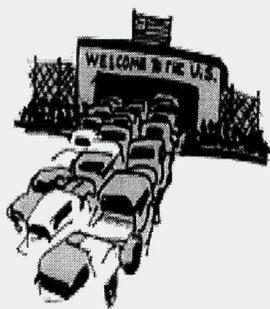


## Like Oil in Water: Exploring the Narratives of an Undocumented Worker

*Every year millions of immigrants come to the United States with a dream of making their lives better. Many of them face ever changing immigration laws and institutional discrimination. Like oil in water, the undocumented worker lives within the confines of society but is not mixed into the community. This narrative examines the life of one such individual, highlighting challenges many undocumented workers encounter. She is a young woman with hopes of improving herself and her quality of life, while finding herself categorized and restricted within the status of undocumented worker, without opportunity, freedom, or membership in the community. Her narrative informs and challenges practitioners, policymakers, and researchers.*

by  
**Rachel Pitt  
and  
Flavio Francisco Marsiglia**

Rachel Pitt and Flavio Francisco Marsiglia, Ph.D., are with the School of Social Work - College of Public Programs, Arizona State University



The general public's attitudes towards immigration are treated as the Greek Chorus speaking to the undocumented workers as their real life tragedy unfolds. Changing immigration laws (Padilla, 1997) have increased the challenges faced by documented and undocumented immigrants. This article explores the immigration experience as narrated by a young, undocumented immigrant woman. Within the interview, different layers of an undocumented worker's life unfold, exposing the oppression and limitations that are part of her daily existence.

### The Journey

*Bienvenido a los Estados Unidos de America* [Welcome to the United States of America] is the title of the (1996) pamphlet given to non-citizens entering the U.S. The inviting words give the impression of open arms, a warm smile, and a friendly atmosphere. "We welcome you to the United States and we wish that your entrance into the country is easy and without inconveniences." These

welcoming words printed by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Customs Office often contradict reality seen within individual lives.

Despite the economic opportunities the U.S. provides, many immigrants struggle to succeed or adequately survive. Discrimination, racism, economic factors, and other obstacles taint the opportunities given to immigrants. While these difficulties exist, many individuals continue immigrating, surviving, and at times prospering. Hopes and dreams for a better future remain as part of immigrants' stories despite the hostile environment many of them face in this country.

### Listening to one story

This article presents personal meanings behind the current depersonalized immigration experience. This journey into the life of an undocumented immigrant worker elicits information, insights, and meaning from a usually silenced voice.

As a student and the instructor of a graduate social work diversity course, the authors arrived at the conclusion that the narratives of undocumented workers were missing from the course readings. Class was held very close to the Mexico-U.S. border, but the voices of immigrants were distant. Those who make daily attempts to cross the border, succeeding or failing, were not represented in the class material. The informant was chosen since she was a casual acquaintance with one of the authors; thus a comfort level was previously established. She was enthusiastic and inclined to share her insider's perspective of the immigration ordeal. When asked, her response was of surprise in that her story was recognizable and important enough to be documented and substantiated. Her willingness and interest inspired the dialogue to occur.

Specifically, the goal of the interview was to uncover personal meanings behind the expert informant's immigration experience. The informant was a 30-year-old South American female. She emigrated from her country of origin to Mexico in 1987. Her journey into the U.S. began in 1992. She has lived in a large city in Texas in the home of her employer since her immigration. She has not been able to obtain documentation to authorize residency in the U.S. Despite these obstacles, she remains optimistic to the outside eye. Inside, frustration colors her reality. For purposes of this article she will be referred to as María Lopez, a pseudonym she chose.



#### María's Narrative

It was a Saturday evening. Driving to meet María, one could see magnificent mansion-like homes, majestic yards, and beautiful cars parked in colossal driveways. The home in which María worked and lived was no exception. Shimmering windows from castle-like homes lighted the dark night and led the interviewer to María. Her employers were out for the evening, leaving the large home available for intimate discussions and private dialogues. The only other individuals present in the home were sleeping children in their upstairs bedrooms. The interview took place while the participants drank tea in the spacious kitchen. The enormous house was filled with the chilly air of a winter night. María was wearing a casual outfit of jeans and a sweater. She was an attractive, petite woman with modest jewelry adorning her ears, hands, and neck. Her demeanor was calm and welcoming that evening as she spoke softly, yet purposefully. The house remained quiet while

we discussed sensitive details of María's life.

