

# JCSCORE

Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity

The Journal of the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education

## HOW POSTDOCS IDENTIFYING AS WHITE U.S. CITIZENS CAN SUPPORT UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS

Elizabeth A. Jach  
University at Albany, State University of New York

Kalpana Gupta  
University of Colorado, Boulder

*Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity*  
Volume 9, Issue 1 | 2023

### Copyright and Open Access

© 2023 Elizabeth A. Jach, Kalpana Gupta



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). Permission of the authors is required for distribution and for all derivative works, including compilations and translations. Quoting small sections of text is allowed as long as there is appropriate attribution and the article is used for non-commercial purposes.

The *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity* (ISSN 2642-2387) is published by the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE), a production of the University of Oklahoma, in partnership with the University of Oklahoma Libraries.

## **How Postdocs Identifying as White U.S. Citizens Can Support Undocumented Students**

Elizabeth A. Jach  
University at Albany, State University of New York

Kalpana Gupta  
University of Colorado, Boulder

Research on attitudes within higher education toward undocumented students has overlooked the views of postdoctoral scholars (postdocs). With the number of postdocs in the United States on the rise, this highly trained group matters for future leadership inside and outside of higher education. Since previous research has shown that individuals of minoritized races/ethnicities and non-U.S. citizens exhibit greater support for undocumented students (Garibay et al., 2016; Jach & Gloeckner, 2020), this study conducted individual interviews with 10 postdocs who identified as White U.S. citizens. Findings indicated postdocs with a personal or professional connection to undocumented students exhibited greater levels of support toward undocumented students. Those lacking these connections exhibited greater levels of White immunity (Cabrera, 2017) and what this study terms citizenship immunity. Postdocs also expressed a need for adult education to better support undocumented students yet articulated possible strategies for engaging in allyship, suggesting postdocs have the power to counteract negative rhetoric and work toward a more inclusive policy for undocumented students.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) (2018) identified undocumented and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students as a top issue for state policy consideration. An undocumented person is an individual who does not have legal status within the United States because they did not arrive with legal status or overstayed the limitations of their status (Passel, 2006). While some students in higher education have temporary legal status under the provisions of DACA, scholars have pointed to the dire anxiety and exhaustion experienced by DACA beneficiaries as court cases continue (Rivarola & Russell, 2022). A more

comprehensive solution for undocumented students has yet to be ratified by U.S. Congress.

Undoubtedly, the AASCU's naming of these issues is in part due to the political climate within the United States. The "Trump effect," or a negative impact on undocumented immigrants because of the election of Trump (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016), has been a reality for students in K-12 schools (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016) and within institutions of higher education (Muñoz et al., 2018; Nienhusser & Oshio 2019; Vigil & Muñoz, 2023; Santa-Ramirez, 2022). These effects perpetuate White hegemony, defined by Spanierman and Smith (2017) as "dominating social, cultural economic, and ideological forces of Whiteness" (p. 728). Further, undocumented students experience numerous barriers in their pursuit of higher education (Bjorklund, 2018), including ramifications of an unwelcoming campus climate, such as decreased mental health (Cadenas et al., 2022) and lower levels of belonging and persistence (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). Yet undocumented students also bring unique assets to their pursuit of higher education (Salinas et al., 2019), such as motivation grounded in the perceived sacrifices made by their parents (Luedke & Corral, 2023; Salazar, 2021). The negative climate encountered by undocumented students makes it important to consider attitudes regarding their pursuit of higher education (Jach, 2019). Cognitive behavioral theory suggests that an individual's thoughts inform feelings, and feelings can inform behaviors (Beck, 1967). Therefore, considering attitudes toward undocumented students can inform how to engage in behaviors and actions that may ameliorate the negative climate encountered by undocumented students (Cadenas et al., 2018; Cisneros & Cadenas, 2017) toward

improving policy at the institutional level and beyond. In fact, scholars have examined the effectiveness of interventions such as DREAMzone training (Cisneros & Lopez, 2020) and undocumented student resource centers (Cisneros et al., 2022). While we acknowledge and emphasize the importance of this work, this qualitative study addresses a gap in the literature by examining attitudes within the academy toward undocumented students by interviewing postdocs. Research questions included: 1) How do postdocs, who identify as White U.S. citizens, make sense of their attitudes to support undocumented students? And 2) how can postdocs, who identify as White U.S. citizens, support undocumented students' pursuit of higher education?

### **Relevant Literature**

Published literature on attributes associated with greater support of undocumented students' pursuit of higher education (Garibay et al., 2016; Herrera et al., 2013) further informs the rationale for the focus on postdocs in the present study. Research regarding attitudes toward undocumented students' pursuit of higher education has considered a variety of groups within the academy. Studies on this topic have considered the opinions of students (Garibay et al., 2016; Herrera et al., 2013), institutional leaders (Nienhuser, 2014; Parrish, 2015), staff (Cadenas et al., 2018; Cisneros & Cadenas, 2017; Nienhuser, 2018), and faculty (Salas, 2012). However, this body of work has overlooked postdoctoral scholars. The following subsections briefly consider the experiences of postdoctoral scholars, attributes associated with supporting undocumented students, and theoretical underpinnings, including an adult education lens and Deaux's (2006) theory for the social psychological study of immigration.

## **Postdoctoral Scholars**

The National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) (n.d.) defines a postdoctoral scholar (postdoc) as:

an individual who has received a doctoral degree (or equivalent) and is engaged in a temporary and defined period of mentored advanced training to enhance the professional skills and research independence needed to pursue his or her chosen career path. (slide 2)

Postdocs will often become future faculty and leaders in the private and public sectors.

