he might overcome his addiction. A young woman once asked me if I danced at

parties because she was told that it is wrong to do so but this did not diminish its appeal. Finally, those who express their feelings of rejection and isolation are told of “the freedom that God brings. [That] God loves you very much. [That] you are important... but it ends there.” That is, they do not feel they are supported beyond the messages that are given to the entire congregation. One young man expresses that the hours spent at church during his first five years in the US was time “wasted” because “those who are in the church simply say, ‘come to church! God loves you! God bless you! Serve! Sweep! Everything! But that’s it.’” He, and others, believes that the church takes more from the youth than it gives in social support. Youth must therefore look beyond the church to find alternate resources to navigate the challenges they face.

Together, transnational and local financial commitments, acculturative stress, and limited institutional resources cause what the Voices of Hope mentor, Wil, refers to as a social “disorientation” among unaccompanied minors as they come of age. In our interview Wil explained, “They (the youth) have been living disorientated. Now they are getting oriented, but just barely.” This “orientation” is the process of socialization, where youth are learning how to relate to and engage with society. Wil contributes to their “orientation” by providing mentorship, psychological idioms to facilitate self-construction, and an alternative support group setting for dialogue. Voices of Hope creates a space for open discussion with similarly situated peers in which people are asked to talk about themselves and what they have gone or are going through to begin “accepting” their conditions and finding how to overcome them. Voices of Hope is a socializing agent that introduces youth to individualistic language and behaviors that serve to overcome the psychological and mental traumas of migration, burdens of collective responsibility, and their own economic instability.

Catalysts for Social Adaptation

Teaching Expressive Individualism

The formal focus of Voices of Hope is to identify, discuss, and overcome daily obstacles with “honesty, sincerity, and an open mind.” Each week, Voices of Hope participants gather their chairs in a circle and begin with the question “how was your week?” Those in attendance take their turn reflecting on their week or a specific event. The most commonly heard stories week

after week fall under four main themes: work and finances, physical health, reports of families in Guatemala, and the previously mentioned emotions of fear, stress, and anxiety.

The group socializes Maya youth to American norms of individualism, urging them to express their thoughts and emotions and take on a new form of thinking and speaking in which they accept their circumstances of poverty and, in some cases, exploitation as the first step toward doing what they need to overcome the challenges they face in everyday life. While previous research shows that immigrant families try to prevent their children's socialization into a culture of individualism, this research does not distinguish between utilitarian and expressive individualism. American children are primarily socialized into American individualism through two institutions, the family and school. The unaccompanied working youth in this study have incomplete or nonexistent access to their familial or academic guides and mentors. They may, however, have access to cultural brokers (such as Wil) and support groups (like Voices of Hope). Cultural brokers are figures who are acculturated in both the mainstream and the ethnic culture and bridge the mainstream society and various subcultures (Gentemann and Whitehead 1983, Lee 2002).

Wil is a community leader who began mentoring youth after observing their "disorientation" while he was the catechist instructor eight years prior to the start of my fieldwork. Wil is a Salvadoran man in his late forties, with dark features. He relates to the youth of Voices of Hope because he too migrated to the US as an unauthorized, unaccompanied minor. Though he notes life was much easier as an unauthorized immigrant in the 1980s, he often reassures the youth that if he was able to adapt to American society, they can too. Jorge, who is a 1.5-generation Mexican immigrant and has a college degree in psychology from the University of California, works alongside Wil. Jorge acknowledges that unlike Wil, who is perceived more as a mentor or father figure, he is a role model for the youth who aspire to participate in mainstream activities such as driving, school, and middle-class work (Gentemann and Whitehead 1983). In this section I focus primarily on Wil's influence on the group participants' adaptation, since he spearheaded the group and is a key figure in their lives. Wil facilitates the meetings, gives concluding thoughts each week, and spends time with the youth throughout the week. During my occasional visits to the coffee shop where Voices of Hope began, I often found Wil meeting with young Mayan men and women who did not attend Voices of Hope. He explained to me that Voices of Hope participants recommended their neighbors, co-workers, and friends to

talk to Wil for counsel and support. Thus, he and his methods are well known by Mayan youth throughout Pico Union.

