

# Constructing “Deservingness”: DREAMers and Central American Unaccompanied Children in the National Immigration Debate

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## Abstract

Utilizing a Latina/o Critical Theory framework (LatCrit), I examine the narratives that emerged within national newsprint media coverage of DREAMers and Central American unaccompanied children. Data included 268 newspaper articles published during periods of heightened national media attention about DREAMers (96 articles) and Central American unaccompanied children (172 articles). A content analysis revealed that prevalent and contradictory narratives created constructions of deservingness, where one group is positively portrayed as deserving of U.S. opportunity, and the other group, negatively portrayed as undeserving. The analysis shows that regardless of the positive or negative portrayals cast, constructions of “deservingness” are employed in these narratives that assigned values of non-nativeness to both groups that justify their continued subordination in U.S. society.

## Introduction

We are at the helm of what many are calling a global immigration “crisis.” The displaced are risking their lives to seek refuge abroad from war and violence, while receiving countries are escalating efforts to shut them out.<sup>1</sup> Domestically, the U.S. grapples with its own immigration issues, between the hundreds of thousands of undocumented mostly Latina/o youth currently residing in the country, and other migrants who continue to arrive to escape similar conditions. This study explores the public discourses around two groups of immigrant youth at the center of recent immigration debates, DREAMers and Central American unaccompanied children.<sup>2</sup> As this special issue suggests, these immigrant youth are similar, yet distinct, and differentially framed by constructions of deservingness that categorize them as either “deserving” or “undeserving” of access and opportunities in the U.S. I utilize Latina/o critical theory (LatCrit), and specifically, the concept of racist nativism, to examine how these constructions perpetuate the subordination of both groups.

First, this article provides a context for understanding the DREAMer and Central American unaccompanied youth populations. Second, I explain how the literature discusses constructions of deservingness for U.S. immigrant groups in the U.S. Next, I provide the theoretical and conceptual frameworks utilized, followed by the methodology. The findings section presents the prevalent and contradictory narratives that emerged for both groups of immigrant youth. Finally, I provide an analysis of these narratives and the constructions of deservingness employed by them in the discussion, and conclude with implications of the study.

## Political Context

### DREAMers

There is a lengthy political context significant to the undocumented youth population in the U.S. (Seif, Ullman & Núñez-Mchiri, 2014). For the purposes of this article, I focus on a specific and brief political context significant to DREAMer youth, which arose around 2001 with the first introduction of the federal DREAM Act (Nicholls, 2013).

A DREAMer identity emerged from the activism initiated by undocumented college students for the federal DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act, a bill first introduced in Congress

1 For example, Syrian and North African immigrants have taken mass exoduses from the warfare and civil unrest in their home countries, embarking dangerous journeys by land and sea to seek safety in European countries. Hungary, Germany, and Austria are only a few of the many countries reinforcing their borders to keep these migrants out. See the interactive story of this migration in the New York Times at <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/15/world/europe/migrant-borders-europe.html>.

2 DREAMers approved under DACA may also identify as “DACAmended.” For purposes of consistency, I use the term DREAMers throughout this paper. A description of each group is provided in the following section.

in 2001, and nearly passed in 2010 (Olivas, 2012). This bill would have allowed eligible undocumented youth a pathway to citizenship if they attended college or served in the U.S. military.<sup>3</sup> Undocumented youth who would have benefitted from the bill became known as DREAMers (Nicholls, 2013).<sup>4</sup> I use this term for purposes of consistency with media discourse, acknowledging its fluidity of meaning across individuals and groups, and that this is not a homogenous identity.<sup>5</sup> Most DREAMers migrated to the U.S. as young children to escape poverty, spent the majority of their lives in this country, and attended U.S. schools. Having lived in the U.S. for a significant part of their lives, many have developed “American” identities (Gonzales, 2011; Pérez, 2011),<sup>6</sup> adopted dominant meritocratic worldviews to claim U.S. legitimacy, and reject constructions of illegality (Abrego, 2008; Negrón-Gonzales, 2014). Demographically, the vast majority of DREAMers are Latina/o, reflecting the overall undocumented U.S. population (Passel, Cohn, Krostad, & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014).

