During the late 2010s, the undocumented immigrant youth movement embraced inclusive and intersectional representations. Directly impacted activists deconstructed language and symbolic categories that excluded. However, their movement continued to stratify activists along representational lines. This article combines theories of intersectionality and symbolic power to develop the concept of “representational hierarchy.” Producing representations requires legitimacy, and the resources needed for legitimacy (i.e., symbolic capital) are unevenly distributed to activists. Activists in possession of these resources can rise to the top and exert control over the means of representation. Dominant activists enforce representations and their positioning through coercive (“calling out”) and consensual (“calling in”) mechanisms. Our project employs ethnographic data from two periods of investigation: 2011–12 and 2018. The data include interviews with new and experienced activists, analysis of movement documents, and 400 hours of participant observations. For this specific article, we draw mostly on interviews conducted in 2018.

INTRODUCTION

The undocumented immigrant youth movement (Dreamers) originated in the 2000s as a project of prominent immigrant advocacy organizations.

1 We acknowledge and thank all undocumented immigrant youth activists that participated in this research project for their openness, trust, and knowledge. We also thank the
These organizations not only organized undocumented immigrant youths through a series of campaigns, but they also produced new public representations. These representations stressed that undocumented immigrant youths “deserved” legal status because the youths were fully Americanized, well embedded in their communities, economically productive, and largely innocent of their “illegal” immigration status (Seif 2010; Nicholls 2013b; Swerts 2015; Enriquez and Saguy 2016; Lauby 2016; Fiorito 2019, 2021). As has been well-documented, early youth activists revolted against these representations and their representatives (Nicholls 2013a; Unzueta Carrasco and Seif 2014; Gonzales 2014; Lauby 2016; Fiorito 2019; Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales 2020; Escudero 2020; Monico 2020). The representations, they argued, were exclusionary because they reinforced the division between “deserving” and “undeserving” immigrants and attributed blame for their “illegality” to their parents. The representations also silenced attributes and identities—queer and trans identities, working-class cultures, national origins—that were not consistent with the assimilationist “Dreamer narrative.” Youths criticized the representatives working in nonprofit organizations because they talked about undocumented issues from a dominant and privileged (i.e., male, heterosexual, middle-class, legal status) position and not from their lived and directly impacted experiences. Nonprofit organizations had, these insurgents argued, alienated undocumented immigrant youths from the means of representing themselves.

Following a contentious battle within their own movement, undocumented immigrant youth activists eventually assumed control over their organizations and representations. They embraced representations that were more intersectional, inclusive, and egalitarian (Patler and Gonzales 2015; Terriquez 2015; Enriquez and Saguy 2016; Fiorito 2019; Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales 2020; Escudero 2020). They mobilized to achieve policy goals (e.g., DREAM Act, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals [DACA], etc.), but they also believed that true emancipation could only be achieved when they dismantled exclusionary language and generated representations that reflected their intersectional and multiple identities (Garcia Cruz 2020). The production of representations was therefore not simply a means to achieve a policy goal, but it became a distinctive goal in its own right (Nicholls 2013a; Swerts 2015). This resulted in what one activist aptly called a “new social contract of inclusivity.”

Despite these commitments, certain activists took a leading role in constructing new representations, shaping the rules of representation or what some called “the new social contract of inclusivity,” and devising coercive
(“calling out”) and consensual (“calling in”) mechanisms to ensure compliance with the representations. Some activists became adept users of acceptable language and practices, but others struggled to adapt and sometimes committed symbolic transgressions. Such transgressions could undercut their legitimacy, trigger disciplinary actions, and push transgressing activists to the margins of the movement. Even a strongly intersectional and consciously inclusive social movement led by directly impacted people produced its own distinctive hierarchy. What explains the persistence of such hierarchies in movements consciously seeking to dismantle them?

The social movement literature has long examined how hierarchies emerged in social movement organizations dedicated to egalitarian causes (Michels 1959; Piven and Cloward 1977; Staggenborg 1988; Rucht 1999; Voss and Sherman 2000). The literature maintains that social movement organizations are more sustainable and arguably more effective when they professionalize (Staggenborg 1988). However, the growing number of professional staff creates distance between leaders and members, resulting in claims and strategies that depart from members’ interests. Although these theories are useful for understanding highly professionalized social movement organizations, the more recent iteration of the undocumented immigrant youth movement is characterized by uneven professionalization, on the one hand, and control by directly impacted activists, on the other. Despite these attributes, we continue to find oligarchic tendencies. Theories of framing and collective identities address the centrality of language and representations in contentious struggles, but these theories do not address how representations can give rise to symbolic hierarchies (Snow et al. 1986; Melucci 1985, 1988; Snow and Benford 1988; J. Gamson 1995; W. Gamson 1995; Benford and Snow 2000; Polletta 2006; Polletta et al. 2011). Thus, the social movement literature that focuses on professionalization and oligarchy largely ignores representations, while the literature that focuses on representations (i.e., framing, identity, narratives) largely ignores oligarchy.

To address this gap, we draw on theories of intersectionality (Combahee River Collective [1977] 1979; hooks 1981; Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 2000) and symbolic power (Bourdieu 1984, 1991, 2000; Swartz 2013, Burawoy 2019) to develop the concept of “representational hierarchy.” Representational hierarchies concern who is representing whom within a social movement, what gets represented and what gets silenced, and how such representations are enforced. Although representational hierarchies help construct political identities, they also produce internal cleavages that shape relational dynamics within social movements. We use the case of the undocumented immigrant youth movement to assess how such hierarchies form, endure, and impact relations between activists.

Intersectionality theory—understood broadly—provides important insights into hierarchies that emerge from the representation of marginalized groups.
The theory maintains that people are embedded in intersecting hierarchies (e.g., gender, class, race, sexuality) that contribute to multiple, divergent, and intersecting experiences of oppression, which in turn give rise to complex intersectional identities. However, social movements of marginalized people are often dominated by the most privileged members of a dominated groups (e.g., white, male, middle class, straight) who make their identity into the default identity of the movement (Crenshaw 1989) while marginalizing subordinate identities. Social movements can reverse these oligarchic tendencies by embracing intersectional identities and placing “directly impacted” activists in control of the means of representation. The undocumented immigrant youth movement applied this prescription, but as will be shown, a new representational hierarchy, based on an uneven distribution of symbolic capital, emerged anyway.

We turn to Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power to better understand movement stratification along representational lines (Bourdieu 1984, 1991, 2000; Swartz 2013; Burawoy 2019). Language, Bourdieu maintains, is an important condition of power and a major stake in political struggles. Within the field of politics, the production of new language requires legitimating resources (or symbolic capital), and these resources are unequally distributed across a political group. Those in possession of these resources are in a stronger position to generate new language to represent the group, create rules over how to use the language, and enforce the rules. Such hierarchies are particularly acute in social movements of marginalized people (e.g., working class, immigrants) because members lack sanctioned forms of symbolic capital, compelling them to delegate representational functions to their more privileged comrades. New representatives maintain power by adopting strategic maneuvers to normalize dominant representations and obfuscate power relations within the political movement. Following from this, even when movements replace their leaders with directly impacted people who embrace intersectional representations, hierarchies emerge because of the unequal distribution of symbolic capital.

From the above theories, we derive four arguments that underpin the concept of representational hierarchy: First, representational hierarchies are common across social movements but become acute when representatives are not directly impacted people and generate universal representations that privilege their particularistic positions (Crenshaw 1989). Acute hierarchies can give rise to conflicts, with dominated activists seeking to democratize their movement and generate more representative representations (Combahee River Collective 1977). The revolt of undocumented immigrant youth activists against their leaders during the earlier period of the movement reflects such a conflict. Second, activists struggle to achieve symbolic power within their movement by constructing new representations (Bourdieu 1991). The language they produce becomes sacred and true, while competing utterances are deemed transgressions. Third, representation requires legitimacy, and the
Representational Hierarchies

resources needed for legitimacy (symbolic capital) are unevenly distributed. Those in possession of more and better-quality symbolic capital tend to rise to the top of the hierarchy and assert their control over representations. This is especially the case in movements of marginalized people where the distribution of symbolic resources can be highly unequal. In the case at hand, symbolic capital was derived from being “directly impacted” and through the adept use of inclusive and intersectional language. Activists with higher education were more adept users of this language and, consequently, in a stronger position to be recognized as legitimate leaders. As other scholars have shown, access to higher education played an important role in shaping the sociopolitical trajectories of undocumented immigrant youth activists (Nicholls 2013a; Terriquez 2015; Gonzales 2015; Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales 2020). To this we add that access to higher education became a source of symbolic capital within the movement and a resource that shaped the movement’s representational hierarchy. Lastly, new leaders adopt coercive and consensual mechanisms to enforce representations and obfuscate hierarchies within the movement. In the case at hand, two mechanisms have been particularly important: “calling out” and “calling in.”

Although we use the undocumented immigrant youth movement to illustrate representational hierarchies, we maintain that such hierarchies have long been prevalent in movements of marginalized and stigmatized people. Within socialist movements, middle-class intellectuals rose to prominence because of their mastery of Marxist theory (King and Szeléyni 2004). Although they assumed a leading role in representing the working class, their intellectual claims and theories were often far removed from the lived realities of the proletariat. In other instances, leaders of the LGBTQ movement constructed a distinctive gay identity that reflected the middle-class and male positions and interests of its leaders (J. Gamson 1995; Valocchi 1999; Warner 1999; Armstrong 2002). As Valocchi argues, “The class positions of some set of actors and activists can create more powerful social networks, more highly valued cultural spaces, and episodes of confrontation where the terms of the confrontation are determined by the more class-privileged segments of the aggrieved group” (1999, p. 209). We find similar dynamics in the construction of a Black political identity in civil rights and Black power movements (McAdam 1982; Crenshaw 1989; Bloom and Waldo 2013).