Therefore, how the academy has or has not socialized postdocs to support undocumented students matters for the future of higher education and for influencing more inclusive policies for undocumented students. In addition, the number of postdocs has increased in the past 30 years (Ferguson et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2018), providing additional rationale for the need to examine views within this group as they will become future leaders inside and outside of academia.

Postdocs constitute a diverse group, and their experiences are hardly monolithic. Research has acknowledged that postdocs have been overlooked within higher education even though they contribute high levels of productivity at a very low cost (Yang & Webber, 2015). Individuals employed as postdocs encounter numerous systemic challenges, including low pay, long hours, and job insecurity (Bixenmann et al., 2020). Furthermore, postdocs can be especially vulnerable to discrimination based on gender, race, and/or citizenship status (Flaherty, 2022). Given the population's susceptibility to marginalization, educational leaders have been called upon to engage in social justice advocacy with and for postdoctoral scholars (Moyo, 2020). However, research examining the experiences of postdocs has primarily focused on issues about career trajectory (Levitt, 2010; Xu et al., 2018), labor issues (Camacho & Rhoads, 2015;

Cantwell & Taylor, 2013), and career engagement (Gloria & Steinhardt, 2016) rather than attitudes held by postdocs. The present study reinvigorates research on postdocs by considering them a group worth examining when understanding attitudes within the academy, given that they will move into important roles within and outside of higher education.

### **Attributes Associated with Attitudes toward Undocumented Students**

Postdocs are positioned to garner experiences that have been shown to be associated with exhibiting greater support toward undocumented immigrants and/or undocumented students. Research on student populations and the public in the U.S. suggests some experiences have been associated with greater support of undocumented students, including: attending an institution of higher education that receives federal aid (Garibay et al., 2016); having positive cross-racial interactions (Herrera et al., 2013); and living in an urban environment (Caicedo, 2016), a neighborhood with a higher Latino population (Berg, 2009), or in a state that has policies permitting in-state tuition for undocumented students (Garibay et al., 2016). More support of undocumented students has been associated with individual endorsement of liberal views and having a home address in a liberal Congressional district (Garibay et al., 2016). Conversely, previous research suggested that membership in the Republican party increased the odds of an individual's disapproval of undocumented immigration (Berg, 2009). Many of these experiences are likely to be encountered by a postdoc since many have moved to a new institution to take on their position and may have some of these experiences along the way.

A variety of individual factors have been associated with greater support of undocumented students, which connects to postdoc demographics. First, a summary of factors associated with more supportive views of undocumented students and immigrants. Research by Garibay et al. (2016) found that being a member of a minoritized group, such as People of Color, women, or non-native speakers of English has been associated with more supportive views toward undocumented students. More broad support of immigration has been found to be associated with more liberal views, such as endorsing the belief that immigrants contribute to the economy and supporting bilingual education (Palmer & Davidson, 2011). Higher levels of education have also been associated with more supportive views toward immigrants (Berg, 2009; Kunovich, 2013). Identifying as a non-U.S. citizen has also been found to be related to greater support for immigrant education (Jach & Gloeckner, 2020). While these factors certainly do not describe all postdocs, there are several connections between factors associated with greater support of undocumented students as well as immigrants and the demographics of postdocs. Specifically, the U.S. National Postdoc Survey found that more than half of postdocs identified as women, and more than half were non-U.S. citizens (McConnell et al., 2018). Therefore, it is possible that the individual demographic attributes, as well as the individual training and life experiences of postdocs, may be associated with greater support of undocumented immigrants and/or undocumented students, rendering postdocs a group worth considering when it comes to research on attitudes within the academy toward undocumented students. To better understand the level of support from postdocs, this study examines explicitly how

postdocs who identify as White U.S. citizens make sense of their supportive attitudes toward undocumented students' pursuit of higher education.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

This study employed Brookfield's (2005) critical theory for adult learning. Brookfield (2005) stressed the need for not just understanding realities within the world but, more importantly, to use critical theory to advance and transform those realities. In other words, he argued critical theory fosters learning that leads to a democratic society. This framework illuminates the importance of considering postdocs' attitudes toward undocumented students to contest White hegemony and White immunity, as Cabrera (2017) described. Postdocs have been highly trained by the academy to understand the world and change it through research. This study examined how postdocs who identified as White U.S. citizens construct their supportive attitudes toward undocumented students and how postdocs can ally with these students. As delineated by Brookfield (2005), critical theory for adult learning guides the present study by facilitating consideration of how postdocs have learned themselves and might teach others to support undocumented students' pursuit of higher education.

### **Critical Theory through an Adult Education Lens**

While White people may become defensive of the notion of White privilege because of the difficulties they may encounter in their life (see DiAngelo (2018)), Cabrera (2017) argued that White immunity focuses on the fact that "People of Color are precluded from equitable treatment" (p. 82). Cabrera (2017) posited that White immunity names the reality that White people are not subject to the disparate treatment which People of Color routinely encounter. For example, police brutality and political



rhetoric against immigrants (e.g., building a wall along the U.S./Mexico border) demonstrate the perpetuation of systematic oppression which disparately impacts People of Color. Adult education offers a disciplinary lens to understand opportunities to combat this oppression. Adult education, in its simplest translation, is continuing education, and it can be an informal process for personal growth or in the form of professional development that advances skills or competencies that contribute to workplace success. As well, adult education is premised on promoting social change, and is reflected in the works of Freire's (2007) liberatory praxis and Brookfield's (2005) critical theory for adult learning.