When the DREAM Act failed in Congress in 2010, DREAMers mobilized to place pressure on President Obama to utilize his executive power to grant deferred action—a form of prosecutorial discretion that allows the federal government to provide a reprieve from deportation on a case-by-case basis—to undocumented youth that would have benefitted from the DREAM Act. On June 15, 2012, the Obama administration announced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program that provided this reprieve and a temporary work permit for legal U.S. employment, renewable for two years.<sup>7</sup> Over 600,000 DREAMers have been approved under DACA in the U.S.<sup>8</sup>

## Central American Unaccompanied Children

In summer 2014, there was a 92 percent increase in the number of Central American unaccompanied children entering the U.S., mostly from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador (Wolgin & Kelley, 2014), fleeing increased death and violence in their home countries (Wong et al., 2013).<sup>9</sup> This migration pattern is not new and stems from a long, complex U.S. relationship with Central American countries (Menjívar & Rodriguez, 2005; Olivas, 1990). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2014) reported that 58 percent of those entering the U.S. should be eligible for international protections claims (i.e. asylum) because of the dangerous conditions they are fleeing. Human trafficking law protects their immediate deportation and right to remain in the U.S. (with U.S. relatives, if available) for an immigration hearing.<sup>10</sup> Throughout this article, I choose to use the term Central American unaccompanied “children” and “youth” interchangeably, to describe children under the age of 18, who arrive to the U.S. unauthorized, and without a parent and/or legal guardian. I chose not to use the term most often used in immigration policy and media, “unaccompanied minor.” The term “minor” obfuscates the focus on children that further dehumanizes the experiences of this particularly vulnerable group of youth.<sup>11</sup>

3 In the 2010 DREAM Act bill, an undocumented person was eligible if she or he was under 35 years old, entered the U.S. more than 5 years ago (if 15 years old or younger at the time of arrival), and could demonstrate good moral character. Once the student graduated high school, she/he would be able to apply for conditional permanent residence status that would authorize six years of legal residence. At the end of this term, permanent resident status would be granted if the student had attended college or served in the military for at least two years.

4 Some scholars use more precise descriptions of DREAMers as undocumented youth activists engaged in the DREAM movement and other national immigrant rights campaigns (Nicholls, 2013).

5 I also recognize that many undocumented youth may not use this term to self-identify.

6 The term “American” has historically defined a white racial identity and has strategically been used to exclude People of Color in the U.S. (Saito, 1997). I use quotes to show this is not my use of the term, but that of others.

7 There are multiple requirements to be eligible for the DACA program, some include: arrival to the U.S. before age 16, continuous residence in the U.S. since arrival, under the age of 31 as of June 15, 2012, have graduated high school (or earned a GED) or currently enrolled in school, and have no felony convictions or significant misdemeanors. Moreover, the USCIS states those eligible must not “pose a threat to national security or public safety” (see USCIS at <http://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/consideration-deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-process>)

8 See <http://immigrationimpact.com/2015/06/15/3-years-in-its-increasingly-clear-that-daca-benefits-all-of-us/>

9 It was also found that more young girls were arriving than in the past, and being targeted by human trafficking (Wolgin & Kelley, 2014).

10 The William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 has protected the majority of recent Central American child immigrant arrivals from immediate deportation. Under this law, unaccompanied immigrant children have the right to remain in the U.S. with a relative or guardian until the date of an assigned immigration hearing (see <http://www.state.gov/j/tip/laws/113178.htm>). Detained children are transferred from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) who then coordinates their care and/or placement with family members residing in the U.S.

11 I also choose not to use the term “refugee,” but acknowledge the protections this status provides those under international law. I agree with the use of the term as a political strategy by immigrant groups and allies to implicate the U.S. in migration from Latin-American countries. However, a racist nativist lens reveals that the term “refugee” is also problematic because it carries with it a racialized construction of the “non-native” that erases the complexities of within-group differences among Latinas/os generally.

The news articles revealed that detainment conditions for this specific influx of immigrant children were horrific, that children’s families did not have the resources to seek adequate counsel, and immigration hearings were sometimes scheduled in different states than where the children resided (Aguilar, 2014). In 2014, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) reported significant efforts focused to “stem the tide” of Central American immigrants and as a result, apprehensions drastically declined by the end of the 2014 fiscal year (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2014).

DREAMers and Central American unaccompanied youth are both distinct and similar. Unlike DREAMers, Central American immigrant youth are newly arrived, and entered the U.S. unaccompanied, without parents or adult caretakers. DREAMers have spent the majority of their lives in the U.S., and have integrated into the dominant values, customs, and cultural norms of U.S. society. On the other hand, both groups arrived to escape difficult and dangerous conditions in their home countries, often related to U.S. imperialist policies and interventions throughout Latin America (Menjívar & Rodriguez, 2005). Both arrived (with or without their families) in search of better lives. Finally, both groups have been framed by similar anti-immigrant narratives that frame them as “burdens” who pose a “threat” to U.S. well-being (Chávez, 2008). I utilize Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) and specifically, racist nativism as frameworks to understand how, despite these differences and similarities, both groups have been targeted by such narratives.