In the past decade, activists across social movements have made dismantling representational hierarchies into an important goal. The Occupy Wall Street movement developed a representational process designed to obviate representational hierarchies (Juris 2012). Similarly, many within the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement embraced intersectionality and inclusion as central principles. This movement, Thompson notes, “engages in a group-centered model of leadership, driven by ideas of participatory and deliberative democracy, which not only gives voice to those who were marginalized..."
or silenced within the civil rights movement but is in fact driven by those voices” (Thompson 2020, p. 249). The undocumented immigrant youth movement also embraced trends to dismantle representational hierarchies. And like those other social movements, they found that, although changed, hierarchies can be stubborn despite good-faith efforts to dismantle them. Thus, by explaining representational hierarchies in our case, we identify a process that can be applied to other social movements of marginalized and stigmatized people.

Intersectionality is analytically ambiguous because it offers a compelling theory of hierarchies in social movements, but it is also a normative theory that activists employ in their organizations and struggles. Like other social scientific theories adopted by activists (e.g., Marxism), it is both a framework to explain the world and normative precepts that inform the ideas, language, and strategies of activists. Consequently, intersectionality can be used as a social scientific tool to analyze actual social movements that are employing the theory to shape their own ideas, language, and strategies. In this way, we use intersectionality to inform our concept of representational hierarchy, which is then used to analyze how activists consciously seek to undo these hierarchies through the application of intersectionality.

The article consists of several sections. The first section provides an overview of the literature and presents the central argument of the article. After the methods section, we then present our findings in the following order: the first generation of undocumented youth activists revolt against the representations that had been constructed for them by nonprofit organizations, insurgents construct intersectional representations that stress inclusion and equality, the unequal distribution of symbolic capital results in a new representational hierarchy, the new rules of representation are enforced through calling out, and, finally, leading activists adopt calling in as a more consensual and less alienating mechanism of rule enforcement.

REPRESENTATIONS, HIERARCHIES, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Identities and Frames in Social Movements

The social movement scholarship has made important advances in analyzing how frames, narratives, and collective identities are constructed and employed in contentious mobilizations. Scholars have argued that activists are not simply rational actors mobilizing resources in political arenas but instead “signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning” (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 613). The literature has shown how language (e.g., frames, narratives) is used to challenge dominant codes, achieve policy and normative goals, and broker relations between social movements.

Alberto Melucci maintained that conflicts over power take place first and foremost on symbolic grounds. Such battles result in the construction of collective identities that are multivocal and fluid (Melucci 1985, 1988, 1992).
Postindustrial society, Melucci argued, is characterized by a greater degree of individual autonomy but also by the proliferation of institutions that require conformity with broad social norms (whiteness, nationhood, heterosexuality). Consequently, while social movements focus on achieving classical political goals like legal reforms, they are primarily about challenging dominant codes and achieving recognition for stigmatized identities. He noted that “beyond modernization, beyond cultural innovation, movements question society on something ‘else’: who decides on codes, who establishes rules of normality, what is the space for difference, how can one be recognized not for being included but for being accepted as different... This is the deepest and the most hidden message of the movements” (1985, p. 810).

Others examined how language serves as an instrument to achieve normative and policy goals. These scholars argued that mobilization frames provide different people with a common framework to understand and interpret the world (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988; J. Gamson 1995; Polletta 2006; Polletta et al. 2011). Diagnostic framing provides a common way to perceive problems as a collective threat and identifies the structural and political causes. Prognostic framing is a “call to arms” (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 617) and provides a path to moving forward. Lastly, motivational framing provides a rationale for engaging in collective action by stressing the severity of the threat, the urgency to address the threat, and the moral obligation to take collective action (Snow and Benford 1988). Polletta adds that although frames are important, messages delivered through stories can be particularly impactful because clear “morals of the story” allow “people to process stories differently than they do non-narrative messages, suspending their natural proclivity to counterargue when they are absorbed or transported by a story” (Polletta et al. 2011, p. 112).

Lastly, scholars have long recognized that movements are made up of plural networks and identities (Melucci 1996; Armstrong 2002; Polletta 2006; Heaney and Rojas 2014). For Melucci, identities are not things that exist outside a movement. Networked actors struggle with one another to assemble collective identities out of the norms and symbolic rules that make up their everyday lives. Because the process involves multiple interconnected actors and symbols, the resulting identities are multivocal, fluid, and subject to challenges and change. Thus, whereas some movements have sought to construct a singular collective identity, others have adopted “hybrid identities.” Heaney and Rojas maintain that such hybrid identities can help broker relations between social movements by facilitating the circulation of activists between movements and the formation of intermovement networks. The undocumented immigrant youth movement shifted from a singular to a hybrid identity over the 2010s. This shift allowed activists to adopt frames and demands from LGBTQ and BLM movements. For instance, activists
adopted the concepts of “coming out” from LGBTQ and “defund the police” from BLM. The adoption of these and other symbols made it easier for alliances to form across social movements (Terriquez 2015; Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales 2020).

Thus, the social movement literature has demonstrated that language, representations, and identities are central aspects of movements because activists are attempting to valorize counterhegemonic norms and cultures that are denigrated by the dominant codes of society. Challenging dominant codes is part and parcel to challenging dominant institutions. Just as important, through framing and narratives, language is used as an instrument to achieve normative and policy ends. And lastly, the adoption of hybrid identities creates opportunities to broker relations with other movements. While this literature addresses the centrality of language and symbols in social movements, it does not address how the process of generating, managing, and enforcing representations generates hierarchies of their own.

Intersectionality: Identifying Representational Hierarchies

Theories of intersectionality—understood broadly—have maintained that the process of producing representations in social movements results in hierarchies (Combahee River Collective 1977; Crenshaw 1989). Such hierarchies are reflected in who is speaking on behalf of whom and what identities are elevated or silenced.

While marginalized and oppressed people often contend with a multiplicity of intersectional identities associated with their varied marginalized positionings, activists tend to construct a movement around a single identity, generating new exclusions for those who do not fit the confines of the new identity. For instance, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) argued that the Black civil rights movement produced a Black political identity that assumed male as the default gender of all Black people. Similarly, the feminist movement produced an identity that assumed white as the default race of all women. In both instances, seemingly egalitarian movements generated singular identities (Black, woman) that excluded identities that failed to align. Crenshaw added that when activists are successful, their singular and exclusionary identities become legal categories, which can have detrimental effects on the excluded. People who do not fit one identity or the other can find themselves excluded by the words of the movement and the laws of the state. Representations therefore have symbolic power because they delineate boundaries of belonging and such boundaries inform exclusionary laws and institutions.

These scholars maintain that the most privileged elements within these movements (e.g., men in the Black civil rights movement, white in the feminist movement) assume power and construct general identities that reflect
their particular social positioning. Crenshaw in particular argued that white feminist leaders assumed that white womanhood was the universal condition for all women.

The value of feminist theory to Black women is diminished because it evolves from a white racial context that is seldom acknowledged. Not only are women of color in fact overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when white women speak for and as women. The authoritative universal voice—usually white male subjectivity masquerading as a non-racial, non-gendered objectivity—is merely transferred to those who, but for gender, share many of the same cultural, economic, and social characteristics. (Crenshaw 1989, p. 154; emphasis in original)

Representations and identities are exclusionary because representatives of one group assert an “authoritative universal voice” for all. Intersectionality theory therefore proposes that hierarchies result from representations because movements come under the control of the dominant factions of dominated groups, like white women and Black men.

Hierarchies can be eliminated, or at least lessened when movements elevate directly impacted groups. The feminist concept of “standpoint epistemology” (Hill Collins 2000; Haraway 1988; Smith 2004) posits that all forms of knowing and understanding are partial and situated in the experience and standpoint of the knower (experiencer/observer/listener/researcher). “All thought by humans,” Harding maintains, “starts off from socially determine lives” (1993, p. 57). We cannot, consequently, know or represent the experience of others because we do not possess their knowledge, perceptions, lived experiences, and habitus. Only those who are directly impacted can represent their own lived experiences. When outsiders represent other groups, such representations misrepresent the meanings and experiences of directly impacted people. hooks (1981) adds that “knowledges from the margin” are superior to mainstream knowledges generated by the privileged and powerful. Marginalized people understand more of the world than powerful, privileged people, as they understand both the world of the dominant and the world of the oppressed. This theoretical line therefore criticizes privileged representatives and elevates the importance of knowledges and representations from directly impacted people.

Thus, intersectionality theory maintains that the process of constructing new representations to challenge “dominant codes” results in hierarchies and that such hierarchies are rampant in movements of marginalized people. Dominant factions of dominated groups (e.g., white women, Black men) produce representations that assert an “authoritative universal voice” for all, as Crenshaw argued. Because privileged actors are the cause of such hierarchies, the solution involves replacing them with directly impacted people and generating intersectional representations. However, as this article shows, the undocumented youth movement, along with other recent
movements (e.g., BLM, Occupy, among others), applied this precise solution. It resulted in a change of who dominated, but it did not eliminate the movement’s stratification along representational lines.

Symbolic Power: The Process of Producing Representational Hierarchies

To improve our understandings of such hierarchies, we turn to Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power (Bourdieu 1984, 1991, 2000; Swartz 2013; Hilgers and Mangez 2015; Burawoy 2019). Bourdieu argued that political conflicts are symbolic struggles over the legitimacy of knowledge and interpretations and categorizations of the world. He states: “Political struggle is a (practical and theoretical) cognitive struggle for the power to impose the legitimate vision of the social world, or, more precisely, for recognition, accumulated in the form of a symbolic capital of notoriety and respectability, which gives the authority to impose the legitimate knowledge of the sense of the social world, its present meaning and the directions in which it is going and should go” (Bourdieu 2000, p. 185). These are struggles over “symbolic power,” which is the power to legitimately “impose the principles of division, knowledge and recognition” within the political field (Bourdieu 2000, p. 189). Such power is reflected in the ability to construct knowledge, divide through classifications, render classifications meaningful for those inhabiting the field, and ensure that these classifications shape the perceptions and dispositions of all people.