Freire (2007) proposed that liberation from oppression is a process requiring reflection and action to be transformative in its results. The acts of solidarity, dialogue, and conscientization are instrumental to the concept of liberatory praxis. Solidarity is formed not by acting on behalf of someone else but rather by acting with, or in other words, alongside someone (Freire, 2007). Dialogue in adult education practice represents more than a conversation among individuals and leads to ways of knowing (Vella, 2002). Similarly, for Freire, dialogue involves the need for co-learning to exist and for people to be jointly responsible in the process of transforming reality. Conscientization is the act of raising consciousness to develop an awareness of unjust situations with the purpose of wanting to change them. This awareness requires critical thinking skills that deeply explore attitudes that inform one's thoughts and actions.

In the same way, Freire's (2007) seminal concept of liberatory praxis seeks to raise consciousness toward taking action. Brookfield (2005) posited that "a critical theory of adult learning must focus on understanding how adults learn to challenge

ideology, contest hegemony, unmask power, overcome alienation, learn liberation, reclaim reason, and practice democracy” (p. xii). In our current U.S. reality, White hegemony continues to dominate higher education (Cabrera, 2017). Brookfield furthered that critical theory for adult learning facilitates the possibility of “understand not just how the world is but also how it might be changed for the better” (2005, p. 7).

Brookfield’s view on critical theory provides the means to contend with the White hegemony that dominates higher education and that the way people learn to construct and deconstruct their own experiences and meanings can lead them to recognize the systemic oppression that permeates dominant ideologies in everyday practices.

Brookfield and Associates (2019) also cautioned about using allyship on a surface level, as it should be understood as consistently supporting marginalized populations. Critical reflection is integral to the employment of critical theory as it allows one to examine their assumptions and understanding of their realities on a deeper level (Brookfield, 2005).

This study also uses Deaux’s (2006) theory for the social psychological study of immigration. Deaux’s (2006) model employs three levels: the macro, meso, and micro. Deaux (2006) deems the various levels of influence which form individual views, including social structures at large (macro), individual influences (micro), and where the macro and micro interact (meso). Additionally, the strategies identified at Deaux’s (2006) three levels connect to Beck’s (1967) cognitive behavior theory, in which feelings inform behaviors, which suggests that exploring postdocs’ support could inform how to relay this support into action. These levels also correspond to various echelons of policy related to undocumented students, including institutional, local, state, and national policies.

## **Methods**

This study employed a qualitative approach to interrogate the topic of postdoctoral scholars' support of undocumented students' pursuit of higher education. This study used the constant comparison analysis method toward "context-imbedded meaning making," thus invoking the need for "the demonstration of multiple perspectives, bounded subjectivity, trustworthiness and authenticity" (O'Connor et al., 2008, p. 44). We endeavored to consider the context of the postdoctoral fellowship in addition to examining postdocs' support of undocumented students. For instance, the primary researcher engaged postdocs in discussing their connection to their current employing institution. The interview questions also considered the individual context of participants' institutional, local, state, and national policy regarding undocumented students.

### **Sample and Data Collection**

After obtaining approval from an institutional review board, the primary researcher sent a recruitment email to the National Postdoctoral Association listserv. Eligibility requirements included having a terminal degree, current employment as a postdoc, self-identifying as White and as a U.S. citizen, and agreement with a statement that undocumented students should be supported in their pursuit of higher education. Since the IRB approved a waiver of signed consent, participants consented verbally to have their interview recorded. A total of ten individuals participated in an interview via Zoom video conferencing, and each received a \$50 Amazon gift card. Recordings were then transcribed. To enhance trustworthiness, participants could review a copy of their transcript and remove anything they did not want to be included in the study. Nine out of

ten participants responded to a request to review their transcript, and none made changes. Table 1 displays participant pseudonyms and demographics (n=10).

**Table 1.** *Participant Pseudonyms and Demographics*

Pseudonym	Institution Type	Region of U.S.	State has in-state tuition	Academic Discipline	Gender	Sexual Orientation Disclosure	Identified as LGBT
Paul	Private	Midwest	no	Engineering	Man	yes	no
Maria	Public	Midwest	no	Social Work	Woman	no	-
Sue	Gov	South	no	Genetics	Woman	yes	no
Matt	Public	Northeast	no	Biology	Man	yes	yes
James	Public	Northeast	no	Statistics	Man	no	-
Casey	Public	West	yes	Pop Health	Woman	yes	yes
Evan	Public	South	prohibited	Exercise Sci	Man	yes	no
Jenny	Private	Northeast	no	Neuroscience	Woman	no	-
Liz	Public	Midwest	no	Neuroscience	Woman	yes	no
Kat	Private	Northeast	yes	Nursing	Woman	yes	yes

Among the ten postdocs, six women and four men participated. At the time of the study, six participants worked at a public research university, three at a private research university, and one at a government agency. Research disciplines varied across science, health, and social sciences, but no participants worked in the arts or humanities. Geographical representation across the United States included four participants employed in the Northeast, two in the South, three in the Midwest, and one in the West. For state policy on in-state tuition for undocumented students, seven postdocs were working in states without in-state tuition, two in states with in-state tuition, and one in a state prohibiting enrollment of undocumented students at institutions of higher education (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021). Three participants self-disclosed as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer (LGBTQ).

**Data Analysis**

Transcripts and interview notes were reviewed using Saldaña’s (2009) approach to qualitative coding for social justice research. First, the primary researcher read and

re-read the transcripts, initially coded all interviews, and then re-reviewed all codes. Finally, a study auditor reviewed all codes toward further enhancement of trustworthiness.