Wil is aware of the various obligations youth have to their families, work, and the church. He urges youth to practice “honesty” and “sincerity” with themselves and others as a way to uncover personal values and needs. In essence, he promotes ideals of expressive individualism—a form of speaking and acting that places precedent on the personal self. In this case of working Maya youth, expressive individualism means taking the focus off the collective responsibility for family members who remain in the home country and prioritizing individual well-being. Bellah et al (1996) describe that defining the self begins when one leaves their parents’ home. Wil insists that these youth, who see themselves as detached members of a distant family, have taken the first step toward independence and individuality. One evening, conversations turned to sharing narratives of fear of speaking to others in public. Wil broke his

Look, you have succeeded! Honestly, take that in your mind. You say ‘I am embarrassed, I am scared, I am shy, etcetera, but ask yourselves ‘of what?’ You have overcome it all! Well, that is how I see it. You have overcome and you are free.

Like most times Wil speaks, youth sit in silence, glancing around the room, with smiles of pride in their accomplishments.

You were freed in your childhood. In turn, the American starts to get supervised freedom at eighteen years. The majority leaves the house to study but their parents are still looking out [for them]. You came out from the distances at 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 years and you made it and you are here. I see that, in all honesty and with all due respect, you are fine.

His tone turned from impatience to enthusiasm while expressing America’s core ideologies of freedom and independence of youth as grounds for empowerment rather than fear. Scholars note that immigrant children define becoming American as being individualistic and independent from parental authority (Waters 2000, Zhou and Bankston 1998). Though they may not see it as such, distance from their families is portrayed as an asset for youth who experience strong family obligations because distance gives freedom to pursue individual interests. According to Wil, geographic distance from families also gives the option of when and how to provide for their families; yet, youth struggle to realize it as such. He elaborates on this idea when explaining, "They are free. They are at so many miles of distance but no, they stay in the emotional, the psychological. They say, ‘it’s just my mom... my dad... my mom... my dad.’"

Voices of Hope participants revere their parents' authority and their filial responsibility. But these youth turn to Wil as a decision-making authority figure, mentor, and friend. They ask him questions ranging from what will happen if they are stopped by police officers and the difference between feeling afraid or shy to intimate questions as how one knows when they are in love or the potential consequences of masturbation. They also ask for help in making decisions about what jobs to take, whether they should pursue or continue pursuing their education, if they should send money to Guatemala when it is requested, and the like. Wil openly shares information on how to do or think about various situations, but encourages youth to exercise their agency in what steps to take. That is, Wil might explain how to remit money but he does not intervene on whether youth should. To Wil, these moments are opportunities for youth to push back on their collective obligations and begin to think in terms of what feels good and right. When I asked why he does not give his opinion when youth ask for advice he explained, "It's because they need to take the last word. Even though they come to talk they would want to know, 'what do you think? What should I do?' I would tell them 'No, wait. This is your option. Option one, option two, and if it is possible, option three. You have to do what is convenient for you.' I cannot tell them do this, do that, do this." In this way, Wil brokers independent and individualistically oriented decision-making.

Wil recognizes the youth are looking for validation, but encourages them, in their 'freedom' from their parents and the constraints of the home country, to find validation in themselves. This approach is emphasized in cases where Wil praises those who "do what works for [them]" in the face of a "tribulation." To illustrate, one evening a young man described feeling anxiety at work earlier that week. He decided to take a break and went to a local park where he saw a man doing yoga and mimicked the man's pose, which he reported helped calm him down. Wil used this as an example of how people should take initiative in finding and doing what works for them. He said, "Go to [a different group]. If it works for you, go there. Take initiative, do what works for you!" A similar instance occurred some weeks later when Wil used another young man's \$700 investment in a series of self-help books as a sign of initiative and exemplary self-duty. In saying, "take initiative, do what works for you!" and lauding the efforts of another participant, Wil is communicating that the youth should not rely on others to tell them what their next step should be. Wil is brokering expressive individualism so that youth who lack

parental figures might see themselves as the ultimate authority, capable of determining what is in their best interest through self-discovery.