Exercising symbolic power depends on the accumulation of “symbolic capital,” which is by its very nature unequally distributed. This form of capital is, according to Bourdieu, the “recognized authority” to construct knowledge and classifications, express views in public, and impose knowledge and classifications upon others within the field. This form of recognition stems from the accumulation of sanctioned cultural capital and authenticity. First, cultural capital can be expressed through the accumulation and use of socially valorized language, tastes, and dispositions, but it can also be expressed through consecrated forms such as academic credentials. Those who acquire valorized culture and credentials may be deemed a recognized authority and, therefore, possess symbolic capital. Second, authenticity is another important source of symbolic capital. In his study of the field of art, Bourdieu noted that 19th-century artists created their own values, forms of knowledge, aesthetics, classification schemes, and metrics of recognition (Bourdieu 1992). Artists accumulated symbolic capital by demonstrating their authentic commitment to an autonomous artistic field, as expressed through the maxim “art for art’s sake.” By contrast, producing art for the external world (i.e., the mass market) violated artistic integrity and authenticity. These “sellouts” profited economically from the sale of their work, but such financial profits came at the cost of sacrificing the symbolic capital needed to be considered legitimate within
the field of art. Thus, symbolic capital is derived from cultural capital and authenticity, as defined by a specific field.

The unequal distribution of symbolic capital gives rise to hierarchies when political representations are constructed and articulated. Activists delegate political representation to those with sufficient symbolic capital to gain recognition as legitimate subjects within the political field (Bourdieu 1984, 1991). Delegation is, Bourdieu maintains, especially pronounced in movements of marginalized people (e.g., the working poor, undocumented immigrants, etc.). Marginalized people have been heavily stigmatized, and their cultural resources devalued. This can ultimately deprive them of the cultural resources needed to gain legitimacy. Those few activists and allies who possess sanctioned cultural resources (e.g., speaking and writing skills, university education, etc.) are in a better position to accumulate symbolic capital and gain legitimacy. They are, consequently, delegated representative functions by those in their movement with less symbolic capital. “There is,” Bourdieu explains, “an inherent antimony in politics which depends on the fact that the individuals that are defenseless—are unable to constitute themselves as a group, that is, as a force capable of being heard and of speaking and of being listened to, except by dispossessing themselves in favour of the representative” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 57).

Dominant representatives enforce their symbolic power by naturalizing representations and ensuring that subordinates misrecognize hierarchies within their political movement (Bourdieu 1991). Parties, labor unions, and social movement organizations employ rallies, workshops, education, writings, and media, among other mechanisms, to inculcate constituents and members into the dominant language and knowledge of their movements. The representations produced by leaders about their constituents (e.g., the working class) become inscribed in the cognitive frameworks the represented use to see and talk about the world. Bourdieu argues that political representatives adopt strategies to mask hierarchies and bolster their legitimacy. One common strategy is the “strategy of condescension.” Bourdieu describes a scene in which an elected official from a large city addressed a deeply provincial audience in their regional language of Béarnais (1991). The elected official possessed enormous amounts of cultural capital (e.g., from the city, highly educated) but used a stigmatized language to negate the hierarchy between him and his audience. The audience was “greatly moved by this thoughtful gesture” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 68). Through the strategy of condescension, the elected official was able to both obscure the hierarchy between himself and the audience and reinforce it by making everybody aware that such displays of a “common touch” are special when employed by self-evident elites. Bourdieu explains that “the symbolic negation of hierarchy . . . enables the speaker to combine the profits linked to the undiminished hierarchy with those derived from the distinctly symbolic negation of the hierarchy” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 68). Thus, enforcement
involves naturalizing representations and obscuring the hierarchies responsible for producing them.

To summarize, social movement theory addresses the importance of frames, narratives, and identities in contentious mobilizations. Despite its sophistication, this literature does not assess how representational work generates hierarchies. To better understand such hierarchies, we go outside the traditional social movement literature and place theories of intersectionality and symbolic power into conversation with one another. Intersectionality theory suggests that such hierarchies have been endemic to social movements of marginalized people and result from dominant factions within dominated groups generating an “authoritative universal voice” based on their dominant identity. To understand the stubborn persistence of such hierarchies, we turn to Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power. His theory maintains that the process of producing legitimate representations in the political field results in hierarchies, which are particularly acute in movements of marginalized and stigmatized people. Activists delegate representational functions to those with more symbolic capital. These representatives construct representations and identities that reflect their own positioning, interests, and identities. And they enforce representations through strategic maneuverings aimed at naturalizing representations and obfuscating the hierarchies responsible for producing them. Even when a movement expresses a commitment to ensuring representational equity and inclusion (as is the case with contemporary intersectional movements), hierarchies arise because the process of producing representations favors stratification.

Representational Hierarchies in Social Movements: A Theoretical Synthesis

Utilizing these lenses of social movement scholarship, intersectional theory, and Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power thus helps us understand the emergence of new representational hierarchies and power dynamics in contemporary social movements, such as the undocumented immigrant youth movement. We draw on these literatures to make the following theoretical arguments that structure the analysis and narrative of this article.

First, representational hierarchies are generally present in social movements, but they are more acute when representations elevate one identity and silence others and when representatives are not directly impacted people (Crenshaw 1989). In such movements, the represented may question the content and exclusionary character of the representations and the legitimacy of representatives. When relations between representatives and the represented become too asymmetric, open conflicts can ensue. The represented may seek to appropriate the means of representation and generate representations that are more inclusive of their experiences. We saw such battles in the feminist
movement of the 1980s (Crenshaw 1989) and in the early days of the undocumented immigrant youth movement (Nicholls 2013a). These are, we contend, battles for symbolic power and conflicts about representational hierarchies within social movements.

Second, the battle for symbolic power prompts insurgents to construct and elevate representations and categories that reflect their own understandings of an inclusive and egalitarian political subject. In the case of the undocumented immigrant youth movement, activists drew directly from intersectionality theory, which stressed representations that reflected intersectional identities of directly impacted people. While language and practices that reflect these norms are deemed sacrosanct, language and practices that violate these norms are deemed transgressions.

Third, insurgents who accumulate symbolic capital assume the role of representatives. For the case at hand, cultural capital derived from academic experience was a crucial source of symbolic capital because of the importance of theoretical language among this group of activists. Those who could employ the language of intersectionality were in a stronger position to be recognized authorities. A second source of symbolic capital was authenticity, which was derived from being directly impacted. Those in possession of these two sources of symbolic capital could assume greater influence over the production and dissemination of representations. Although cultural capital and authenticity are two important sources of symbolic capital, they can work at cross purposes because the accumulation of one can undercut the accumulation of the other. In the case at hand, the accumulation of academic privilege could undercut the authenticity of being directly impacted. Drawing on symbolic capital from conflicting resources introduces uncertainty by rendering legitimacy vulnerable to criticism.

Fourth, leading representatives enforce new representations through mechanisms and strategic maneuverings. The primary role is to naturalize representations and obfuscate the power lines that underpin the movement. We maintain that movements struggle to strike a balance between the use of coercive and consensual methods. When enforcement is too coercive, representatives risk engendering new conflicts and generating feelings of political alienation. Such conflicts can expose the power lines underlying the movement and trigger an internal legitimacy crisis. Blowbacks such as these can precipitate readjustments and new ways to enforce rules through more consensual means. For the case of the undocumented youth movement, representatives employed two mechanisms to maintain symbolic power: calling out and calling in. The first mechanism relied on coercive methods to ensure control. These methods made many activists question the exclusionary effects of achieving the “new social contract of inclusivity.” Rather than legitimating the representational hierarchy, it exposed it and spurred conflicts. This precipitated the growing adoption of more consensual methods to
achieve control. The endurance of representational hierarchies therefore requires enforcement, but it also requires leaders to constantly adjust between coercive and consensual methods.

METHODS
The article rests on ethnographic research on the undocumented youth movement in the wider Los Angeles area in two time periods: six months in 2011–12 and six weeks in 2018. The data sample includes 36 interviews with new and experienced undocumented youth activists (ages 19–33), a document and discourse analysis of (digital and hardcopy) movement documents, and 400 hours of participant observations at activist events such as strategy meetings, media trainings, protests, rallies, press conferences, and informal meetings. (All interviews were conducted in English.)

While the main argument stems from a comparative analysis of the language, norms, representations, representatives, and practices in the undocumented immigrant youth movement during these two timeframes, most of the findings presented in this article are from the interviews conducted in 2018. This selection of findings relates to the theoretical focus of the article: understanding how new representational hierarchies form and endure irrespective of the movement’s commitment to and turn toward inclusivity, intersectionality, and equality. As mentioned earlier, whereas in the early 2010s the movement mobilized around assimilationist representations in line with the “Dreamer narrative,” at the end of the decade activists criticized these representations and embraced more intersectional and inclusive representations. Because in the 2011–12 period, the ethnographer (Fiorito) had become a genuine movement participant and had established meaningful and sustainable personal relationships with undocumented youth activists, they could not only grasp the complexity and nuance of the new representational hierarchy and dynamics of the movement after their return to the field but were also able to discuss these issues during informal conversations and formal interviews with movement participants.