**Table 2.** *Summary of Themes with Corresponding Examples*

Theme	Example / quote	Frequency of code among 10 participants
White and Citizenship Immunity	"I actually don't know any[one who is] undocumented..."	White privilege – 7 Citizenship privilege – 3
Professional and Personal Connections	"So that's I think when I first started to become aware of this is an issue that impacts real people and it's not just something that you hear about in the news. " – Casey	Lack of personal or professional connection - 7
Need for Adult Education and Trainings	"I'm not entirely sure what would specifically help." - James	Need for adult education - 8
How Postdocs Can Support Undocumented Students at three levels of Deaux's (2006) model for the social psychological study of immigration	Macro: political action, through letter writing Meso: offer DREAMZone training through existing organizations Micro: advocate in current and future positions	DREAMZone training would be valuable - 10

Analyses led to several key themes, summarized with illustrative examples in Table 2. Cabrera's (2017) term "White immunity" (in which Whites are immune to the disparate treatment experienced by People of Color) informed the development of the concept of "citizenship immunity" in our findings. Like White immunity (Cabrera, 2017), we posit that individuals who lacked personal or professional connections with undocumented students were able to go about their lives without having to make sense of the issues undocumented students encounter, granting them citizenship immunity. Postdocs who described a professional or personal connection to undocumented

students and/or undocumented immigrants exhibited greater support and less ambivalence toward undocumented individuals, describing reasons and experiences that informed their supportive views. In addition, postdocs described a need for adult education to better ally with undocumented students yet simultaneously shared numerous ideas on how to support undocumented students. We detail each of these themes with illustrative quotes.

### **Positionality**

First author (Elizabeth Jach): I identify as a White, cisgender, heterosexual, able woman born in the United States with citizenship privilege. I served as the primary researcher for this study. The topic of undocumented students' pursuit of higher education is an area in which I have conducted previous research, and I aspire toward allyship with this population. In addition, my identity as a White citizen of the United States makes me interested in how individuals who identify as White U.S. citizens can ally with undocumented students. While I have not been a postdoc myself, as the spouse and sister of former postdocs, I have witnessed how this group is too often overlooked. These views have informed my interest and approach to this work.

Second author (Kalpana Gupta): I identify as an Asian-American, born in India, obtained U.S. citizenship as a young adult, and was raised in a middle-class family. I am a cisgender, heterosexual, and able woman. My doctorate in Adult and Post-Secondary Education and being cisgender, heterosexual, and at times, citizenship affords me privilege in certain situations; however, I am no stranger to the effects of marginalization. My positionality as the second author of this article is to offer adult

education as a disciplinary and theoretical lens that provides opportunities for postdocs to engage in critical awareness that leads to action.

### **Findings**

In this section, we provide quotes to illustrate four key themes: White and citizenship immunity, professional and personal connections, need for adult education and trainings, and how postdocs can support undocumented students at three levels of Deaux's (2006) model for the social psychological study of immigration.

#### **White Immunity and Citizenship Immunity**

The majority of participants shared that they did not personally know anyone who was undocumented (n=7). For instance, Evan, who worked as a postdoc in a state which prohibited enrollment of undocumented students in higher education, shared: "I actually don't know any[one who is] undocumented, or they might be, and I just don't know they're undocumented." Cabrera's (2017) notion of White immunity was present in the responses of the postdocs, who said they did not know anyone who was undocumented or had never encountered anyone who was undocumented. In this sense, the lack of personal or professional connection described by several postdocs in this study exhibited a form of citizenship immunity in that their citizenship privilege made them immune from needing to understand issues concerning legal status. Evan elaborated: "Maybe I'm just white male supremacy over here and don't get exposed to it because people are scared to ask or bring it up." Furthermore, several participants who did not have a personal or professional connection to undocumented immigrants or undocumented students stated that they were not familiar with issues pertaining to in-state tuition for undocumented students. For instance, when asked about their views on

in-state tuition for undocumented students, Matt, a postdoc working in biology who identified as LGBT, shared: "I don't know. I've never thought of that before." In these instances, White immunity (Cabrera, 2017) and citizenship immunity made it possible for these postdocs to not have to think about concerns such as legal status.

### **Professional and Personal Connections**

Several participants shared professional or personal experiences that informed their support for undocumented immigrants and undocumented students. Maria, a postdoc employed at a public research university in the Midwest in the discipline of social work, shared that she served as an expert witness for asylum cases during her time as a graduate student. She had experience conducting mental health status exams in a detention center in the southern region of the United States, where she encountered a survivor who had been brutally raped by MS-13. Maria also shared her experiences as a teaching assistant during graduate school, where she encountered students who disclosed their undocumented status. Maria's professional experiences informed her supportive views for undocumented students. Casey, a woman who identified as LGBT and worked in and with population health at a public research university in the West, shared her experience volunteering for a mentoring program that helped high school students apply to college. She shared:

While our program was not supposed to accept undocumented individuals, most years, when it came time for college applications, and we were supporting the students as they were making decisions surrounding their college applications, it would often come out that one of the students was undocumented and just had never known. So, I think when I first started to become aware of this is an issue that impacts real people, and it's not just something that you hear about in the news.



Casey's volunteer experience provided her with firsthand knowledge that informed her supportive views toward undocumented students.

Individuals with personal connections also exhibited stronger support for undocumented students' pursuit of higher education. Sue, a postdoc working in the discipline of genetics at a government agency based in the South region of the United States, shared that she had a prior romantic partner who was part of a mixed-status family. Sue's former partner had an ex who could not come to the U.S., but their daughter had U.S. citizenship. Sue shared this personal experience to explain how her understanding helped her see how others do not have this experience and therefore lack a personal connection. Kat, a postdoc in the discipline of nursing working at a private research university in the Northeast, talked about a personal friendship she had with an undocumented person, which helped her understand the importance of these issues. She shared:

Particularly like me coming from the Deep South and having many friends who are Latino in terms of representation, and a dear friend of mine pursued higher level education, but she was undocumented for many years... So just understanding experiences like that and hearing fears from people whom I know personally on that level.