### **Latina/o Critical Theory and Racist Nativism**

Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) is a theoretical branch of Critical Race Theory (CRT) that encompasses the following five tenets: (1) centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; (2) challenge to dominant ideologies and deficit perspectives; (3) centrality of experiential knowledge, (4) interdisciplinary analyses, and (5) explicit commitment to social justice (Solorzano, 1998). In addition to these central tenets, LatCrit acknowledges the unique experiences of Latina/o communities as mediated by immigration, language, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Thus, LatCrit provides a more focused research lens to examine the experiences of Latina/o communities.

Racist nativism has evolved from the overarching framework of LatCrit, and provides a focused space of theorizing at the intersections of race and immigration status, two inextricably linked conditions of the Latina/o immigrant experience (Sánchez, 1997). Historically, Latina/o immigrants have been targeted by dominant beliefs and values that assign a racial inferiority and consequently, construct an “outsider” status to white mainstream culture and a white “American” identity (Acuña, 1978). Racist nativism is a conceptual lens to understand this process. Racist nativism (Pérez Huber, 2008) is defined as,

the assigning of values to real or imagined differences, in order to justify the superiority of the native, who is to be perceived white, over that of the non-native, who is perceived to be People and Immigrants of Color, and thereby defend the right of whites, or the natives, to dominance.  
(p. 43)

Moreover, because racist nativism is based on perceptions, it targets Latinas/os regardless of immigration status. As a result, this form of racism functions to erase within-group differences among Latinas/os (i.e. U.S.-born, immigrant, Mexican, Central American, etc.) that acknowledge the sociopolitical and cultural complexities that exist in shaping the diversity of Latina/o experiences. This erasure homogenizes the Latina/o population to fit a monolithically subordinate category of people (Hernández-Truyol, 1994). Racist nativism informs the shaping of a public imaginary of Latinas/os, and has influenced U.S. immigration policy—policies that often exclude Latina/o immigrants, and particularly the undocumented from full participation in U.S. society (Pérez Huber, 2009). I argue that racist nativism is a useful tool to understand narratives of undocumented Latinas/os, and the constructions of “deserving” and “undeserving” these narratives employ.

### **Constructions of Deservingness and Immigrant Communities**

Constructions of deservingness are shaped by dominant discourses that discursively position particular

groups as more deserving than others in policymaking (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). According to Ingram and Schneider (2005a) “constructions of deservedness are undergirded and rationalized by well-accepted narratives, or story lines, in which various groups are portrayed as playing more or less positive roles in contributing to a national well-being” (p. 219). Moreover, these constructions have existed within policymaking since the early formation of U.S. government (Ingram & Schneider, 2005a).

Constructions of deservingness for immigrants, particularly Immigrants of Color, utilize culturally deficit perceptions that often define these groups as fraudulent, burdensome, and of low morality (Yoo, 2008). These narratives justify the exclusion of Immigrants of Color from policies that provide increased rights and opportunities (Fujiwara, 2005; Horton, 2004; Newton, 2005). For example, in a study examining constructions of deservingness in welfare policy, Fujiwara (2005) explained how Latina/o and Asian immigrants were framed by narratives of “undeserving foreigners” of welfare benefits that only U.S. citizens should have access to. Similarly, Newton (2005) examined constructions of deservingness within immigration policy for Latina/o immigrants. She found that narratives of the “immigrant freeloader,” and the “criminal alien” were used to construct this immigrant group (both undocumented and legalized) as undeserving of government assistance, effectively excluding them from social services U.S. citizens had access to.