The 26 formal interviews conducted in 2018 addressed a wide variety of issues including motives for joining and remaining in activism, the political development of the movement, the movement’s turn to intersectionality, experiences of inclusion and exclusion within activist circles, and processes and practices of constructing, enacting, and ensuring new representations and language. Although most interviews were performed with activists within the same metropolitan region, our findings concerning the intersectional turn of this social movement largely concur with the research of other scholars (Unzueta Carrasco and Seif 2014; Terriquez 2015; Lauby 2016; Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales 2020; Escudero 2020; Garcia Cruz 2020; Monico 2020). For instance, Escudero’s multisited ethnography of the undocumented immigrant
youth movement demonstrated how intersectionality informed the collective identities of undocumented youth activists in San Francisco, Chicago, and New York. Although the actual process of constructing new representations and identities varied according to local political context and social movement ecology, intersectionality remained an important framework across three very different cities.

The digitally recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and inductively coded and analyzed. (To protect the identities of our interviewees, we have used pseudonyms and attempted to safeguard identifying attributes.) After identifying certain themes in the open coding process, we then cross-compared our findings to look for common patterns. Through an iterative process of constant comparison, we became particularly attentive to the following issues: problems with the standard representation of “Dreamers,” the content of new representations, conditions that conferred legitimacy (and thus symbolic power) to new representatives, methods to enact and enforce new representations within the movement, and mechanisms and maneuvers to normalize representations and obfuscate the new representational hierarchy of the movement.

While quantitative methods have been extremely effective in detecting major forces driving social movements, such methods have greater difficulty detecting how activists create and derive meaning from contentious political struggles. Using political ethnography as a method therefore provides insight into how larger political structures play themselves out in local contexts, how people negotiate their political actions in their everyday lives, and how people make sense and give meaning to such actions (Auyero and Joseph 2007; Baiochhi and Connor 2008, p. 141).

ACUTE HIERARCHY AND REVOLTING REPRESENTATIONS

Our theoretical framework suggests that hierarchies are particularly acute when representations focus on one identity and silence others and representatives are not directly impacted members of a movement (Crenshaw 1989). These acute hierarchies are more prone to intramovement conflict over who should represent whom. The early years of the undocumented immigrant youth movement reflect such an acute hierarchy and the resulting struggle over the means of representation.

Undocumented immigrant youth activism exploded onto the political scene in 2010. Most of the activists had been trained by well-established nonprofit organizations (Nicholls 2013a). These organizations employed messaging that stressed that immigrant youth “deserved” legal status because of their assimilation in American life and their important contributions to the country (Lauby 2016; Fiorito 2019). The organizations also stressed that the messaging needed to be disciplined and focused. Youth activists should not, according to these organizations, talk about other grievances and identities because

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that would distract from the central message. This representation of undocumented immigrant youth came to be known as the “Dreamer narrative” (Lauby 2016). Most of those responsible for generating representations were not directly impacted by the immigration regime, and they favored representations that stressed the most “deserving” and resonant attributes of the undocumented immigrant population.

Directly impacted youth activists grew critical of three basic points of the Dreamer narrative. First, the messaging stressed that undocumented immigrant youth should not be held accountable for their immigration status. This was expressed through the phrase “no fault of their own.” By absolving youths of the guilt of illegality, the message inadvertently placed blame on their parents. Emma notes, “When we use messaging that goes ‘It’s not my fault I was brought here,’ it’s criminalizing our parents. It’s like putting the blame on our parents and I believe that’s what the opposition wants. They want to criminalize our families” (personal interview). Second, youth began to reject representations of themselves as deserving of legal status because of their cultural assimilation and economic contributions. Many felt that such a representation sharpened the boundary between supposedly deserving and undeserving immigrants. Emma notes, “So now we’re moving away from that messaging and moving forward to more inclusive messaging. We’re saying we deserve permanent protections, not because we go to school or not because we contribute to the economy, but we deserve protections and we deserve to be with our families and treated justly and right, because we are human beings” (personal interview). Third, many felt compelled to stay silent about important parts of their identities. They could not address the intersecting lines of power that shaped their lives and subjectivities. Regina recounts:

When we started the immigrant youth movement, there were a few folks that were talking about like “I’m also gay and that is an intersection in my identity. Like I can’t separate that from my immigration status and we need to talk about that.” And a lot of that in the beginning were like “Well, this is not about LGBTQ issues, this is about immigrant issues.” And some folks felt like they were not included, they were not welcome. . . . And people felt left out and people felt like that we need to create our own groups and our own movement. (personal interview)

Mariana adds that the nonprofit leadership at that time would tell youth activists, “Oh, we can’t talk about being queer, it’s just around immigrant rights right now.” These grievances reflected a broader struggle among undocumented LGBTQ people who faced the double burden of coming out on two fronts. As Maria Ramirez notes in her study, “These multiple dimensions of coming out link together to form a heavier emotional experience that includes variations of happiness, sadness, and other emotions that cannot be reduced to words” (2020, p. 155). Thus, this was a diverse and intersectional
population whose real lives exceeded the narrow representations generated by the movement’s leaders. Most existed on the economic margins, some had criminal convictions, others identified as queer and nonbinary, and many had different racial identities (Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales 2020). In many informal ethnographic conversations, differently positioned youths expressed that they did not really identify with or fit into the assimilationist Dreamer narrative, which many experienced as a normative and exclusionary straitjacket. Many argued that they had used it in the past, because they understood that it was purposefully constructed by professional activists that knew how to beat “capitalism at its own game” (Fiorito, field notes 2012).

Despite the limitations of the representation, its emphasis on immigrant youth as fully assimilated contributors to the national community resonated with broad swaths of the American public and elected officials (Nicholls 2013a). Broad support and constant mobilizations from youth activists resulted in the important policy win, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Although DACA improved the lives of recipients (Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales 2020), it also created what Fiorito (2021) has called “survivor guilt” among DACA recipients. Many undocumented youth activists reported experiences of guilt for reproducing representations that criminalized their undocumented parents and families. Their legalization came, many believed, at the expense of others. DACA came at the costs of (or in exchange for) more immigration enforcement and higher rates of detention and deportation. Survivor guilt therefore generated immense emotional turmoil and a strong aversion to noninclusive representations.

Feelings of political alienation and survivor guilt spurred youth activists to revolt against these representations and against the representatives in nonprofit organizations. The representatives were typically not undocumented immigrants or youths. But they generated dominant representations of Dreamers and denied youths the power to generate their own representations. As the clash mounted, representatives in nonprofit organizations lost their legitimacy and were increasingly viewed as a source of oppression. At this time, one of the leading voices of youth activists wrote on her blog, “Along with undocumented youth from across the country, I’ve worked to rip the DREAM Act from the clutches of the non-profit industrial complex. . . . It’s taken a whole decade to build a movement that is not hinged on the non-profit industrial complex framing our stories in ways that are damaging and containing our migrant bodies in neat boxes with pretty labels.”

Undocumented youth activists had therefore been denied the means to represent themselves and compelled to accept representations that excluded other parts of their identities. Similar concerns were bubbling up in contemporaneous social movements, which helped to reinforce the importance of

2 http://DREAMdeployed.blogspot.com/2010/10/insults-aside-issues-
representational autonomy, intersectional inclusion, and disruptive political tactics. BLM, in particular, played a special role in convincing many youths that this was the direction the movement needed to embrace. Mariana explains: “I feel Black Lives Matter . . . just really pushed a lot of conversations that needed to happen around intersectionality” (personal interview).

CONSTRUCTING INTERSECTIONAL REPRESENTATIONS

Insurgent youths asserted their symbolic power by rejecting narrow and sanitized representations and embracing intersectional and inclusive language, norms, and identities. They sought to construct new “principles of division, knowledge and recognition” (Bourdieu 2000, p. 189). As new representations grew in prominence, they provided activists with a script for how to think, talk, and feel about themselves, injustices, and their movement.

The theory of intersectionality resonated with many undocumented youth activists because it made their complex identities into a virtue and opened connections to other oppressed groups. Terriquez (2015) found that tapping into the intersectional positionality of LGBTQ undocumented youth played a strategic role in enabling the diffusion of “coming out” rituals from LGBTQ activism to the undocumented youth movement. This not only created the basis for the movement’s critical Coming out of the Shadows events but also reinforced the value of LGBTQ activism within the movement and made combating homo- and transphobia an equivalent priority (p. 359).

Inspired by intersectionality, activists believed that there were numerous and equally important power hierarchies. These overlapped in various ways to privilege some and marginalize others. Struggles for liberation must focus on addressing how all these different hierarchies combine to structure opportunities and shape the identities of individuals within a particular group. “Audre Lorde,” Mateo noted, “put it perfectly, she once said: ‘We do not live single issue lives’” (personal interview). He went on to explain, “We are so intersectional because that’s who we are as a people. Me, growing up, not only was I undocumented, but I also came to find out that I was gay and I was also poor and I was also a first-generation college student trying to go to college. It took a long time for me to see myself as whole and to say I am as much poor as I am undocumented, as I am LGBT” (personal interview). Isabela noted that intersectionality resonated strongly with her personal experience: “my skin color, where I’m from, the things that I’ve experienced” (personal interview). Such a framework means that an activist may prioritize one fight (e.g., immigration) over others but that each fight should recognize and engage in those other fights as well. Olivia noted, “I am undocumented. We do care about immigration of course, but we are a whole people and there is also so much diversity within our community, queerness, but also color, language, food, like all those things” (personal
Intersectionality allowed activists to reimagine their political subjectivities through a holistic lens, with each aspect of their subordination being equivalent to another. “So, we just want to be as inclusive and intentional of our politics,” added Mariana (personal interview).