Kat's personal experiences informed her supportive views toward undocumented students. Postdocs' professional and personal experiences helped these individuals be aware of issues pertaining to undocumented immigrants and undocumented students, which in turn bolstered their support for these groups.

### **“But it's just I feel like I know so little”: Need for Adult Education**

Postdocs also expressed a need for adult education. Many of the participants expressed wanting more information about how to support undocumented students.

Evan shared: “But it’s just I feel like I know so little” and “I wish I knew more.” Postdocs quickly owned their lack of knowledge regarding issues about undocumented students and what might help. Jenny, a postdoc working in neuroscience at a private research university in the Northeast, admitted, “I’m probably not nearly as informed on the issues [as] I should be.” Similarly, James, a postdoc working at a public research university in the Northeast in the discipline of statistics, shared: “I’m not entirely sure what would specifically help.” Participants also articulated the type of training and information they needed to be able to better support undocumented students. When asked what would help postdocs support undocumented students, Liz, a postdoc working at a public research university in the Midwest in neuroscience, wanted to know, “How can I frame my language to better support individuals living undocumented?” Similarly, Casey stated:

I think understanding what are the best ways to be an active ally if these are people I'm regularly in contact with. What are the best ways to be a more active ally if these are not people that I'm regularly in contact with, particularly at a university or local level?

This quote demonstrates Casey’s interest in adult education to be more informed about how to ally with undocumented students. Matt shared that just participating in the study raised their awareness of the issues. He explained: “Our conversation has made me more aware currently of my lack of knowledge about DACA and Dreamers, but it makes me want to understand it better for the future.” Thus, engaging in adult education for postdocs can help them further develop their awareness and skills to address undocumented students' needs. The quotes in the section illustrate postdocs’ lack of knowledge and skills regarding how to ally with undocumented students, demonstrating

the need for adult education opportunities to engage postdocs in being better equipped for this work.

### **How Postdocs Can Support Undocumented Students**

Postdocs also brainstormed numerous strategies to support undocumented students' pursuit of higher education. The strategies can be described through the three levels of Deaux's (2006) model for the social psychological study of immigration: macro or political, meso or institutional, and micro or individual.

When asked about how postdocs could support undocumented students, participants identified strategies at the political or macro level. Several postdocs discussed learning who their representatives are, voting for candidates in government who supported undocumented students, and contacting representatives regarding undocumented student issues. Both James and Casey suggested a letter-writing campaign to representatives. Sue discussed having personally participated in a march or demonstration for undocumented students. Postdocs named political organizing as a means of garnering collective support for undocumented students. The notion of political organization also extended to political activism via social media by sharing information or making donations. For example, Matt shared: "I post things on social media, and I try to get information out as much as I can." This example from Matt illustrates how postdocs can connect with their own networks to share information.

The participants in this study also identified a variety of support strategies for undocumented students at Deaux's (2006) meso level or the institutional level. Many participants were involved in a postdoctoral association or office at their employing institution or the NPA. Several postdocs suggested distributing information to build

awareness through membership in these groups. This could also extend to other institutional entities such as the graduate council/senate or the postdoctoral fellow union. Maria suggested registering with the University of California Hastings Center for Gender and Refugee Studies (n.d.) expert witness database. Participants also proposed integrating undocumented student support into campus committee work, teaching practices, and mentoring undergraduate and graduate students.

When asked about DreamZone training (Cadenas et al., 2018), or training offered to educate participants about undocumented student issues and available supports, all ten postdocs agreed that this would be valuable training. Previous research has shown that DreamZone training positively impacted ameliorating participants' views of undocumented students and how to support undocumented students (Cadenas et al., 2018; Cisneros & Lopez, 2020). During her interview, Liz reacted to learning about DreamZone training by saying: "I'm probably going to look that up and see if (name of public research university) has that once we finish this interview because that sounds phenomenal, and I think it'd be really helpful." Liz's reaction demonstrated how these types of offerings would be of interest and of value to postdocs. Participants in this study suggested that DreamZone training should be accessible to postdocs via existing organizations or associations or through required or optional training available at their employing institution. Matt suggested incentivizing postdocs to attend DreamZone training. Participants agreed that existing organizations could offer such training about undocumented students.

Postdocs also identified individual strategies for the purposes of ameliorating undocumented students' pursuit of higher education in their current and future roles,

which connects to Deaux's (2006) micro level. Several postdocs discussed speaking up in conversations with others. The notion of acting on one's privileged identities came up for participants. Evan explained:

I think being in that position makes me more powerful than some people, not that I'm seeking power, just the appearance of a White male and the backing of that in society. I think having that power and using it too for good, whether [or not] that's undocumented students... is a great thing that should be used. People will listen to you, and they won't dismiss you as easily.

In this statement, Evan recognized how his privileged identities can be an asset when allying with undocumented students. The participants in this study also took to heart the need to engage in personal work to make a difference. Matt said: "The only thing I could really do is understand what I could do to help." When asked what being an ally to undocumented students would look like, Liz, a postdoc working at a public research university in the Midwest, responded: "So I mean obviously being a friend, not judging them for being here."

On the micro level, postdocs also talked about how supporting undocumented students could be a part of their future employment. A few postdocs also suggested writing about undocumented students as part of diversity statements when applying for faculty positions and asking about undocumented students when interviewing. Several participants expected to have more power to be able to advocate for students upon having faculty status, whether by hiring undocumented students in their lab or mentoring students. Thus, the findings illuminated how postdocs identifying as White U.S. citizens can engage in opportunities for dialogue, reflection, and actionable steps toward supporting undocumented students.