When youth doubt their ability to make “correct” decisions, Wil links the legitimacy of individual authority to the migration experience itself. The morning of a scheduled group gathering, the Los Angeles local Spanish newspaper, *Hoy Los Angeles*, printed a front-page story entitled “*Más niños guatemaltecos viajan solos a los E.E.U.U.* (More Guatemalan Children Journey to the United States Alone).”² That evening Wil placed the newspaper at the center of the table. As people slowly entered the room, they gathered around the table, each taking notice of the newspaper, which prompted youth to begin sharing immigration stories. Wil allowed me to ask questions related to the journey and settlement, particularly how each was navigated both physically and emotionally and why youth thought this was a growing phenomenon. After people shared their insight, Wil took a deep breath, thanked those who shared for their courage and ended the meeting by urging youth to garner a sense of personal hope from their experiences, saying,

Maybe you don’t see crossing the border like something you have accomplished. Maybe you want to forget it because it is painful. But if you were to use that experience and transform it into something positive... Sometimes you come here and say, ‘Oh, I don’t have anything. I don’t know English, I don’t have anything, I am poor,’ whatever it may be but you do not notice that we have so much life experience. If we learn that, you can get much further.

Here, Wil is promoting the cultivation of personalism where each person learns to value their personal story and uses it as the foundation to succeed in an individualistic American society. In this way, the individual experience is of highest value. Furthermore, just as is found in American middle-class support groups, the construction of the individual is closely linked to the support group (Wuthnow 1994). He notes unique experiences of crossing the border, poverty, and disadvantage, but acknowledges the collective life experience and the collective’s need to learn that each life experience can be transformed to a source of empowerment. He then says “if *we* learn that, *you* can get much further,” implying that the group is learning, but that each person is on an individual path. Youth nod in agreement as messages of personal responsibility and self-duty resonate with those who begin to describe themselves as unique individuals and their daily experiences as means for self-realization. The following section discusses how youth come to

² <http://hoylosangeles.com/news/2013/mar/01/mas-ninos-guatemaltecos-viajan-solos-eeuu/>

adopt the rhetoric and behaviors of expressive individualism espoused by Wil and the outcomes of doing so.

Becoming Expressive Individuals and Shifting Social Commitments

Thus far this paper has examined how unaccompanied Mayan's transnational family obligations and stigmas associated with indigeneity create financial, emotional, and psychological and social burdens as they come of age in American society. With limited institutional membership, youth receive little support in confronting the challenges they face. Those who have access to a cultural broker and a dialogue based informal support group garner tools to navigate the challenges associated with the circumstances of their migration, which subsequently fosters their adaptation in American society. As Mayan youth engage in personal storytelling and are exposed to therapeutic language such as "do what works for you", they become more self-oriented in that they move away from transnational family obligations to focus on the individual. I argue that the cultivation of self-duty contributes to a re-orientation of the self as a transnational collective being to a local one. For these youth social commitments are not severed, but are also re-oriented from the transnational to the local.

Cultivating Self-Duty

Unaccompanied minors who leave their home country with the intention of working to provide for their families use a narrative of filial responsibility and familial obligation. Children feel particularly responsible for their mothers whom they remember as "suffering." In a previous section I noted Wil's description of youth as being disoriented because they are constantly thinking about their parents. Voices of Hope participants share that the concern for their families that remain in Guatemala can be overwhelming. One evening I arrived to the group a few minutes early and found Wil huddled around a dining table in the meeting space with three young men. They spoke so softly I hesitated to approach them. As I walked around the table to the nearest empty chair I heard Marcos confess, "Thoughts of Guatemala do not leave me alone. I am always thinking about what's going on over there. *Me da tristesa y ansiedad* (It gives me sadness and anxiety)." Scholars have described this as a state of "perpetual mourn[ing]," where migrants feel sadness over the loss of their "families, homeland, language, identity, property,

religious or cultural rituals, geography, or status in their home communities” (Zavella 2011, 158). Immigrant mourning shapes the relationships maintained with those left behind, but also how the immigrant participates in the host society.

These narratives are shared week after week by youth who simultaneously describe their desires to attend school, learn English, find better employment, and improve their circumstances. Voices of Hope participants work ten-hour days, six days per week with little to show for their efforts. Wil typically refrains from engaging with youth in any way beyond providing self-help resources. However, on the evening when Marcos and Omar shared that thoughts of Guatemala and concern for those they left behind do not leave their minds, Wil broke away from his typically reserved posture where he listens to others while bowing his head with his hands clasped in his lap. He waited his turn to speak as to not disrupt the dialogue circle structure but when his turn came, he quickly leaned forward and began:

You must control your situations. Control your economy... Don't let yourself be pressured! I know you have debts still, and even more your family over there puts pressure on you. Ervin keeps telling us... I think he has really opened himself up to us really well. We can see how he gives and gives and gives to his family, and I congratulate you but at the same time I don't see where you are going. You, with your life, *you*... where are you? We have seen, that you open up for your brothers and your sisters, you are always looking out for others. You are the youngest of everyone and you are the one taking care of them. Be careful. Take care of you. Be careful each one of you because even from Guatemala you are getting a lot of pressure economically. I understand, I understand. That whole thing about the American Dream? It's dead. Don't dream so much. But you (all), with your self motivation and attending a group like this, you can take new paths...”