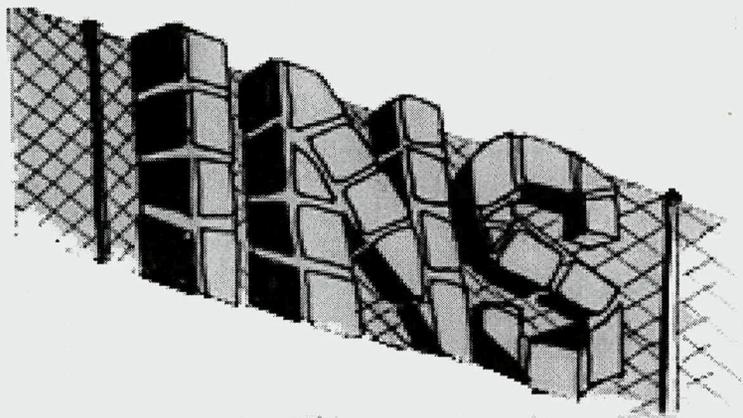
Why did María, like millions of other immigrants, resettle in the U.S.? María shared her perspective: *"I think it is the same reason everybody comes [to the U.S.]: To make money and go back to your country. But I don't think that ever happens because you are here and start making money and get used to making money and living that kind of life."*

María was less than two years from finishing dentistry school in Mexico, a profession practiced by both her father and brother in her country of origin. Her parents were helping support her while she attended a university in Mexico until financial troubles struck the family. Her parents were no longer able to offer monetary support. *"I thought that since I am close to America, I said that I will go and make some money, then go back to Mexico to finish my school. That never happened!"* María recounts her reason for coming to the U.S. with humor, but disappointment tinges her voice.

María entered the country with a tourist visa. It entitled her to reside in the U.S. for a limited time until, she thought, it would be possible to obtain a work visa. *"I thought I would stay here maybe a year."* Five years later, María sits at the kitchen table of her employer's house reporting that *"[the visa] expired and I became illegal."*

Hers is just one of many scenarios that describe how people immigrate into the U.S., only to be caught in the legal battle for citizenship rights. After

the time limits of her restrictive visa expired, the immigration laws were in effect. People establish lives in the U.S. but without docu-



mentation permitting them to remain in the country, leaving them with the option of remaining part of the undocumented "illegal" community. They face overwhelming barriers and frustrating limitations. People become trapped, unable to free themselves of monumental obstacles encountered in the U.S.

### **La Pared [The Walls]**

The INS presents bureaucratic walls difficult to climb. Barriers such as language skills, lack of work experience, lack of proper documentation, lack of resources, and absent family support systems also create problems. They help structure glass walls that keep immigrants from prospering.

Lack of employment is a pressing issue for many immigrants. As noted earlier, many individuals enter the country with visas that do not permit legal employment or extended residency. Thus, one might question how immigrants obtain employment without proper documenta-

tion. María reports: *"There are many ways. You can buy fake papers on the street, you can pick a social security number, or some*

*people [employers] don't care because they don't have to report you on income taxes so they would rather hire someone cheap."*

Agencies, like the employment agency María used, apparently are less concerned with legal status of an employee and more focused on earning commissions. Finding placements for workers may grant agencies approximately \$600 to \$800 for each person employed through them. María needed employment. *"I did not have experience with any type of job. So, the easy job to look for was as a nanny."* Not speaking English, without work experience, and without proper documentation for employment, María's options were limited. *"...Being single and being by myself, it is more easy to have this kind of job because I don't have to pay rent. You can save some money!"* This scenario describes many in this country.

How do immigrant individuals obtain "status" for employment and residency in the

United States? Employment choices are limited. People do what is necessary for survival. María tells how she might gain legal status in this country: *"Getting married to an American citizen. You pay money. You marry someone who will allow a fake marriage with you and live with you if necessary. You pay \$3,000 or \$4,000 dollars."* This option is a reality for many undocumented immigrants wanting authorized documentation. *"That is the only way now. There is no other way."*

Feelings of powerlessness tainted her thoughts. Her words hinted at an optimistic viewpoint, but her reality was painted with pessimism and despair, replacing her once optimistic dream. While María floats along the rim of society, she is left without a strong sense of community or belonging. Her words expressed a dichotomous perception of herself: as a woman and as an undocumented immigrant. The adjective "undocumented" obscures the hopes and the dreams of the woman.

### **Soy una persona tambien [I'm a person too]**

Experiences have shaped María's view of the U.S. She has experienced an ambivalent acceptance within U.S. culture. The precarious status of the undocumented worker leaves her and many other immigrants with the bitter taste of racism. Glances, cruel labels, questions, and comments create a community filled with pain for many immigrant individuals.