## **Discussion**

The findings from this study suggest that postdocs who identify as White U.S. citizens and believe that undocumented students' pursuit of higher education should be supported are uniquely positioned to engage in allyship with undocumented students. Moreover, postdocs are situated to engage in this work regardless of whether their career continues inside or outside academia. Given that the number of postdocs in the United States has been increasing (Ferguson et al., 2021) while the number of tenure-track positions in the academy is on the decline (Ruben, 2013), postdocs will continue to enter employment with entities such as government agencies, private research institutes, and non-government organizations. In addition, considering attitudes matters because understanding attitudes can inform how individuals develop their feelings and behaviors, which can further inform action, as defined by Beck's (1967) theory of cognitive behavior. This study builds on previous literature regarding attributes and experiences associated with greater support for undocumented students' higher education pursuits. Specifically, prior research has shown that being of a minoritized race/ethnicity, being a woman, and being a non-native English speaker (Garibay et al., 2016), as well as having higher levels of education (Berg, 2009; Kunovich, 2013) and being a non-U.S. Citizen (Jach & Gloeckner, 2020) are associated with greater support of undocumented students' pursuit of higher education and immigrant education, and this study examined how individuals who are White U.S. citizens make sense of their attitudes to support undocumented students' pursuit of higher education.

This study also contributes to the literature with a delineation of specific strategies for postdocs to engage in support strategies and opportunities to learn more

about how to advocate with and for undocumented students. These findings suggest postdocs would opt to engage in adult learning opportunities, such as participating in an in-person or online UndocuAlly training, to develop skills related to allying with undocumented students. The prospect of further participation in adult education offers a deeper understanding of becoming an advocate and forming an allyship that only occurs by taking action (Brookfield & Associates, 2019). The opportunities to engage in training about supporting undocumented students and engaging in allyship connect to Brookfield's (2005) concepts of challenging ideology and contesting White hegemony to transform realities and Freire's (2007) concept of solidarity. Previous researchers have also delineated what constitutes multicultural competency in this domain, formalized by undocumented status competency or UDSC (Nienhusser & Espino, 2017).

This study's key themes elucidate postdocs' unique ability to support undocumented students, engage in opportunities for adult education, and inform more inclusive policy for undocumented students and undocumented immigrants in roles inside and outside of academia. First, interviews with postdocs who identified as White U.S. citizens indicated that personal and professional connections with undocumented immigrants and undocumented students contributed to greater motivation to support these populations. Through their high level of training within the academy, several postdocs had these encounters, while others expressed experiences that can be tied to Cabrera's (2017) notion of White immunity and what this study deemed as citizenship immunity. While postdocs expressed a need for adult education to best support undocumented students' support of higher education, they also identified numerous strategies at Deaux's (2006) micro, meso, and macro levels on how to engage in

advocacy. Finally, although postdocs are often isolated in their individual labs and areas of research, organizations such as the National Postdoctoral Association and institution-level postdoctoral associations are situated to offer adult education opportunities on how to advocate for undocumented students as a postdoctoral scholar and as a leader inside or outside of the academy. An example of Freire's (2007) notion of raising consciousness is to offer in-person or online versions of DreamZone training (Cadenas et al., 2018), which constitute a replicable method of engaging postdocs in adult education to work toward improving the campus climate for undocumented students.

### **Implications: Countering the Master Narrative**

Postdocs can counter the master narrative against undocumented immigrants through supportive strategies at Deaux's (2006) micro, meso, and macro levels through a collective organization or Freire's (2007) liberatory praxis. While the master narrative has perpetuated negative rhetoric resulting in negative impacts known as the "Trump effect" in K-12 schools (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016) and institutions of higher education (Muñoz et al., 2018; Nienhuser & Oshio, 2019), postdocs in this study identified numerous ways to support and advocate for undocumented students in their current and future roles. To be sure, White immunity (Cabrera, 2017) and citizenship immunity enabled some postdocs to be unaware of issues affecting undocumented students. Yet personal and professional connections with undocumented immigrants as well as undocumented students, had a profound impact on postdocs' conviction that these groups should be supported.

The participants in this study named a variety of strategies for supporting undocumented students connected to Brookfield's (2005) definition of critical theory of



adult learning, which posits the need to understand how adults learn to challenge ideology. Sue summarized:

I think that a lot of postdocs have had contact with the immigration system and have seen kind of how messed up it is. And so, I would think that, in general, postdocs would be a good community to kind of tap into to kind of mobilize for some activism in that area.

Similarly, Casey shared: “Postdocs tend to be among one of our more diverse groups on campus given that we've come from all of these different institutions.” Postdocs and their associations can engage in a variety of support strategies to serve as allies of undocumented students. Engaging with groups such as the NPA or institutional associations to support undocumented students can ameliorate the need for adult education and work toward advocacy for more inclusive policy for undocumented students in higher education and beyond.

Engaging in support strategies at the macro, meso, and micro levels, as delineated by Deaux's (2006) model, can empower postdocs to engage in activism in their current roles and prepare them for advocacy work in their next career step and beyond. This work can counter the negative rhetoric against undocumented individuals in the current political climate. These findings connect to Brookfield's (2005) critical theory for adult learning and Freire's (2007) liberatory praxis in that postdocs can work together to raise consciousness regarding issues affecting undocumented students toward engaging in allyship and advocacy.