Youth glanced around with uncertainty. Noticing their hesitation, Wil said, “Ask Stephanie! She is a sociologist. She knows better than I do.” In this example, Wil is making a distinction between utilitarian and expressive individualism. He advises the youth to forget about the former by alluding to the myth behind the American Dream, but encourages them to think about what “new path” they can take that will lead to self-fulfillment when saying “You, with your life, *you*... where are you?” – a promotion of self-responsibility. Wil explained that he confidently passes on this message because he has witnessed the positive changes that take place in people's lives when they begin to ask themselves that very question. Those who accept it discuss experiencing an “awakening” to a new reality of their personal identity.

We can turn to Angel as an example. Angel is twenty years old and has lived in the US for five years during which he struggled with stress and felt frustrated with family related

obligations. Typically energetic and talkative, Angel solemnly shared that he didn't know how to handle all the things he was responsible for, particularly his alcoholic brother. Angel said, "My brother drinks and I don't know how to take care of him. When I started coming here (Voices of Hope) I learned I'm not responsible for my brother. He is responsible for himself." Nodding his head as if affirming himself, he continued, "Now I know what I will be doing." He said Voices of Hope is "a place of mental training" where he learned what his priorities should be. He looked around the circle, nodded his head, and thanked the group for listening. Angel is now a leader of a local church youth group and is enrolled in English classes. His experience demonstrates that the adoption of expressive individualism and cultivation of self-duty may heighten personal stability and facilitate social adaptation by alleviating the burdens that impede participation in community organizations and education. That is, becoming individualistic in self-expression and -definition did not lead Angel to deviance but to greater social participation. Again, thinking of individualism as a way of learning and re-orienting the self rather than a form of acquiring material goods can uncover its potential of promoting the social adaptation of immigrant youth. Finally, Angel's claim that the support group is "a place of mental training" suggests that support groups are also socializing institutions for marginalized immigrant youth.

Despite adopting expressive individualism, social commitment is not completely lost, as proponents of the Seesaw Model might argue. Individualism that is learned and practiced in a social support group setting, as is the case for Voices of Hope, becomes grounds for personalized, local commitment. For some, a newfound focus on the self also increases aspirations for social incorporation and socioeconomic mobility.

Personalized Social Commitment

Becoming personalistic can be interpreted as especially harmful for unaccompanied young immigrants whose social ties are those with their dependent families that remain in the country of origin. Communitarian sociologists might expect that social commitment ceases to exist upon becoming personalistic. Immigration scholars posit that individualism among immigrant youth leads to downward mobility and threatens social integration. However, adopting expressive individualism does not sever the social commitments of Voices of Hope members. Instead, three patterns of reoriented commitments emerge. First, youth's economic

attachments to the home country attenuates because personal well-being is prioritized. Second, identification with indigenous language or culture strengthens and becomes a greater part of self-presentation as youth learn to value their personal narratives and identities. Finally, the valuation of personal narrative is accompanied by the conceptualization of the self as a potential community leader or role model. Together, these work to draw the individual to a more localized understanding of the self with the intention of reaching social stability and adaptation and the increased desire to similar transformations within the community. With time, youth may come to develop growing aspirations for permanent settlement and socioeconomic mobility.

Benji's case exemplifies the first pattern. Benji is a thirty-year-old who has been living in Los Angeles for the past fourteen years. For nine years he lived in a small one-bedroom apartment with multiple people and constantly fell ill as he worked long hours to provide for his family in Guatemala. He began his recovery from depression, alcoholism, and drug addiction after meeting Wil and receiving guidance in the importance of finding one's gifts and purpose and setting personal goals. Benji retells this story every few weeks when he attends Voices of Hope meetings. He typically arrives a few minutes after the dialogue has begun, making evident the excitement in response to his arrival. When it is his turn to share, he casually leans back in his chair, his arms hanging by his side while he explains that he feels "free". The other group participants intently listen to Benji with wide eyes and grins, demonstrating their admiration for him. He explains he no longer feels obligated to send money to Guatemala each week, but remits money when his personal budget permits. Rather than causing a downward social trajectory when becoming more individualistic, Benji was able to begin working to overcome the emotional and psychological burdens that stemmed from his inability to sufficiently provide for his family.