Intersectionality raised the value of inclusion in political representations. Activists, consequently, became attentive to the ways power was enacted through everyday language. They embraced new ways of talking and expressing themselves that were, in their view, radically inclusive. For instance, in 2018, activists criticized the practice of using default gender pronouns. It was described as symbolic violence because it imposed and naturalized heteronormative, binary, and cisgender gender categories. Youth activists began to express preferred pronouns in communications with others. Isabela describes the process: “Folks are big on stating their preferred pronouns now. Whenever we have retreats, meetings, whatever it might be, folks normally start with introductions, your name, the organization you are with and your gender pronouns. That’s just to make folks conscious of how people identify, just because they might be feminine, that does not necessarily mean that they go by female pronouns” (personal interview). The use of the term “Latinx” is another prominent example of creating inclusive language. “And then, that’s really been a move in the last two years, to really think about language and be really intentional about language, even if we have to make up our own terms that everyone can agree on” (personal interview).

Activists were vigilant of exclusionary language and practices. Some questioned the “men” in women. “I know with women, it’s spelled M-E-N. So, a lot of folks don’t feel that’s inclusive” (personal interview). Consequently, in public written communication, some people used “womxn.” Others also expressed concern about colorism and racism within the immigrant community. Regina, for instance, identified the importance of white supremacy in the Latinx community. “There is this idea that being white is considered more beautiful and is more accepted. And this is also part of our structure, like white supremacy. . . . So, you want to associate yourself with whiteness. . . . Our anti-Blackness has left a lot of immigrants and refugees out of the conversation” (personal interview). Activists therefore were vigilant about how exclusionary power was expressed in everyday language and practices. They identified “problematic” language and practices and generated more inclusive ones. This was, according to Mariana, a process of continually challenging boundaries and “renegotiating” worldviews.

Intersectionality provided activists with a holistic characterization of their own political identity. They did not have to worry about silencing one aspect of their identity (e.g., queer, low-income, Black) in order to raise another (e.g., undocumented youth). Mariana related her own experience: “I feel like you’re able to have conversations that might not have been open in the past. . . . When people get that opportunity to just be their full selves,
I think it creates a lot more opportunities” (personal interview). While intersectional inclusion allowed activists to be their “full selves,” it also allowed them to identify with other activists and campaigns. Santiago described how an intersectional view allowed him to connect to others. “It became part of my experiences as I kept getting older and started expanding my boundaries and being in other spaces and connecting with other folks. And listening and not speaking and just hearing and seeing what others are saying and experiencing” (personal interview). Lastly, intersectionality allowed immigrant youth activists to see the commonalities in different and intersecting forms of oppression and resistance. The cross-cutting nature of immigration affected all communities and could be used to build coalitions. Mateo urged that “it’s not a Black issue, it’s not an API issue, it’s not a Latino issue, it’s not a LGBT issue, it’s a people issue. That we are all impacted by the same systems” (personal interview). As a result, the movement explicitly became pro-Black, proqueer, propoor, prowomxn, establishing intersectional partnerships with other (Black, queer, trans, labor) groups and mobilizing for all 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, including those with criminal convictions.

Although activists embraced intersectional theory and inclusionary representations, several highlighted problems. The effort to address all exclusions simultaneously made it difficult to prioritize issues and campaigns. Strategic prioritizing often gave way to long and emotionally intense discussions around possible problems in language and acceptable solutions. Valeria noted, “One of my frustrations is that sometimes we are so focused on intersectionality and we want to be so all-inclusive that sometimes we cannot find a common direction. And I think the more intersectional we get, the more difficult it is for us to go with a plan, to just get to an end goal. We spend hours, meetings after meetings, trying to figure out which is the most inclusive way to go, we end up arguing amongst ourselves” (personal interview). Others observed that the focus on inclusion resulted in the proliferation of new words and terms to identify exclusions. The production of new words contributed to a rapidly changing discursive landscape where the new language was perpetually replacing old language deemed violent and exclusionary. Isabela noted, “I have seen a lot of different terms and, to be honest, sometimes it’s hard to keep up with it” (personal interview). Santiago concurred, going on to note, “I’m always trying to stay ahead of the curve, in terms of like what’s not okay, or why is not okay and things are changing . . . . It’s always overwhelming because there’s so many things you have to take into account” (personal interview).

In sum, activists maintained that language was power and therefore changing language was an end goal in its own right. The use of “problematic” representations like the “Dreamer narrative” may facilitate the achievement of policy goals like DACA, but such wins were pyrrhic victories
because they reproduced symbolic hierarchies that made longer-term change impossible. These concerns made theories of intersectionality popular among these activists. These findings show that internal struggles over exclusionary representations have both helped and hindered the ultimate aims of the movement. On the one hand, an inclusive and intersectional approach has led to coalition building as more people could potentially feel represented and included by the movement, while on the other hand, too much internal discussion over priorities and language can derail activists from choosing a clear path of action and caused feelings of being overwhelmed and uncertain about what terms to use.

**SYMBOLIC CAPITAL AND A NEW REPRESENTATIONAL HIERARCHY**

A new group of activists assumed increased responsibility for producing and managing representations. These activists drew upon their symbolic capital to bolster their legitimacy and assert control over the means of representation (Bourdieu 1991). Academic-level mastery of intersectional ideas and language provided activists with cultural capital while being “directly impacted” provided an important source of authenticity. Those who could combine these resources were able to assume a prominent position in the movement’s new representational hierarchy. Positioning in this hierarchy was, however, conflicted. Activists viewed privilege largely as a stigma, but academic experience was itself a privilege that could be converted into other privileges including middle-class jobs, partners with citizenship status, and broader social networks. The accumulation of privileges took activists further away from being directly impacted, which could in turn devalue their symbolic capital and undermine positioning in the representational hierarchy. This dilemma compelled conflicted actors to use various tactics to preserve their symbolic capital and positioning in the movement.

The Sources of Symbolic Capital

Creating and enacting inclusionary language was difficult, and not everybody was equally prepared to do it. For many, discriminatory categories and language were naturalized and inscribed in the cognitive frames that peopled used to evaluate the world. Discriminatory categories and language constituted the normal ways in which people saw and talked about the world, which made it difficult to adopt more inclusive categories and language (Bourdieu 1991). Unseasoned activists had more difficulty recognizing “problematic” normalized hegemonic (e.g., heteronormative, gender-binary, assimilationist, patriarchal, capitalist) language and practices. Some activists were also expected to adopt and master new expressions, terms, narratives, behaviors,
and manners. Failing to effortlessly use a correct term or mannerism could mark an activist as having uncertain commitment to the values of the movement. Reworking language and practices was therefore difficult, and not everybody was equipped with the capital and skills to undertake the process. Mateo explained: “As a people who have always been surviving, to relearn, to unlearn a lot of unhealthy habits and even forms of thinking that have been informed by media and by what people at the federal level say about us . . . it’s like, let me unlearn that and let me unpack that to create the environment that I want. And sometimes, that’s a challenge, because we might not have the skills for that” (personal interview). Mateo stressed that ways of thinking and talking were habitual (“unhealthy habits”), certain skills were needed to unlearn and relearn, and these skills were not universally accessible (“we might not have the skills”).

Knowledge of intersectional theory and language was one such skill needed to relearn more inclusive and egalitarian mental habits. “I feel like when you don’t have the theory or the understanding of intersectionality,” one activist noted, “you don’t know how to react appropriately to the time” (personal interview). Intersectional theory and understandings were not equally accessible. It depended on majoring in certain disciplines (e.g., gender studies, ethnic studies, Chicano studies, sociology, etc.) at strong universities. For two to four years, activists attending such programs gained intense training in the skills (i.e., theory, authors, terms, attitudes, etc.) needed to deconstruct language and adopt new ways of speaking and behaving. Immersion of students into this culture inculcated new skills, practices, language, and thought, making their political performances habitual and second nature. Activists who did not attend university or majored in other disciplines often struggled to keep up. Jose, for instance, recounted his experience: “I went to school to be a nurse. You don’t learn about the terms that you’re supposed to use. I feel like a lot of the people that do immigrant rights organizing do a Chicano/Chicana major, or gender and sexuality major. I came from a different background” (personal interview). Jose’s education placed him at a disadvantage because it didn’t teach him “about the terms that you’re supposed to use.” Knowledge of intersectional theory, talk, and practices was therefore acquired through certain university programs. Those who could master the new discourse and practices enjoyed greater legitimacy and influence in the movement.

More inexperienced activists learned the new rules of the discursive game through their more skilled and better educated comrades. Jose explained, “For me, most of the learning has been through this space, right. When we have our meetings, people would bring in different perspectives and, through that, I was able to learn” (personal interview). Others learned the new language by attending trainings organized by activists with extensive experience. Mateo recounted how such a training helped him recognize the
multiple systems of oppression. “I’m in such a privileged position. I’ve had mentors who have invested in me, who have provided me with leadership opportunities, have sent me to trainings around systems of oppression and how I manifest those in my male privilege” (personal interview). The knowledge needed to detect oppressive structures and how they manifest in practices and words therefore required academic training. Those who did not have that training depended on those who did, which in turn magnified the value of the more skilled activists and their academic capital.

Education therefore provided certain activists with intersectional language and skills, which in turn augmented their symbolic capital. This created a divide between those people who had the relevant academic experience and those who didn’t. Those who had this experience became the delegated representatives of the movement (Bourdieu 1984, 1991). Mariana explained: “Intersectionality . . . sometimes does get very theoretical and I think a lot of our community members are practicing . . . those theories already. And sometimes folks don’t have the language to express, or the same language that is used in the movement world. Folks are looked down on, or they are not taken as seriously when it is they who should be taken the most serious. That’s my biggest issue; it has become very academic. We can have debates, cool, but for me, it’s like, how does that play out in real life and how are we connecting it?” (personal interview). As the movement’s language became “very academic,” those with a certain quantity (e.g., number of school years) and quality of academic capital (e.g., social sciences and humanities) possessed the resources needed to gain the esteem of other activists in the movement. They could effortlessly unpack the problematic language and practices, employ sophisticated ideas and terms in meetings, and display all the markers (e.g., taste, opinions, intonations, mannerisms, etc.) of elevated political consciousness. Those lacking academic experience had greater difficulty. Their behavior, dispositions, and use of language betrayed them and signaled a deficit in political consciousness. These people, most of whom were the most marginalized immigrants in their communities, were, according to Mariana, “looked down on.” Just as taste and bodily dispositions are markers of class distinction in broader systems of social stratification (Bourdieu 1984), so too are words markers of political and social status.