### **Conclusion**

The findings from this study identify numerous strategies for postdocs who identify as White U.S. citizens to engage in active support for undocumented students' pursuit of higher education now and in their future roles. Postdocs will become future

faculty and leaders within the industry. Continuing to engage this group matters not only for ameliorating more inclusive policy for institutions of higher education but also for informing more inclusive policy at the local, state, and national levels. Future research should also engage how to further support postdocs in their roles. This study suggests that the first steps toward a more inclusive policy for undocumented students start at a local level with adult education on how to become an advocate for transforming realities. Postdocs, in their current and future positions, can engage in allyship with undocumented students at Deaux's (2006) micro, meso, and macro levels. Counteracting the negative rhetoric against undocumented immigrants and undocumented students can have real impacts at the level of creating more inclusive policy. As articulated so clearly by Maria in this study: "Everyone deserves the opportunity for higher education."

### References

- American Association of State Colleges and Universities. (2018). Higher education state policy issues for 2018. *Policy matters: A higher education policy brief*. <http://www.aascu.org/policy/publications/policy-matters/Top10Issues2018.pdf>
- Beck, A. T. (1967). *Depression: Causes and treatment*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Berg, J. A. (2009). White public opinion toward undocumented immigrants: Threat and interpersonal environment. *Sociological Perspectives*, 52(1), 39–58. doi: 10.1525/sop.2009.52.1.39
- Bixenmann, R., B. J. Natalizio, Y. Hussain, & C. N. Fuhrmann. (2020). *Enhancing dissemination of evidence-based models for STEM PhD career development: A stakeholder workshop report*. Professional Development Hub, University of Massachusetts Medical School. <https://doi.org/10.13028/79a5-ym66>
- Bjorklund, P. (2018). Undocumented students in higher education: A review of the literature, 2001 to 2016. *Review of Educational Research*, 88(5), 631–670.
- Brookfield, S. D. (2005). *The power of critical theory: Liberating adult learning and teaching*. Jossey-Bass.
- Brookfield, S. D. & Associates. (2019). *Teaching race*. Jossey-Bass.
- Cabrera, N. L. (2017). White immunity: Working through some of the pedagogical pitfalls of "privilege." *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity*, 3(1), 78–90.

- Cadenas, G. A., Cisneros, J., Todd, N. R., & Spanierman, L. B. (2018). DREAMzone: Testing two vicarious contact interventions to improve attitudes toward undocumented immigrants. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 11(3), 295–308. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000055>
- Cadenas, G. A., Nienhusser, K., Sosa, R., & Moreno, O. (2022). Immigrant students' mental health and intent to persist in college: The role of undocufriendly campus climate. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000564>
- Caicedo, D. A. (2016). *Alien, illegal, undocumented: Labeling, context, and worldview in the immigration debate and in the lives of undocumented youth*. The City University of New York. ProQuest
- Camacho, M. S., & Rhoads, R. (2015). Breaking the silence: The unionization of postdoctoral workers at the University of California. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 86(2), 295–325. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2015.0010>
- Cantwell, B., & Taylor, B. J. (2013). Internationalization of the postdoctorate in the United States: Analyzing the demand for international postdoc labor. *Higher Education*, 66(5), 551–567. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9621-0>
- Cisneros, J., & Lopez, A. (2020). Ally competency and self-efficacy for working with undocumented students. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 57(3), 309–321 <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2019.1634464>
- Cisneros, J., & Cadenas, G. (2017). DREAMer-ally competency and self-efficacy: Developing higher education staff and measuring lasting outcomes. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 54(2), 189–203. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2017.1289098>
- Cisneros, J., Valdivia, D., Reyna Rivarola, A. R., & Russell, F. (2022). “I’m here to fight along with you”: Undocumented student resource centers creating possibilities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 15(5), 607–616. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000355>
- Deaux, K. (2006). *To be an immigrant*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press.
- Ferguson, K., Chen, L., & Costello, T. (2021). Growing progress in supporting postdocs: 2021 National Postdoctoral Association Institution Policy Report. *National Postdoctoral Association*. [https://www.nationalpostdoc.org/page/policy\\_report\\_databa#2021PolicyReport](https://www.nationalpostdoc.org/page/policy_report_databa#2021PolicyReport)
- Flaherty, C. (2022, August 10). Seeking protections against bullying. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/08/10/postdocs-within-u-california-system-allege-bullying>
- Freire, P. (2007). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. 30th anniversary ed. Herder and Herder.
- Garibay, J. C., Herrera, F. A., Johnston-Guerrero, M. P., & Garcia, G. A. (2016). Layers of influence: Exploring institutional- and state-level effects on college student views toward access to public education for undocumented immigrants. *Research in Higher Education*, 57(5), 601–629. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-015-9400-0>