Benji's case demonstrates that expressive individualism, focusing on oneself, and seeking self-fulfillment can allow youth to see their attenuated economic commitment not as abandonment of responsibility, but investment in self-responsibility. After Benji received his "orientation" to self-duty, he began focusing his resources on living a healthy and more enjoyable life. Though he has not attending school and learned the English language, Benji says he is not afraid to interact with others. He says, "I know who I am. I know what I can do." In this way, expressive individualism caused Benji to think of himself not as someone who is a member of a transnational family with responsibilities to support that family, but as a local self with an

individual identity, needs, and potential.

Marlon is another example of this pattern. He came to LA fourteen to support his younger brother's education, remitting \$250 weekly. Robert invited Marlon to Voices of Hope to meet Wil and Jorge after he confided in Robert that his employer was underpaying him.³ Marlon describes that he too received an "orientation" after meeting Wil where he learned "how youth live here (in the US)." He said he gained insight into "the purpose of life" and that he did not just have to work but could also pursue his own dreams, whatever those may be. That is, Marlon is acculturating to the US mainstream's idea of youth behavior. Marlon quit his job, applied for another that would allow him to attend school, and informed his brother that after he received his degree, Marlon would no longer remit money to Guatemala. In our interview, Marlon switched between Spanish and accented, sometimes broken, English. With a smile on his face he shared his goals of completing high school and attending culinary school, an example of how personal stability can create inroads to increased aspirations for socioeconomic mobility. Marlon explained to me that he believes Voices of Hope has caused him to think in terms of the purpose and meaning of his own life. Though he would like to continue providing for his family, he says he very seldom considers returning to Guatemala and recognizes that in order to succeed in the US, he must focus on "preparing (educating)" himself. Here he alludes to his desires for social incorporation and socioeconomic mobility.

These examples corroborate the findings of Agius Vallejo and Lee (2006), who highlight that immigrants that "feel that their extensive financial and social obligations have circumscribed their choices and prevented them from achieving more economic stability" must sometimes distance themselves from family obligations to get ahead (25). In this way, focusing on the self actually promotes immigrants' emotional, psychological, and financial stability, and in turn social adaptation. The inverse relationship between individualism and social responsibility is something the proponents of the Seesaw Model might expect to see. Voices of Hope participants are learning a language that focuses on self-responsibility and doing what works and feels right for the individual at the expense of their social ties to the home country and families that remain. Immigration scholars would anticipate increased risk to downward mobility; however, Marlon exemplifies that decreasing transnational financial commitments may coexist alongside

³ In one year his employer withheld about \$8,000 of his income. At the time of this writing, it has been six months since Marlon reported the violation, yet the matter remains unresolved.

increasing desires for social incorporation in the host society and socioeconomic mobility. Furthermore, this trend exists within the context of evolving social commitments.

As youth's transnational commitments weaken, their local commitments are strengthened. The second form of reoriented social commitment is seen through an increased importance of identification with indigenous language or culture in self-representation. Thus, they are participating in a strengthening of the Mayan co-ethnic community in Pico Union (Popkin 1999). In their home countries and upon arrival in Los Angeles, youth are afraid of experiencing discrimination based on their indigenous backgrounds. They are often referred to as the derogatory term *indio*, or indian, and thus resort to social isolation (Batz 2010). Parents reinforce fears of discrimination and violence when instructing children to keep their indigeneity private and keep their distance from those who are from outside of their village or of lighter skin tone. Strikingly, part of the self-orientation I observed among youth includes learning the meaning and value of one's cultural identification.

Aaron articulately describes how this transition occurred in his life. He said that upon arrival he did not accept that he was Guatemalan but through education and self-preparation he began awakening to a new reality.

I did not accept that I am Guatemalan. I felt that I am rejected there. I am rejected here. I could not find help. I fell into depression and everything was bad, nothing was good. I asked myself why other people are okay and I am not. I would tell myself, "Well, it's because I am an *indio*."