Most activists clearly saw the disparities in academic capital, but they took different and sometimes contradictory stances on them. Many recognized the exclusionary effects of academic capital (e.g., “looked down on”) and were open to critical discussions of the movement’s hierarchical tendencies. Many also sought to address these disparities by turning to academically privileged comrades to share their scarce and valued knowledge through trainings, meetings, mentorships, and consciousness-raising sessions. This latter approach contributed to legitimating academic knowledge as a valued resource and legitimating the elevated position of those who possessed

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this resource. Most activists therefore recognized the hierarchies emerging in their movement, but many held onto contradictory views on what these hierarchies meant for the movement and how they could be addressed.

In addition to academic capital, authenticity was another source of symbolic capital, and it was derived from being “directly impacted by systems of oppression.” Those who are directly impacted by systems of oppression are often stigmatized (Goffman 1963; Bourdieu 1991; Lamont and Mizrachi 2012). As “negative symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1991), stigma naturalizes oppression and undercuts the legitimacy of oppressed people to be recognized as legitimate political subjects. However, the undocumented immigrant youth movement inverted this symbolic system by making oppression and stigma into sources of pride and authenticity. Oppression and stigma, in other words, were transformed into a positive source of symbolic capital. Regina described the value derived from stigma like “queer” and “illegal”:

A lot of immigrant youth were saying: I’m queer. And then you have the older LGBTQ, like gay folks that are saying: “Why are you saying queer? It was a derogatory term. You don’t say that.” And then for like a lot of immigrant youth they are like: “No, we own this. We want to change the way that term is used, and we want to take ownership of it.” And now, I don’t know if you realize, but the term is: “I am Illegal.” The term illegal is now being used by immigrant youth as a way to own that term. But some of the younger ones, some of the most politicized, more revolutionary ones will say: “I am illegal and what?” And that’s quite empowering to say like: “You know what, I am an illegal alien, who cares, you’re not oppressing.” (personal interview)

By embracing “illegal,” activists transformed a marker of shame into a source of pride, honor, and authenticity. This process was, according to Regina, performed by the most politicized, knowledgeable, and skilled activists.

Claiming stigma and oppression enhanced legitimacy and standing within the struggle. Jose explained: “Like the more oppressed you are within a social justice space, I guess the cooler you are” (personal interview). He went on to give an example of recent claims to indigenous culture: “It’s just interesting coming into these spaces and seeing everyone growing their long hair or doing things that they think are indigenous. . . . And yeah, I feel like they are trying to take ownership of it. And I feel like a lot of the times it is just like a façade” (personal interview). Laura noted that oppression and stigma were sometimes deployed as ways to validate a person’s point of view. “I think people feel like they want to validate their perspective so much that they rely on that. And I think to an extent it is important for us to hear those perspectives. And at a point where we start to use that as a way to gain power, I think that’s where it becomes problematic. I think it’s manipulative” (personal interview). Thus, the active embrace of stigma and oppression became important sources of symbolic capital that helped to fortify
the positioning of certain activists within the movement. When coupled with academic capital, being directly impacted could enhance legitimacy and boost positioning within the movement. Consequently, the need to involve directly impacted people and the most stigmatized members of the undocumented community became a widespread and often reiterated “good practice” within the movement. For instance, at an ICE out of LA open community meeting—a coalition of more than 20 organizations—people were repeatedly informed by differently positioned undocumented youth activists to “listen to and work with folks who are directly impacted” (field notes, 2018).

The Dilemmas of Privilege

The concept of privilege was a central construct for evaluating intersectional power. Privilege was expressed in many different ways, including heterosexual identity, cis gender, male, middle class, authorized immigration status or citizenship, whiteness, and so on. Displays of privilege could count against activists. Antonio commented, “Even amongst ourselves, our communities, you’re like: ‘Oh my god, you’ve got privilege.’ And people will interpret it like that’s a bad thing” (personal interview). Another activist remarked that she had been in long relationship with a cis gender, middle-class, white man. Dating somebody with accumulated privileges, according to her, undercut her positioning within the movement. During the breakup, she recounts that she told him, “I lost movement points for you, dating a white guy while fighting” (personal interview). A similar experience of “losing points” through privilege is shared by Cindy while having lunch: “That family feeling that other people talk about, I never had that in the movement. I think it is because of my privilege, I mean, being white and having a white partner with citizenship status” (field notes, 2018).

Accumulating privileges could come at the cost of undermining one’s legitimacy—or diminishing “movement points”—within the movement. Several veteran activists adjusted their immigration status either through DACA, marriage, or other means. For Mateo, the acquisition of permanent residency status contributed to a demotion in the movement from vocal activist to a supportive ally.

I adjusted my status after 24 years in this country and I had to understand that I was no longer undocumented. That I would be viewed as an ally. And to have been undocumented for 24 years of my life, it seemed strange to me, but the reality is that I have different opportunities and privileges, because of my status. And that change of status, where I could say that I’m undocumented, but technically I’m not. And I have to respect that. And I still fight for undocumented people, because nobody is going to take that identity from me, but I have to be conscious of the road that I walk and make sure that I give space to undocumented people to speak on their lived experiences. (personal interview)
Regina recounted a similar experience following the regularization of her immigration status: “I’m not undocumented. I have purposefully said I don’t have a place and I’m not going to take up space of people who are directly impacted and want to move in a certain way” (personal interview). For both Mateo and Regina, gaining privilege in one direction (authorization to reside in the country) contributed to challenging their position in the movement. Activists expressed concern about acquiring other privileges besides legal status. For instance, lighter-skinned activists had the privilege of “passing” in white America. Laura noted, “People always tell me that I can pass for white. I feel like, not like I’m betraying my community, but they have this sense of power” (personal interview). Others expressed concern about the possession of material goods. Jose remarked, “I feel guilty even saying I want to buy a nice car…. For me it has been like an internal conflict of trying to balance. I still say I’m undocumented and that I’m queer, but also not completely fall into like completely having to follow a certain path” (personal interview).

Possessing privilege did not automatically result in a loss of legitimacy and influence. It induced feelings of guilt (Fiorito 2021) and created a sense of uncertainty that movement adversaries could use their privilege to call them out. Privilege in this sense did not disqualify activists from leadership. It simply made them more vulnerable to disqualification. Feelings of guilt and uncertainty compelled many activists to employ various tactics to address the dilemma of privilege. In several cases, activists chose to reject the accumulation of privilege outright. For instance, several activists would forego legal status to maintain their undocumented identity and standing in the movement. Olivia recounted one such case:

I think that’s part of the unhealthy culture we have in organizing. It goes back to people who become citizens and feeling some shame or guilt about that, which is crazy, but I understand it. I know somebody who got married for real, with love, and has not submitted their application because they are afraid to lose their undocumented identity, like belonging to the undocumented community. He’s amazing, he’s an organizer, he’s a beautiful person. And it pisses me off so much that we are doing that to each other, without wanting to. (personal interview)

Olivia expressed disappointment, but she also “understands” such a decision and expressed respect for him. Another example of rejecting privilege is Mariana’s breakup with her boyfriend because his privileges (cis gender male, white, middle class) posed a problem for her positioning within the movement. By ending the relation to the boyfriend and his accumulated privileges, Mariana was able to regain lost “social movement points.” Other activists obfuscated their privilege. Just as people of color sometimes hide stigma to “pass” in society (Alexander 2006), some activists masked their privilege in order to maintain their good standing in the movement. Jose
remarked, “I feel like now, more people are scared to say they have some sort of privilege” (personal interview).

While privilege could potentially damage an activist’s legitimacy and reduce influence within the movement, skilled activists could gain social movement points by calling attention to their own privileges and encouraging others to keep them in check. With a similar logic to Bourdieu’s “strategy of condescension” (1991), this jiujitsu-like strategy converted a weakness (privilege) into a strength (checking one’s own privilege). Facundo had attended a prestigious university, married a citizen, obtained legal permanent residency through his spouse, worked at a prominent nonprofit organization, and purchased a house. By calling out his own accumulated privileges, he was able to bolster his own standing within the movement: “I’m definitely middle class. What I would say is that when we feel uncomfortable . . . , it’s because we haven’t fully accepted the new terms, the new social contract of inclusivity. I don’t mind asking people for gender pronouns. . . . I don’t mind being checked if I’m using my male power, my male privilege. But other people might not be there and, therefore, feel uncomfortable or challenged” (personal interview). Facundo openly identified his privileges and invited people to check him when he abused those privileges. He then suggested that others may not be willing to check their own privileges because they did not accept “the new social contract of inclusivity.” Mateo employs the same strategy. He calls out his own privilege while simultaneously retaining directorship over a prominent organization for undocumented immigrant youth. “I can’t speak on that experience in this current moment in time, even though I did have DACA. I let my staff, who are current recipients of DACA, have that conversation. I always continue to assess my positionality and how I provide opportunity to speak on issues that they are directly impacted on” (personal interview). In both instances, Facundo and Mateo transform their weakness (various privileges) into a strength by calling themselves out and demonstrating full compliance with the “new social contract of inclusivity.” More established and skilled activists are better equipped to employ this jiujitsu-like tactic. Clumsier and less-skilled activists would have greater difficulty with the delicate strategy, increasing the risk of it backfiring on them.