However, these studies do not explicitly account for the ways racism informs these narratives, and the ways nativism functions to exclude those perceived “foreign” to the U.S. These narratives, and the constructions of deservingness they confer, are about more than just “racial and gender politics,” as some scholars claim (Fujiwara, 2005). They establish parameters of racist nativism that assign a non-native status to Latina/o immigrants, while reinforcing the perceived native and superior status of the dominant group, historically constructed as whites (Pérez Huber, Benavides Lopez, Malagon, Velez, & Solorzano, 2008). Brown (2013) would add that race-based narratives incite degrees of “moral worth” that blame Latinas/os for the “suffering of deserving White American citizens” in the competition for scarce U.S. economic resources (p. 291). Coll (2010) highlights such negative perceptions are also gendered, often targeting undocumented Latinas. The dominant narratives of immigrant “criminality,” “resource-drain,” and “freeloader” have emerged as common discourse for Latina/o undocumented immigrants, and are indicative of the perceived threat to a U.S. well-being (Chávez, 2008). The literature outlined here highlights the significance of constructions of deservingness as a mechanism for shaping public discourse and justifying policy decisions directed toward Immigrants of Color. An analysis of the role of racist nativism in constructions of deservingness is useful to understand the constructions assigned to Latina/o immigrants—constructs that perpetuate the subordination of Latinas/os (and other Immigrants of Color) while establishing a perceived superior status of the dominant group.

## Methods

To examine the narratives within newsprint media, I utilize a content analysis of national media coverage in major U.S. newspaper outlets (Merriam, 2002). Analyzing newspapers allows for an effective assessment of public discourse (Brown, 2013). News stories provide an ample opportunity to examine the dominant narratives of these immigrant youth groups. In fact, research has shown the utility of examining newspapers to understand the framing of U.S. immigrants (Chávez, 2008; Massey & Pren, 2012). The newspaper article search began during heightened national media attention for both groups of youth. For DREAMers, heightened attention was sparked by the June 2012 announcement of the DACA program. For Central American unaccompanied youth, media attention increased in June 2014, at the height of the migration surge into the U.S.<sup>12</sup> Using these dates as starting points, I conducted two article searches, one for DREAMers from June 2012 to February 2015, and a second on Central American unaccompanied youth from June 2014 to February 2015. I utilized *ProQuest Newspapers* database, where I was able to simultaneously search indexes for three major U.S. newspapers, including the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*. I utilized a list of relevant key terms, and limited the searches to full-text articles.<sup>13</sup> The article search for DREAMers resulted in 96 relevant articles during this time period.

<sup>12</sup> The Pew Research Center (2014) reported that by July 2014, over 80 percent of Americans had heard at least “a little” about the large number of Central American children crossing the border into the U.S. during the summer of 2014, while nearly 60 percent reported they had heard “a lot.” See report at <http://www.people-press.org/2014/07/16/surge-of-central-american-children-roils-u-s-immigration-debate/>.

<sup>13</sup> Key terms for the search on DREAMer youth included “DREAMer,” and “immigrant” or “undocumented.” This key term search allowed me to capture stories that were about DREAMer youth specifically, rather than young immigrants generally. Key terms for the search on Central American Association of Mexican-American Educators (AMAE) © 2015, Volume 9, Issue 3 • ISSN 2377-9187

The search for Central American unaccompanied children resulted in 172 relevant articles. Thus, there were 268 total articles included in the analysis.

I engaged a content analysis to investigate the dominant narratives of these immigrant groups by identifying common themes that emerged from the news stories (Merriam, 2002). I analyzed articles about DREAMers and unaccompanied children utilizing Merriam’s (2002) approach for content analysis in order to identify themes that emerged from the data, rather than a deductive analysis with a predetermined code list. I utilized Atlas TI qualitative software to upload all articles and code for narratives that developed from emergent themes. Utilizing this approach allowed for a more flexible identification of portrayals that emerged from the data. In addition, this content analysis was informed by the conceptual framework of racist nativism that examined how race, immigration status, and nativity were discussed within these narratives, and the ways both groups were constructed as either deserving or undeserving of U.S. rights and opportunities. The following section describes the findings based on this analysis.

## Findings

The findings are presented in two sections. The first section describes the prevalent narratives that emerged for DREAMers and Central American unaccompanied children. These narratives occurred most frequently in the data. However, contradictions to these prevalent narratives were also found. The second section discusses those contradictory narratives. Although these contradictions did not occur as frequently, they illustrate patterns within a larger and more diverse context of narratives that illustrate the distinct and multiple ways these groups are discussed in public discourse. The discussion of the narratives follows this section, explaining how the theoretical frameworks provide insight to these findings.