In the U.S. it is not uncommon to hear the term "illegal

alien." This label is used to describe an individual who does not possess the required documentation to reside in this country. "Illegal alien" is a reference that reaches beyond legal terminology, implying that immigrants are foreigners in a profound sense. María explained her perspective of the term. "I feel like I am from another planet!" Her eyebrows are raised. A look of amazement crosses her face. María fully understands the implications behind the label "illegal alien." "Undocumented" is the term María uses to describe herself and others in similar situations, as it is a term that refers to legal status and not to issues of worth.

Discrimination places limitations on fulfilling one's potential. Barriers are created which limit success. María illustrates this relationship based on her own experience at school:

*"I remember the first time I went to school, I felt sad because the first thing they asked me was if I was legal. I said that I don't have my papers but I would love to go to school. I am going to pay! They did not want me in the school. They said the only option was to get continuing education, which doesn't count if you want to have a career. That was a kind of discrimination because of being undocumented and not having the social security card."*

María knows discrimination. "White people don't trust us [Latinos]. If you are Latin it is hard for them to trust you. I can see that, I know." María describes the ignorance seen in the attitudes of many people: "they believe Latinos [in the U.S.] are uneducated, ignorant, and all

*[Latinos] do is work their whole lives."* María tells of a movie, *A Walk In The Clouds*, the epic story of a Latino family. She explains her own thoughts by reenacting her favorite part: "...'Because I speak with an accent does not mean I think with an accent, too.' I feel that way. Because I don't speak your language, doesn't mean that I am stupid. I love that line!" Hurt rests in her eyes.

She proved her academic achievement in Mexico, but no one recognizes her past achievements or grants her the opportunity to create her future. In the eyes of the host society, María's most important attribute is her label as an "illegal alien." Her individuality is ignored. María pays taxes, money she will never see since her social security card is a counterfeit. María is unfairly isolated from true membership into the community.

### **Me siento sola [I feel alone]**

María accompanies these painful obstacles with fear. Fear leads many undocumented immigrant workers into isolation. These individuals may find themselves floating along the edge of society, not fully able to participate in the community. María recounts her first months in this country when she began English classes. She recalls: "I was afraid that Immigration would come to the school while I was in class. I was scared that they would put me in a van and take me to jail." She is more aware of the laws now that she has mastered English, something María reports many immigrants have trouble accomplishing.

María's fears are persis-

tent. She tells of her uneasiness in public places, particularly the airport. When asked what she might do if an INS official approached her, María shrugs her shoulders and says: "I think they



*know if you are nervous. Sometimes the way you act or look has a lot to do with it. The way you dress, I don't know."* The image of oil floating in water comes to mind. María makes her life in a community where she is not permitted to mix.

She does not feel at home in the U.S.; she feels alone outside her native country, people, language, and culture. "I feel like I am in a jail, a nice jail, but it is a jail!...because I cannot do some things, go anywhere out of the country, I can't! You have to live with limitations. I try to be realistic and I know I don't have many choices. I cannot go back to my country and start a life over there.

She offers a voice that relays sentiments not usually heard. "Sometimes I am very, very lonely, especially during Christmas and

*all those festivities." One might question why she simply does not return to her native country. María speaks of this issue: "My expectations are different now that I am living in another country. The problem is that I think different from them [those of her native country]. I don't fit in there and I don't fit in here. I don't know where I am going to fit!"*

Uneasy laughter hides her pain. Her isolation is apparent. She is without her family, her country, her language, and her culture. She drifts throughout the community without experiencing the comforts and opportunities of others.

#### **Mi sueño [My dream]**

The American dream (*el sueño Americano*) has a special place in American and universal mythology. Life is thought to be better in the U.S. This country has been idealized as the pinnacle of places in which to live and work, as it is supposed to be the land of opportunity. Yet, prosperity is capped for many undocumented immigrants.

María reports that her scenario is not uncommon. She tells of immigrants coming to this country from their homelands with hope. It begins with an optimistic dream, but at times the dream remains in their native country as a relic of hope. This reality leaves individuals with an isolated existence in the host country. María elaborates on this point: *"I think when young people come to this country, they come because they want to make their life different with a dream and sometimes that is possible...but, you have to deal with [the fact]*

*that you're illegal. And that is not the worst part. The worst part is that you don't speak the language and of course some people learn that language and want to keep going and get better jobs. Some of them have education, others don't. You want to be different. You want to help this country. You want to be part of this country, but it is almost impossible now. The dream is gone."*

The oppressive reality is dried-up dreams about education, work, and opportunities. For many undocumented workers, the dream they brought into the U.S. has faded or has been washed away. New immigration laws have made entrance into the U.S. highly selective. Establishment of residency is a nearly impossible task. Like many people without legal documentation, María waits to see what will happen with changing immigration laws. María, like many, must remain stagnant until changes in her immigration status occur. Hopes and aspirations survive in the imagination.