To summarize, the accumulation of symbolic capital was crucial for creating new representatives. Academic experience provided activists with the theory and language to construct new representations, and being directly impacted provided the authenticity to speak on behalf of the broader group. Activists with these attributes accumulated “social movement points” and rose to prominence in the new representational hierarchy. However, this new hierarchy presented activists with a dilemma. An activist rose in the social movement due in part to their ability to draw on academic privilege. Academic privilege could be converted into other privileges like middle-class
jobs and housing and resources for the legalization of immigration status, which then created a sense of guilt and undercut activists’ abilities to claim the direct impact of oppression. This risked the loss of “social movement points” and made activists vulnerable to callouts and disqualification. Uncertainty placed increasingly privileged activists in an uneasy position. Some chose to reject privilege and stay directly impacted, others masked their privilege, and still others turned the weakness of privilege into a strength by checking and reflecting on their privilege and stressing how they used their acquired privilege for the benefit of others in the movement. Not all tactics were equally available to all activists. Those with more skill, experience, and knowledge of the movement’s language were in a stronger position to employ the latter tactic, while lesser skilled activists were more compelled to simply hide those privileges that placed them at risk.

**COERCIVE ENFORCEMENT**

New intersectional and inclusive representations and practices contributed to what Facundo referred to as the “new social contract of inclusivity.” This contract was enforced through various mechanisms. One enforcement mechanism was calling out. It was more coercive and punitive than other mechanisms because public shaming was key to ensuring compliance. Although effective, this mechanism could also induce feelings of political alienation and lead many activists to recognize the exclusionary consequences of their inclusionary efforts. Rather than legitimating and obscuring underlying power relations, this enforcement mechanism exposed them and made them into a source of open conflict.

Enforcing the New Social Contract of Inclusivity by Holding Activists Accountable

Calling out is the practice of publicly denouncing somebody for having violated political norms, values, and rules. Immigrant youth activists historically called out elected representatives and the leadership of nonprofit organizations for their inability to effectively represent youth interests and demands. Regina described the practice: “Certain individuals, very progressive, very politicized individuals who call out publicly legislators, nonprofits, or individuals for being maybe what they think is sell-outs, what they believe is not true advocates for the immigrant rights community, who are willing to compromise” (personal interview). Within this social movement, there was no formal procedure for holding leaders accountable. Moreover, in the early days, organizational leaders were oftentimes far removed from frontline activists. These conditions made calling out leaders for failures—in social media,
meetings, public forums—an important mechanism to convey grassroots grievances and hold leaders accountable.

Calling out was also used to check other activists when they violated “the new social contract of inclusivity.” Their transgressions were addressed in social media, organizations, meetings, and through personal networks. Public shaming was intended to punish and discipline transgressors. Miguel described a callout process:

Calling out is, if we were here tonight and I cause some sort of violence, I hurt you in some way, I engage in sexism or homophobia or racism, you will go and use social media as a platform to use my name and say what it is that I did and what I am. “Miguel then said this and therefore, he’s a racist, homophobic, sexist.” . . . And then, in every platform that you have, whether it is through your meetings, organizations, and so on, you utilize that to again say the same thing. And then, making sure that you shame people that are my friends, that I am working with, shame them for working with me. (personal interview)

Calling out was thus also directed at close friends of the accused in an effort to isolate them. Callout campaigns therefore unfolded across social media, organizations, activist spaces, and personal networks, with the aim of exerting maximum pressure on the transgressor and reiterate the “new social contract of inclusivity.” In one example, one activist called out two other activists because they failed to mention them in a report on a prominent project. Regina recounted that “these other immigrant youth folks took that idea. They now have a business, like they are getting money. They get paid to put stuff out there. They have a huge base. And they got called out. [They] called them out. And others called them out” (personal interview). The aggrieved activist went on to describe the callout: “I did a whole rant on Facebook, because I was like super angry. I was like, here’s the updated version of the article, praising [the project]. And then I wrote, ‘I’m just tired of men taking credit for women’s work’” (personal interview). The callout triggered a social media storm, with many other activists denouncing the behavior of the two transgressors.

Callouts were not all large, public campaigns. Many callouts were for a onetime transgression. These were smaller interventions intended to modify problematic behavior or words. Laura provided the following example: “I made the mistake of saying: ‘How can we help these clients,’ instead of saying directly impacted people. And there was a colleague from another organization that just completely grilled me. And I felt very . . . It was uncomfortable and I think I struggled with that for a while, because I was like, ‘Well I care about these people. I don’t see them as clients.’ And so, I feel there’s definitely a learning curve that happens when you enter into these spaces” (personal interview). Another example occurred during a Coming Out of the Shadows event in Orange County, where someone was called out for using the “Dreamer narrative.” After a student said: “I’m a student, I’m an American,
I speak Korean, but I don’t know anything about that country,” she was publicly called out on stage by another student. “That Dreamer testimony is actually really problematic, as it creates a division between the good and the bad immigrant. We should also care about people who do not qualify for DACA or weren’t able to study” (field notes, 2018).

Isabela gave another example of a smaller callout directed at her. In preparation for a workshop on gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation, she downloaded a template for activities. She recounted: “And someone pointed out; ‘Hey, just letting you know, the person that put together this template, is extremely problematic. Their ideologies are actually not progressive’ ” (personal interview).

Calling out was, some activists suggested, important because it held individuals accountable and created awareness about the “new social contract of inclusivity.” Miguel noted, “The strategy is to ensure that people are safe, that there is awareness about an issue and the idea is for people to be held accountable, then yes” (personal interview). Mateo went on to specify:

For me accountability, a lot of folks always see it in a negative light, where I’m going hold you accountable. And I was like, yes, hold me accountable. . . . Accountability is an effort on behalf of everyone that is part of that circle, that team, that community. And recognizing that our intent, when we come to these circles, is to hold each other accountable to creating a good movement, environment, culture. And when that doesn’t happen, it’s about creating the strategies to be able to ensure that we mitigate issues and that we have honest conversations to then move our communities in a state of power and influence and justice. (personal interview)

Calling out was therefore viewed by some as a legitimate accountability mechanism. “Called out means,” Teresa explains, “that they are being told you did this and that you need to make it better” (personal interview). By publicly calling out activists’ large and small transgressions, activists believed that the larger group would adopt more progressive words and practices. Laura, who had once experienced the sting of being called out herself, recounted, “Sometimes when you address it publicly, it benefits the larger groups and they all develop a larger understanding” (personal interview).

Some activists note that being called out was a good experience because it allowed them to identify problems and develop better language and practices. Frank recounted that being called out helped him realize a part of himself: “But that’s one of the beautiful things that I found out. . . . I had a lot of my colleagues just point me out, call me out on that. ‘Hey, your masculinity, or your machismo, is preventing you from so many great amazing things.’ And before I didn’t see it that way” (personal interview). Frank went on to note that while it was painful, it provided him an opportunity to grow:

I felt like, wow, how shameful. I can’t believe I was thinking that way. But later I transformed that into a positive thing. It’s helping me become a better
human being. And I just felt a lot better actually, going through that moment. When you realize, it was very painful. When you realize, you were like that, it’s a lot of shame and guilt. . . . But the next stage is, at least for me, relief and, okay, this is helping me become a better human being. A good kind of learning. It is painful. (personal interview)

Others note that even though they had not been called out, they learned from the process. Teresa also stresses the pedagogical function of calling out: “I think, in one way, it’s good to teach people, not teach, but check somebody. It’s also called checking somebody; check yourself. You need to know the words that are inappropriate, or there is behavior that is not okay, or it’s abusive or whatever, or the language that you are using is not right” (personal interview). Mariana recounts how people confronted her because of her past framing of immigrant youth as Dreamers and “deserving immigrants.” “I had someone who called me out to my face: ‘Mariana, when I saw you on TV talking about Dreamers, I felt offended, because that was really fucked up.’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, that’s true . . .’ I think because I’m so used to feedback, I was just like, ‘Okay, cool!’” (personal interview). When asked whether Isabela has been called out, she responds by saying, “I have a few times. And I don’t mind. It take me a while” (personal interview). In these and other instances, the targets of callouts viewed it as a valid way to hold them accountable. The experience was, in the words of Frank, “A good kind of learning.”

The Downside of Calling Out: Alienation and Conflict

Activists also noted that there were serious downsides to calling out. These included using it as an instrument of power, policing the language and behavior of individuals, destroying reputations, and pushing activists away from the movement. Calling out could result in feelings of political alienation and conflicts between actors, exposing the power lines underlying the new hierarchy and leading many to question the legitimacy of the new leadership. Several activists noted that calling out was driven by people who were intent on improving their own power in the social movement. Some called out others because they viewed them as rivals or did not want to work with them. Miguel noted, “I think that it is a tool that can be manipulated” (personal interview). He added that “there have been instances where it has been used to harm others, to try to get rid of them, dispose of them. It’s an easy tool to get rid of them, dispose them and throw them out and no one ever work with them.” Some activists called out others to demonstrate their own political virtue, which in turn improved their standing in the movement. “I feel like self-righteous people do it,” observed Teresa (personal interview). Regina largely agreed, noting “all those individuals that put themselves up on a pedestal. Like, I’m all woke and I’m all conscious
and I’ll never make that mistake” (personal interview). Isabela recounted that one activist repeatedly called out others for not being radical enough. “I don’t really talk to [him]. He has not been kind. He’s been very rude to me and other people. I think he’s one of those folks who constantly accuses people of not being radical enough. He’s always been like that” (personal interview). She went on:

Yeah, lots of shaming. I think people have been trying to figure out who’s more radical. ‘So, you’re not a radical, because of this.’ And it’s like, ‘Okay, dude, everyone’s at different levels.’ Sometimes making people feel bad because they are not at your level, whatever that means. And it’s because they haven’t had the resources, so it’s a lot of that. . . . And as a person of color, you shouldn’t have to correct people all the time. And we might not even waste a lot of time on it. (personal interview).