Aaron recalls meeting Wil and Jorge and admiring that they constantly spoke of learning new things. Ervin enrolled in ESL courses and began reading books that detailed Mayan history. He states,

E: I am barely awakening. I thought I was the only one that felt this way but then I saw that a bunch of youth from my culture and my country are suffering. Many youth are here but they are not studying and they just work and work. I started studying and noticed we don't have leaders. We don't have anybody.

SC: You said you feel as though you are waking up, to what are you awakening?

E: Well, before I thought I was someone without value... Then I started to read the history of how Europeans came over and I started to know my culture. Before I thought that I was *indio*, now I know I am not *indio*. I am Maya. Why am I Maya? Because my grandparents and great grandparents are Mayan. My language is Quiche. Now I am seeing the reality, I am waking up. It does not affect me now when people say, "you are Maya." I say, "yes, yes I am" because I know who I am but the youth who do not know thinks that they is being humiliated. It's not like that.

Through Wil and Jorge, Aaron met other community leaders and role models that asked Aaron about Guatemala, the culture, and the indigenous languages used. Meeting ‘Americans’ who are interested in learning indigenous languages gives a particular sense of pride in their culture. This is something Marlon, Gabriel, Dolores, and others confirmed as a cultural- and ultimately self-validation. Just as Aaron did, many youth describe going from thinking of themselves as *indios* to feeling pride in identifying themselves as Mayan.

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) refer to this process as “reactive ethnicity” where ethnic awareness is a response to “perceived threats, persecution, and exclusion” (148). In this context, a thickened ethnic identity is related to experiences of discrimination. Interestingly, Mayan Guatemalan youth experienced two instances of reactive ethnicity. While the first, a denial of indigeneity, is a response to discrimination, it is not a thickening but a dampening of cultural identity. Youth experience reactive ethnicity once again as they learn to value themselves. Youth have been taught their whole lives to dampen their own cultural identity because of real or potential discrimination. Becoming personalistic and valuing the self may heighten one’s willingness to identify with a larger group. Thus, a language of expressive individualism can create a buffer to sentiments of exclusion and discrimination, and promote social interactions and the beginning stages of adaptation.

The final case of a re-oriented social commitment is related to leadership formation among youth who describe overcoming their traumas of fear, stress, depression, and in some cases alcohol and drug addiction. These individuals express a personalized commitment to other immigrant youth in Pico Union. In the excerpt above, Aaron states, “Many youth are here but they are not studying and they just work and work. I started studying and noticed we don’t have leaders. We don’t have anybody.” Voices of Hope participants are often advised to think about how self-help can lead to helping others. In one instance Wil said, “Each one of you can get better... If you want to do what’s better for other people, see how to better yourself. Do that for yourself, and you will help others. Fight for that internal *reconquista* (reconquer).” This is to say individualism does not mean, “do your own thing” but is associated with personal empowerment, an “internal *reconquista*,” to pursue unique interests and skills that might ultimately better their community. This type of talk became more prevalent as my time in the field progressed, not only in the detail in which youth talked about how to help others but also in the number of people who adopted this mentality. Francisco, introduced earlier in this paper, arrived at fourteen years old

and struggled with alcoholism and homelessness during his first nine years in the US. He has attended Voices of Hope for just over a year. In our interview he explained his goal upon arrival was to build a house for his family. Now, after having overcome addictions, he aims to reach out to others. He explained,

I think my greatest responsibility is to take care of my family. Take care... give them the best life. But I think my responsibility now that I have come out of addiction is to talk with other youth that are here because many are still very young, so I have to talk to them so that they do not fall.

Here, Francisco is using a personalized version of his experience as the grounds for seeing himself as a community leader or role model. Francisco's identification with youth who suffer from the circumstances he was able to come out of is strengthened. In fact, his commitment to youth becomes an immediate responsibility while his responsibility to take care of his family, while still important, may remain a long-term goal. Aaron, who moved from shame to pride his Mayan heritage upon learning the history of Maya Guatemalans, says he is motivated to teach others about what it means to be Maya and the culture and history is worth preserving and celebrating. He now hosts a weekly radio show that is streamed in Los Angeles and Guatemala via Internet. This radio show covers topics such as Mayan history, the importance of education, life in Los Angeles, and often features interviews with Pico Union's Mayan Guatemalan youth. Aaron also hosts a weekly book club at a Pico Union community garden as a way to promote the education of community youth. After each group gathering Jorge, the group leader, will ask if there are announcements. Not one week passed where Aaron did not encourage youth to tune in to his radio show on weekend mornings or attend the book club in the afternoons. After some months of low attendance, Aaron made the announcement that he was reconsidering changing the purpose of the group meeting, but he remained committed to holding a time for people to gather to "*trabajar las cosas* (to work on things)." Francisco and Aaron exemplify that it is possible for individualism among immigrant youth to encourage positive role modeling.