What is María's future? *"I am going to stay here and many people are going to take the same position. I don't think they're going back to their countries. What are they going to do in their countries? They have a life here."*

#### **Mensaje de María [María's message]**

María was asked to explain what is important to her and what she would like the public to understand. Her image is that of a spokesperson, a dignified and insightful commentator. María pauses. Silence fills with her thoughts. María's message

speaks to all who might listen.

*"I will ask them to give us the opportunity to demonstrate that we can make this country better. We can contribute to make it better. Because, like me, there are a lot of people who want to get an education. And if I get an education I am going to work and I am going to work in this country. There are a lot of people who didn't come to this country looking for someone to support them or someone to resolve their problems. Just give us the opportunity. There are a lot of people who want to do the right things here. Sometimes I think it was a mistake [to come here] but I can't go back and start all over again. I have faith that something is going to happen to change my situation and everyone's situation. And I hope it is soon."*

This is María's story. She recounts her situation, her life, her "alien" label, and her future. *"It is real. It is how my life is."* María ends the conversation with words spoken in her native language:

*"Yo creo que a pesar de todas las cosas tan difíciles que he tenido que pasar en este país, hay cosas que me han hecho conocer, cosas tan diferentes. ¡Y que bueno que estoy aquí, a pesar de las circunstancias! [I think in spite of all the very difficult things that have happened to me in this country, there are things that I have been able to learn, different things. And how great that I am here, in spite of all of the circumstances!]"*

Strength and optimism fill her voice and empower her words. María exudes an inner depth from which insight, hope,

and motivation flow. Her words are those that the larger society does not want to hear. The individual person is often forgotten in the text of laws, words of the media, and attitudes of the general public.

As we conclude this article, María's situation remains unchanged. She has not been able to enroll in college or pursue any of her other dreams. She remains a nanny in a glass castle. Her days are spent in a beautiful home that keeps her safe from the outside world while keeping her from fulfilling her dreams.

### Conclusion

Immigration into the U.S. is an international issue that needs to be revisited. Unauthorized immigration is a daily phenomenon with mass numbers of individuals searching to improve their lives. The stereotype of immigrants looking to abuse resources in this country in hopes of solving their problems is a far cry from María's experience. Such prejudiced attitudes have helped create discriminatory laws. As a result, masses of undocumented workers float like oil in water without a chance of participating fully in society.

Many individuals are in dire straits, trapped in the "land of opportunity," powerless, with their hands tied behind their back. Understanding the current laws and regulations concerning immigration is of utmost importance for social workers serving the immigrant community. María's situation raised ethical dilemmas in the minds of the authors. What is our role? Should we be active advocates or silent witnesses?

María's case helped us to remember the unique individual hidden underneath the alien label. Keeping voices like María's silenced only contributes to an already macro-level problem.

This narrative offers an insider's perspective of the experiences of an undocumented worker. Employment is limited due to lack of proper documentation. Immigrants experience discrimination, frustration, fear, and isolation. Such challenges and limitations often leave the American Dream unfulfilled. Governmental restrictions, institutional discrimination, and substantial challenges dampen the once promising fulfillment of a dream. As seen in María, many immigrants have capabilities to make great contributions to this country, if only the opportunities were in reach.

Like the great majority of the inhabitants of this nation, we the authors, are the product of the immigration experience of our ancestors or of our own immigration experience. María's story made us question our personal and professional stand toward immigration. Personally, we agreed on the artificiality of national borders. The saying "we have not been crossing the border, the border has been crossing us for the last two centuries" often used by members of Chicano families in the Southwest, captures the complexity of the immigration experience in the borderlands. Professionally, María's story made us rethink about our ethical responsibilities toward the client in front of us. The person without labels or adjectives that may justify rejection or passivity in our minds.

At the same time we know that we need to work within the frameworks that the law of the land presents. Contradictions may emerge between our professional ethical duty and certain radical anti-immigration laws. As with many other dilemmas we face in our daily professional practice, we have no simple recipes to resolve the problem at hand, just the ability to examine and assess case by case and decide on the right course of action. María and many other immigrants like María may depend on that resolution to enhance their quality of life.

□

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