### Prevalent Narratives

**DREAMers as Deserving Contributors.** This narrative was a positive portrayal of the undocumented rarely seen in contemporary public discourse around immigration. Yet, this was one of the most prevalent narratives that emerged from the data for DREAMers. News reporters often described this group as “young immigrants,” “youngsters,” and “students” rather than the pejorative terms “illegal” or “alien”—more often used in articles about Central American unaccompanied children. News stories emphasized how DACA enabled DREAMers the opportunity to utilize their education and skills in their chosen fields, constructing these youth as potentially successful professionals deserving of opportunity. For example, a *New York Times* article quoted one DREAMer, “I sort of felt that I didn’t go to school for nothing and I could do what I wanted to do, like everyone else in this country. I can go out and execute what I learned” (Semple, 2013).

The civic engagement of DREAMers also emerged, showing they will continue to contribute to the advancement of U.S. society. For example, the *Wall Street Journal* explained how DREAMers led voter registration campaigns during the 2012 presidential elections. It stated, “in swing states like Florida, Ohio, and Colorado, Dreamers...are running phone banks, going door to door and approaching students on college campuses to encourage voting...Dreamers efforts [sic] could boost Democratic support in state and congressional races, supporters and opponents agree” (Jordan, 2012a). DREAMers were also consistently portrayed as “good” people wanting to give back. A *New York Times* article featured one DREAMer who stated, “I’ve been a good boy, you could say...I want to help out my parents and show them their efforts weren’t for nothing” (Preston, 2012a). In another article, the *Los Angeles Times* quotes another DREAMer who commented, “I am undocumented and unafraid and unashamed...I choose to empower my community” (Zucchini, 2012). This narrative portrayed DREAMers as educated future professionals whose skills and talents would be wasted without the opportunity to utilize them.

**DREAMers Are Not a Threat.** This narrative challenged dominant perceptions of DREAMers as a threat to U.S. well-being. News stories commonly emphasized that DREAMers were not at fault for their status

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unaccompanied children were “Central American unaccompanied minor.” I found that using these terms produced the most results of the most relevant articles for the focus of this study.

of illegality, being “brought” to the U.S. as children. The *Wall Street Journal* explained, “most undocumented students were brought to the U.S. by their parents when they were children and aren’t eligible for federal grants, loans or work-study positions” (Jordan, 2012b). The condition of being “brought” to the U.S. implied DREAMers had no choice to come, and thus, were innocent, distancing them from their illegality (Nicholls, 2013).

DREAMers were also cast as fearful immigrants who deserved to “come out of the shadows.” The *New York Times* reported that after DACA, “many [DREAMers] talked about being able to walk out their front door for the first time without fear that a wrong turn could lead to deportation proceedings” (Semple, 2013). Stories argued that even after DACA, DREAMers remained hesitant to apply, “many fearing their data could be used against them one day” (Bennett & Chang, 2012). Living in fear leads to the need to come “out of the shadows.” An article in the *New York Times* stated, “[DACA], while not granting any permanent legal status, clears the way for young illegal immigrants to come out of the shadows, work legally and obtain driver’s licenses and many other documents they have lacked” (Preston & Cushman, 2012). Cast by a state of fear reinforces the “not a threat narrative,” that implies DREAMers would not do anything to jeopardize their ability to remain in the U.S.<sup>14</sup> The prevalent narratives found for DREAMers were very different than those found for Central American children.

**Central American Unaccompanied Children as Economic Burdens.** By far, the most prevalent narrative for Central American unaccompanied children was the “economic burden” their presence posed to the U.S. Recurring articles reported on the drain governmental agencies experienced due to the influx of these youth arriving in the country. For example, the *Wall Street Journal* reported from a national meeting of state governors, that the increasing numbers of Central American children were, “a top concern among state officials gathered here... and a reminder...that Congress’s failure to overhaul immigration laws puts heavy burdens on the states” (Reinhard & Nicholas, 2014). Recurring stories also reported how the influx of the unaccompanied children led to the need to hire more immigration judges, social services staff, and attorneys, adding to the resource drain. Aside from government agencies, it was reported that this group also strained resources in public schools. For example, in an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, a local principal commented how “enrollment [of students] skyrocketed...most of them newly arrived from Central America...it’s put a burden on me because I’ve run out of space” (Hennessy-Fiske, 2014). The burden narrative casts this group of immigrants as undeserving of scarce U.S. resources.