We can see then how adopting a personalized-self complements a stronger identification with certain social identities. Seeing the self as an individual on a personal journey may attenuate youth's sense of transnational economic obligation but fortify the desire to achieve incorporation and socioeconomic mobility in the host society. Furthermore, thinned transnational obligation may simultaneously strengthen local social commitments as one experiences a thickened ethnic identity upon working toward discovering the self and helping others to do the same as a way to

better the community.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The US Customs and Border Protection reports a growing number of unauthorized, unaccompanied minors entering the United States each year. The unaccompanied minors in this study left their homes in Guatemala to work in the US as a way to lift their families from poverty; consequently, bringing with them transnational responsibilities to their impoverished families that remain in the country of origin. Their financial responsibilities lengthen their duration of stay in the US and complicate their social incorporation process as they relentlessly work to provide for their families. Youth also face marginalization and barriers to adaptation due to their indigeneity and limited institutional membership and resources. Without their parents and outside of academic institutions, unaccompanied minor migrant workers lack the traditional supporting and socializing institutions that facilitate incorporation as they come of age in American society. Thus, the existing framework of immigrant youth suggests that the experiences of these young-adults would prompt a very high risk of downward mobility into the underclass.

The study of immigrant assimilation emphasizes the threat of adopting American individualism on youth's successful assimilation as they come of age in American society. This study suggests that among unauthorized, unaccompanied Mayan youth who actively participate in self-help groups, the adaptation process involves a re-orientation process in which youth adopt individualistic expressions of the self that transform self-construction and social commitment from the transnational to the local. While some argue that expressive individualism poses a threat to social cohesion through the weakening of social ties (Bellah et al 1985), others find personalized language can serve as an impetus for social action (Lichterman 1995, Wuthnow 1994). I find that participation in psychotherapeutic culture through support group membership provides an alternative coping mechanism for the stresses and traumas associated with migration and adaptation in the host society. Exercising individualism through personalistic language equips youth growing up without parents or supportive social institutions with a sense of self-responsibility necessary for emotional, psychological, and financial stability, and eventual socioeconomic mobility. Support group participation transforms collectivist ideologies born out

of the socioeconomic conditions of the sending country to one of individualism and self-interest that characterizes the host country. Wuthnow (1994) finds that support group participation makes people feel strong enough that they want to be more socially oriented because they have worked on themselves. This individualism does not, however, atomize the youth, but re-orient their sense of self and their goals, and personalizes their motivations in achieving them. As they develop self-duty, youth's financial commitments to their transnational families attenuate, yet their ethnic identification and desire to engage in positive role modeling are strengthened. That is, while youth are disengaging from the transnational social commitments that motivated their journey North, new social commitments emerge. This finding suggests that immigration scholars must distinguish between strands of individualism and the outcomes of adopting one form versus another among various segments of the immigrant population.

Contrary to what immigration scholars posit about the effects utilitarian individualistic attitudes on youth incorporation, distinguishing expressive (pursuit of self-discovery and good feelings) from utilitarian (pursuit of material wealth) individualism draws out the varied effects on the construction of self as part of the adaptation process. In this case, expressive individualism promotes stability through the breaking of social ties that cause financial, emotional, and psychological burdens. In essence, Voices of Hope participants are taught to be self-interested so that they can survive day-to-day life. Rather than leading to downward assimilation into a minority underclass, youth become individualistic while retaining a sense of struggle and an ethos of giving back to community. It is through their self-realization that youth come to feel embedded in a co-ethnic community, become motivated to achieve their goals, and develop commitment to utilize their experiences to better that community. Those who garner a sense of financial, emotion, and psychological stability begin expressing aspirations for socioeconomic mobility and social incorporation. Thus, this research calls for a more critical profile of unauthorized youth coming of age in American society, as well as a rethinking the pathways and mechanisms for immigrant incorporation in the United States today.

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