- Gloria, C. T., & Steinhardt, M. A. (2017). The direct and mediating roles of positive emotions on work engagement among postdoctoral fellows. *Studies in Higher Education, 42*(12), 2216–2228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1138938>
- Herrera, F. A., Garibay, J. C., Garcia, G. A., & Johnston, M. P. (2013). Documenting attitudes toward undocumented immigrant access to public education: A multilevel analysis." *The Review of Higher Education, 36*(4), 513–549. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2013.0043>
- Jach, E. A. (2019). Understanding views on undocumented students' access to higher education: A critical review and call for action. *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs, 5*(1), 51-63.
- Jach, E. A., & Gloeckner, G. W. (2020). Attributes associated with postdoctoral fellows and views of immigration: A preliminary analysis using the General Social Survey. *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis, 9*(1), Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.31274/jctp.9571>
- Kunovich, R. M. (2013). Labor market competition and anti-immigrant sentiment: Occupations as contexts. *International Migration Review, 47*(3), 643–685. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12046>
- Luedke, C. L., & Corral, D. (2023). "The least I could do is get that four-year degree that they sacrificed so much for": Undocumented Latina/o families and the college navigation process. *The Journal of Higher Education, 0*(0), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2023.2171199>
- Levitt, D. G. (2010). Careers of an elite cohort of U.S. basic life science postdoctoral fellows and the influence of their mentor's citation record." *BMC Medical Education, 10*(80), 1–7.
- McConnell, S. C., Westerman, E. L., Pierre, J. F., Heckler, E. J., & Schwartz, N. B. (2018). United States National Postdoc Survey results and the interaction of gender, career choice and mentor impact. *ELife 7*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.40189>
- Moyo, Z. (2020). Towards enacting social justice in higher education: A case of postdoctoral research fellows. *International Journal of African Higher Education, 6*(1), 77–96.
- Muñoz, S. M., & Vigil, D. (2018). Interrogating racist nativist microaggressions and campus climate: How undocumented and DACA college students experience institutional legal violence in Colorado. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 11*(4), 451-466. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000078>
- Muñoz, S., Vigil, D., Jach, E. A., & Gutierrez-Rodriguez, M. (2018). Radicalizing resilience: Examining the "Trump Effect" in higher education for undocumented college students. *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal, 12*(3), 33-52. <https://doi.org/10.24974/amae.12.3.405>
- National Conference of State Legislatures. (2021). *Tuition benefits for immigrants*. <https://www.ncsl.org/immigration/tuition-benefits-for-immigrants>
- National Postdoc Association. (n.d.). What is a postdoc? *National Postdoc Association*. <https://www.nationalpostdoc.org/page/WhatsAPostdoc>
- Nienhusser, H. K. (2014). Role of community colleges in the implementation of postsecondary education enrollment policies for undocumented students. *Community College Review, 42*(1), 3–22.

- Nienhusser, H. K. (2018). Higher education institutional agents as policy implementers: The case of policies that affect undocumented and documented students. *The Review of Higher Education*, 41(3), 423–453. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2018.0014>
- Nienhusser, H. K., & Espino, M. M. (2017). Incorporating Undocumented/Documented Status Competency into higher education institutional agents' practice. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*. 54(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2016.1194286>
- Nienhusser, H. K., & Oshio, T. (2019). Awakened hatred and heightened fears: “The Trump Effect” on the lives of mixed-status families. *Cultural Studies - Critical Methodologies*, 19(3), 173-183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2016.1194286>
- O'Connor, M. K., Netting, F. E., & Thomas, M. L. (2008). Grounded theory: Managing the challenge for those facing institutional review board oversight. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14 (1), 28–45.
- Palmer, C., & Davidson, T. (2011). Entitled or excluded? Attitudes toward access to postsecondary education for undocumented students. *Current Issues in Education*, 14(2), 1–15.
- Parrish, D. J. (2015). *What's the story here? How Catholic university leaders are making sense of undocumented student access*. DAI-A 76/09(E), Dissertation Abstracts International
- Passel, J. S. (2006). *The size and characteristics of the unauthorized migrant population in the U.S.* Pew Research Center.
- Rivarola, A. R., & Russell, F. S. (2022). (Il)legally exhausted. *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity*, 8(2), 144-151. <https://doi.org/10.15763/issn.2642-2387.2022.8.2.143-151>
- Ruben, A. (2013, November 21). “The postdoc: A special kind of hell.” *Science*. <https://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2013/11/postdoc-special-kind-hell>
- Salas, S. (2012). Steep houses in basic writing: Advocating for Latino immigrants in a North Georgia two-year college. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 31(1), 80–99.
- Salazar, C. (2021). “I knew it was gonna be hard, but I always knew I had support from my parents”: The role of family on undocumented students' college aspirations and persistence. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251211018826>
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.
- Salinas Jr., C., Malavé, R., Torrens, O. D., & Swingle, E. C. (2019). “It is who we are. We are undocumented”: The narrative of two undocumented Latino male students attending a community college. *Community College Review*, 47(3), 295-317. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552119850888>
- Santa-Ramirez, S. (2022). Their mere existence is resistance: Undocu/DACAmented collegian's resisting subordination in turbulent times. *The Review of Higher Education*. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/868684/summary>
- Southern Poverty Law Center. (2016, April 13). *The Trump Effect: The impact of the presidential campaign on our nation's schools*. <https://www.splcenter.org/20160413/trump-effect-impact-presidential-campaign-our-nations-schools>

- Spanierman, L.B., & Smith, L. (2017a). Confronting white hegemony: A moral imperative for the helping professions. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 45(5), 727-736. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0011000017719550>
- Suarez-Orozco, C., Katsiaficas, D., Birchall, O., Alcantar, C. M., Hernandez, E., Garcia, Y., & Teranishi, R. T. (2015). Undocumented undergraduates on college campuses: Understanding their challenges and assets and what it takes to make an undocufriendly campus. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(3), 427-463.
- University of California Hastings Center for Gender and Refugee Studies. *Register as an expert witness*. <https://cgrs.uchastings.edu/register/expert-witness>
- Vella, J. (2002). *Learning to listen, learning to teach: The power of dialogue in educating adults*. Jossey-Bass.
- Vigil, D., & Muñoz, S. M. (2023). The influence of the Trump Era on sustaining whiteness through imperialist reclamation on college campuses: How undocumented students experience the normalization of racist nativism. *Education Sciences*, 13(2), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13020171>
- Yang, L., & Webber, K. L. (2015). A decade beyond the doctorate: The influence of a US postdoctoral appointment on faculty career, productivity, and salary. *Higher Education*, 70(4), 667-687.
- Xu, H., Gilliam, R. S. T., Peddada, S. D., Buchold, G. M., & Collins, T. R. L. (2018). Visualizing detailed postdoctoral employment trends using a new career outcome taxonomy. *Nature Biotechnology*, 36(2), 197-202.