**Central American Unaccompanied Children as a Threat.** Central American unaccompanied children were also portrayed as “diseased,” posing a threat to U.S. well-being. For example, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, “frustration is building on the front lines of the immigration fight...officials say the volume of illegal human smuggling is creating spillover effects north of the border, including a rise in stash houses to hide immigrants, auto theft, and communicable diseases” (Campoy, 2014). In another article, a *Los Angeles Times* reporter stated, “it may be difficult to screen out immigrants who are too old or unvaccinated...that leaves parents not ‘knowing who your child is sitting next to in history class,’” quoting a high school parent about her concern over the immigrant “newcomers” (Hennessy-Fiske, 2014).

A recurring theme of expulsion was also included in this narrative. Articles frequently reported the need for policymakers to expedite the process of deportations for these children. The *Wall Street Journal* reported, “lawmakers are...considering whether to change U.S. law to speed deportations, an effort aimed in part at discouraging future migrants” (Meckler, 2014). A separate article stated, “the exodus from Central America has overwhelmed Homeland Security officials, who have vowed to speed up immigration hearings but have also struggled to house immigrant families and unaccompanied children” (Carcamo, 2014). The theme of expulsion reinforces the immigrant threat narrative—if Central American unaccompanied children pose a threat to U.S. society, they should be expelled from the country. Despite the prevalence of these negative narratives, contradictions did arise from the analysis that portrayed this group more humanely. These contradictions are described in the following section.

<sup>14</sup> This theme poses a contradiction to the previous narrative that highlighted the civic engagement of DREAMers. This contradiction will be discussed further in the conclusion.

## Contradictory Narratives

Examining the narratives that contradicted the prevalent discourses on DREAMers and Central American children provides a broader context for understanding the multiple ways these groups were portrayed by newsprint media. These contradictions also illustrate the complexities of immigration discourse, showing that public perceptions of the undocumented cannot be explained by rigid dichotomies between “good” and “bad” immigrants, or the “deserving” and “undeserving.” This section provides a description of the contradictory narratives that emerged.

**DREAMers as Economic Burdens.** These stories described the strain on government resources and agencies that DACA posed. The *Los Angeles Times* reported the implications of DACA on schools and consulates across the U.S. For example, one article explained that due to the demand for student transcripts prompted by DACA, schools in Los Angeles “battled backlogs of 200 to 300 applicants...which put workers on overtime to catch up” and reported estimated costs of over \$200,000. Similarly, the *New York Times* reported, “schools were deluged with requests for transcripts, creating a logjam that coincided with the frenetic opening days of the new academic year” (Preston, 2012c). The burden narrative for DREAMers played out in the same ways as Central American children, focused on the strain this group placed on schools and government agencies.

**DREAMers as a Threat.** DREAMers were also sometimes portrayed as a threat to U.S. well-being. For example, in the *New York Times* we see the “threat” narrative and the “deserving contributor” narrative occur in the same story in an article citing a federal lawsuit that challenged DACA.<sup>15</sup> The article quotes a lead plaintiff in the case stating, “our biggest concern is that safety has just been thrown out the window.” Later, the article cites a spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security who stated that DACA “ensure[s] that responsible young people, who are Americans in every way but on paper, have an opportunity to remain in the country and make their fullest contribution” (Preston, 2012b). Similarly, a *Los Angeles Times* article mentions how DACA allows “authorities to focus on deporting convicted criminals, instead of students [DREAMers],” while also quoting a Republican opponent of DACA who raises the concern, “such a quick turnaround for these amnesty applications raises serious concerns about fraud and a lack of thorough vetting” of DACA applicants (Bennet, 2012). In this contradictory narrative, DREAMers were cast as possible criminals who pose a threat to the safety of U.S. citizens.

**Central American Unaccompanied Children: A Humanitarian Issue.** The themes that emerged in this contradictory narrative were explicit references to the migration of this group as a humanitarian crisis or issue. For example, a *Wall Street Journal* article reported that hundreds of people nationwide are providing foster care for the unaccompanied children. One of these foster parents stated, “they were all living in a state of chaos...they deserve a second chance” (Jordan, 2015). Many articles referred to President Obama’s June 2014 Rose Garden speech, where he stated that the migration of these Central American children was an “actual humanitarian crisis at the border” (Julie & Shear, 2014). The *New York Times* editorialized their humanitarian stance on this “crisis” in several articles, one stating, “the administration needs to mount a sustained surge of its own, of humanitarian care, shelter, and assistance for children who have faced horrific traumas in fleeing violence in their home countries” (New York Times Editorial Board, 2014).

**Central American Unaccompanied Children Need Protection.** The need to protect this group of vulnerable children also emerged as a contradictory narrative. For example, a *New York Times* article explained that some cities were “more welcoming than headlines and protests suggest,” and quoted a resident who commented, “I don’t feel we have to solve the border crisis for a terrified child to be shown some compassion” (Fernandez, 2014). In a separate article, the mayor of Syracuse, New York, stated, “as a city with a rich immigrant tradition, we feel strongly children should be welcomed and protected” (Semple, 2014). The *New York Times* reported on the stance of the United Conference of Catholic Bishops that stated, “these children are refugees

<sup>15</sup> In *Crane et al., v. Napolitano*, DHS agents filed a lawsuit to challenge the directive to enforce immigration law under DACA. Plaintiffs claimed the directive violates federal law and their oaths to uphold and support federal law. The case was dismissed in U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas in July 2013.

who deserve the protection of our nation. They should not be viewed as lawbreakers” (Preston, 2014). The contradictory narratives that emerged cast this group as vulnerable children who deserve just treatment and protection from deportation.

## Discussion

As these narratives suggest, categories of deservingness are fluid. They can shift across time and context, and can be simultaneously contradictory. The contradictions found within newsprint media is indicative of what the Pew Research Center (2014) calls a “public divide” of U.S. opinion on immigration, with an equal number of people agreeing that deportation is a “good thing” versus a “bad thing.”<sup>16</sup> However, these contradictions represent more than conflicting public opinion. Ingram and Schneider (2005b) argue, “laws are not just bundles of advantages or disadvantages, but are also messages about who matters and who does not” (p. 106). Prevalent narratives of DREAMers and Central American children supported policies that articulated “who matters” in public discourse on immigrant youth. Research has found that differential constructions of deservingness within immigration discourse are mutually constructed categories that cannot exist without an opposite counterpart (DiAlto, 2005). Thus, these contradictions are necessary for the reproduction of constructions of deservingness. However, I argue these constructions are also about racialized perceptions of who aligns with an “American” identity, culture, and values. Such perceptions are also significant to defining what groups “matter” in the broader social fabric of U.S. society, and what they deserve. Racist nativism affords a lens to explore these dimensions of the findings by revealing the discursive functions of power enacted through dominant discourses that shape constructions of deservingness, that in turn, assign a subordinate status to the Latina/o immigrant youth in this study.

According to a racist nativism framework, there is an assigning of values (real or perceived) that justifies the superiority of the “native” (historically, white) and his perceived right to dominance, over that of the “non-native” (historically, People/Immigrants of Color). The negative narratives found in this study are the same assigned values utilized historically to justify the exclusion and marginalization of Immigrants of Color as non-native. The narratives of “economic burden” and “threat” to U.S. well-being were the most prevalent found for Central American children, while the same values were assigned to DREAMers in the contradictory narratives that emerged. Yet, the prevalent narratives for DREAMers were positive values. The question then becomes, *how does racist nativism explain these positive values assigned to this group?*

News stories constructed DREAMers as deserving immigrants because of their values of hard work, education, and civic engagement. Through the assigning of these values, DREAMers were portrayed as a group of immigrants more aligned to American ideals and values, and particularly the neoliberal construct of meritocracy. They have spent significantly more time in the U.S. than the newly arrived Central American children and thus, are perceived more similar to dominant society than different. The length of time spent in the U.S. is critical for DREAMers, as a key justification for their deservingness constructed by the prevalent narratives found in the study. However, their perceived *American-ness* (the assigned values that cast them as similar to the dominant group) does not provide DREAMers the same right to dominance as it does the native. This is simply a non-native preference discursively assigned over the less deserving immigrant group, Central American children. The discursive preference remains one that the dominant group provides, as those who hold a position of power to employ. DREAMers have “earned” the preference of the dominant group over other immigrants, and U.S. immigration policy has followed suit to provide increased access and opportunity through DACA. However, their status as non-native, informs the reluctance of the dominant group to provide DREAMers a legalized status that would allow them to fully participate in the U. S. DACA allows DREAMers a form of provisional acceptance in U.S. society, while those in power benefit from their material and social contributions (i.e. labor, wages, social advocacy). Thus, while this narrative was positive, it constructs DREAMers as a preferred group of immigrants but still reinforces their non-native status, where they will remain marginalized and excluded.

The same argument can also be made for the contradictory humanitarian narrative found for Central American children. Similar to DREAMers, a non-native preference is also assigned in this narrative, based on the condition of these immigrants as children. The narrative claimed that because these were children, they

<sup>16</sup> See results from the Pew Research Center (2014) poll at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/01/dhs-violence-poverty-is-driving-children-to-flee-central-america-to-u-s/>



deserved to be cared for and protected. A humanitarian framing of immigration is one that many would agree (particularly advocates) is the most effective to protect the rights of immigrants.<sup>17</sup> However, a truly humanitarian perspective is not one decided by age, but by the condition of being human. This version of a “humanitarian” narrative included children, but excluded adults. In this case, the native utilizes his power to provide a discursive non-native preference to children over less-deserving adults, reproducing the subordination of both groups, and the power of the native to determine this preference.

In these ways, racist nativism has shaped the prevalent and contradictory narratives found in this study. Through these narratives, real and perceived values were assigned to DREAMers and Central American unaccompanied children that defined their non-native status, reinforcing the superiority of the native (historically perceived as whites), and his right to employ the power to dictate who “deserves” access to the U.S. to serve his benefit. De Genova (2005) explains that the discursive power of nativism does not lie in the “preoccupation with the foreignness of any particular migrant or internal minority, so much as with the ‘native-ness’ of U.S. citizens and the promotion of the priority of the latter” (p. 60). Thus, throughout the diversity of narratives that emerged, racist nativism functioned to *explicitly* and *implicitly* reproduce the status and power of the dominant group. Racist nativism then, articulates a theory for the racialized anti-immigrant politics of nativism that shape constructions of deservingness, whether immigrants are perceived as deserving or not. It also explains why immigration policy continues to exclude undocumented immigrant Latina/o youth from full participation in U.S. society, even for those deemed more deserving. Let us not forget the long legal battle for the DREAM Act that ultimately failed in Congress, or that legal challenges to the DACA program continue in U.S. courts.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, many Central American children (and adults) who migrate to the U.S. are ultimately deported following apprehension (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2014) while those who stay are often subjected to legal violence (Menjívar and Abrego, 2012).<sup>19</sup>

For the U.S. not to show some degree of compassion towards undocumented immigrants, particularly more vulnerable youth, would mean it compromises its democratic principles of equality, opportunity, and freedom. In his theory of interest convergence, Derrick Bell (2004) argues that historically, rights of the racially marginalized are “recognized and protected when and only so long as policymakers perceive that such advances will further the interests that are their primary concern” (p. 49). There is a long and consistent history of exclusion of Immigrants of Color in the U.S. (Ngai, 2004). Constructions of the deserving immigrant and the (albeit limited) legal protections they justify, allow the U.S. to maintain ideals of democracy, and its position to enforce those ideals domestically and internationally. At the same time, constructions of deservingness assure the continued subordination of Immigrants of Color.

## Conclusion

This study found that diverse narratives framed constructions of deservingness for DREAMers and Central American unaccompanied children. However, an analysis of racist nativism showed both groups were discursively assigned non-native values, explicitly and implicitly, that justified the perceived superiority and dominance of the native—regardless of whether the narratives were constructed as deserving or undeserving. This study has shown that it is questionable whether constructions of the “deserving” immigrant truly exist, if, our meaning of “deserving” is positioned within an understanding of a shared humanity. Such a position would require the belief that all human beings deserve the right to democratic ideals of equality, liberty, and freedom. Interrogating constructions of deservingness from a racist nativist lens shows this is not the case.

17 See Pérez Huber (2009) for further description of a human rights frame.

18 *Texas v. United States* No. B-14-254 is a lawsuit filed on behalf of 25 U.S. states to challenge the implementation of the DACA expansion program known as the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA) that was announced by the Obama administration in November 2014. In November, 2015 the U.S. Department of Justice submitted a petition for certiorari to the U.S. Supreme Court to hear the case. The Supreme Court will likely decide in early 2016 if the case will be heard. If the court hears the case, it would likely rule in June 2016.

19 Menjívar and Abrego (2012) found that from since the late 1990’s, Central American undocumented immigrants have been targeted by “legal violence,” forms of structural and symbolic violence produced by immigration law that results in suffering, and hinders immigrant incorporation. These researchers found that legal violence has lasting repercussions for those residing in the U.S., as well as for those within their social networks in their countries of origin. These are the conditions that many of the Central American unaccompanied minor children experience today.

within the context of immigration, we must re-think discourses about who “deserves” U.S. integration. Finally, it is imperative that we are critical of how some immigrant youth are constructed as deserving, while others are not. We must position this critique within its larger social and political contexts, as young lives and futures are at stake in these debates.

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