Isabela suggested that calling out allowed well-positioned activists to maximize their status and legitimacy by highlighting the mistakes of those with less standing and fewer resources. Lastly, she noted that calling out others can be a tactic to deflect accountability. “I think that sometimes people have started to utilize . . . to just escape accountability. You know, saying: ‘Well, you are being racist, and you are being entitled.’ And sometimes I’m like: ‘Well, that’s because you are a shitty person.’ People have used that to just escape accountability” (personal interview). In certain instances, calling out allows activists to demonstrate virtue by denigrating others and deflecting accountability.

Some activists believed that calling out created an environment of heavy social control. Cecilia commented on the irony of heavy self-policing in a social movement that was antipolice. “I’m all for disrupting language, specifically, when it comes to like women and gender, but I do agree that sometimes it’s almost like people are policing each other. We’re antipolicing and antipolice. So, why are we doing that to each other?” (personal interview). Like Cecilia, Teresa was ambivalent about calling people out or forcing them to check their privilege. It was important to ensure accountability, but it also generated excessive controls:

Doing it constantly, constantly, constantly, it’s tiring. Let me live, let me live my life. It needs to be more proactive. “Okay, you did something wrong, but let’s move forward, what’s the next thing.” I try to apply it in my life, like if I do something wrong, it’s like; okay, let’s not dwell on this, what’s the next thing. Next time, I should not do this. You know, it’s almost like a ritualistic thing you need to do. You did this wrong and you need to do this better, to improve yourself. That process needs to be respected, you cannot impose your ideas on somebody that does not know anything about it. They can learn about it. I feel like you need to allow people to have that space. (personal interview)

While recognizing the importance of improving language and practices, Teresa also noted that activists should be provided the space to engage that
process on their own. Heavy policing can deprive the space needed for political growth.

Callout campaigns can also be very harmful because they can tarnish reputations inside and outside the movement. Miguel, for instance, was called out by his ex-girlfriend who took issue with the age of his new girlfriend. This had a devastating impact on his reputation:

My previous girlfriend called me out, saying that I was taking advantage of younger women. This woman [the new girlfriend] idolized me, and I was using that as a tool to take advantage of her. And yeah, pretty much that I was a predator for going after her. However, they never reached out to her [the new girlfriend], asking if she was okay and safe. No one did. And they used social media as a way to do that [the callout]. What hurt me the most is that she [the ex-girlfriend] was still friends with my siblings. When she wrote that, my siblings and family saw that. They [the accusers] said that I would go after younger women without giving them agency. . . . And this affected her [the new girlfriend] too. She started feeling like, “What the heck, why don’t I exist? Why are you not asking me about my opinions?” I think their goal was not to make sure that she was safe. It was just to shame me. I think that was where it was coming from. So that followed me for a long time. So, I started feeling scared about my job. Friends stopped talking to me. For example, Mariana doesn’t talk to me. William doesn’t talk to me. Facundo and Hector, they reached out to me, to ask what’s going on. . . . That followed for one year. Even this past summer, I got a job as a deputy director for a nonprofit in Las Vegas, a good paying job. And someone reached out to them to tell them to be careful with me because I take advantage of younger women. (personal interview)

The long passage reveals that a callout is a collective affair. It begins on social media and then works through one’s social networks, damaging one’s reputation and forcing friends and old comrades to distance themselves from the accused. Moreover, the destruction of reputations has a lasting effect that can travel far beyond one’s hometown. Miguel was tagged as a sexual predator, and that reputation followed him to Las Vegas. Another activist, Antonio, recounted how gossip circulated about him. “It was getting out of hand, because people who weren’t directly involved were spreading rumors and they were serious. They were saying that I was bullying someone. But they were also saying stuff like, don’t let me catch him on the street or they’re going to . . .” (personal interview).

Calling out contributed to the estrangement of several activists from the movement. Some were nervous and self-conscious in political spaces out of fear of saying or doing something wrong. Valeria, a longtime activist, noted that she did not know how to operate in these spaces. “I guess I don’t know how to interact in that space, just because I get too self-conscious. I feel like if I say something, it might make someone else feel uncomfortable” (personal interview). Other activists simply pulled out of activism altogether, having felt the sting of being called out. Miguel, for instance, reported, “I was like, I’m done with this, I am going to take a step back, I’m going to take care
of myself . . . . And so now, I am thinking, okay, this happened to me, this happened to a lot of other people, because of toxic behavior, because of the callout culture” (personal interview). Laura opined, “I don’t agree with that whole calling-out culture, because it is not productive and only alienates people rather than helping them to understand your message and encouraging them to build solidarity with what you are trying to move forward” (personal interview). Hortencia added, “I think the callout culture doesn’t create the safe space that a lot of organizations aim for. I now always say we want to create a safe space and definitely calling out is not something that can make someone feel safe for what they are going to share” (personal interview). Many activist spaces, Miguel noted, have become “toxic.” Rather than empowering activists and raising their emotional energy, they have increased stress and anxiety. He explained:

You make it just unbearable for people to be there. That you just take over the space, the leadership role, you don’t allow people to participate, you push people out. That’s a toxic environment. When you go in there, you feel stress. You remember the meetings that felt like empowering and collective and energy raising. It’s like the total opposite of that. You go into the space, and you walk out of there feeling stressed, feeling drained, questioning like what am I doing there. Maybe it’s even affecting your mental health, going there, then that’s definitely a toxic environment and a toxic culture too. (personal interview)

When calling out predominates in these social movement spaces, activists feel uncertain and anxious about what to say. It denies activists from “having a safe space and people feeling comfortable to engage in the org and continue learning and becoming” (personal interview).

In sum, calling out other activists was an important mechanism to learn and enforce the new language and representations of the movement. However, many reported that calling out damaged reputations, contributed to a culture of self-policing, and alienated some from the movement. These consequences were not meted out equally. Those with more (academic) resources and experience were better equipped to use the correct language and practice. They were also better equipped to dissimulate problematic behavior. Those activists with fewer resources and experience were more prone to have “unhealthy habits” and say problematic things, opening themselves up to the criticisms of their comrades. Their lack of experience also denied them the skills to navigate the twists and turns of the movement and deflect criticisms directed at them. For many, calling out became a counterproductive mechanism to ensure compliance because it spurred conflicts and feelings of political alienation. Rather than enforcing the new social contract of inclusivity, conflicts and political alienation exposed the representational hierarchy and undermined its legitimacy. As Isabella clearly observed, “People have used that to just escape accountability” (personal interview).
CONSENSUAL ENFORCEMENT

Recognizing the limits of calling out, many activists embraced the softer enforcement methods associated with calling in. This mechanism consisted of various methods including transformative justice sessions, accountability sessions, community agreements, and identity circles. At the center of calling in was the communication of core ideas, knowledge, and practices to new activists. Mateo explained, “Calling in is saying; ‘I heard what you said. I don’t see it that way and I am going to communicate why. I want to hear your side and let’s have a conversation around it.’ It’s not shaming. It’s let’s have a conversation, an open-minded conversation to hopefully get us on the same page” (personal interview). The aim is to socialize activists into the rules and values of the movement without the use of shame and ostracism. Emma added that the goal was to help them understand rather than making them understand: “I think it’s about what we like to call calling in, versus calling out, and meeting people where they are and understanding that people come from different backgrounds and experiences and not everyone is going to be, perhaps as knowledgeable with something you’re trying to communicate. It’s really about trying to communicate information in a way that people understand and make sure that the goal is to help them understand, not to make them understand. And hopefully unify our message in that way” (personal interview; emphasis added). Hortencia employed a similar formulation to describe calling in. “Because you can give feedback to someone, but you can say it in an inclusive way. For them to learn something new, rather than letting them know that they are wrong, and they are not as woke as you are. I think we are all at a different level and we can’t expect everyone to understand everything in the space” (personal interview). Calling in aimed to use communication to ensure that more knowledgeable activists impart categories, language, practices, and values to less knowledgeable activists. As Emma noted above, “Not everyone is going to be, perhaps as knowledgeable with something you’re trying communicate” (personal interview). While calling out failed to take differentiated knowledge into account, calling in places the hierarchy of knowledge at the center. Calling out uses force and shame to make people understand, while calling in uses communication to educate less knowledgeable activists in the language, practices, and values of the movement. Calling-in practices are gentler lessons in movement culture. Another example took place during a different ICE out of LA open community event. After the event had finished and the room was emptying out, activist Isabela was still talking to a group of about 15 immigrant Latinx women of color, sitting in a circle and discussing matters in Spanish. The group stood out as most people at the meeting were lighter skinned, white, or Asian and spoke English. The next day, while asking Isabela about this group, she explained, “They
are called the ‘Collectivo’ and are part of a leadership program for undocumented, uneducated women. Yesterday, I spent quite some time explaining why we do the thing with the preferred pronouns and that some people identify as nonbinary” (field notes, 2018).

This example shows that call-ins could consist of a dialogue with more marginalized members of the community to include them within the movement and help them understand the new language and norms of the movement. But call-ins could also consist of a quick talk with a transgressor or formal intervention sessions like transformative justice or accountability sessions or an undocucircle. During the second fieldwork period (in 2018), there were five different transformative justice sessions happening in which undocumented youth activists were involved. At the center of such sessions stood the person who perpetrated the transgression and the person who called attention to that act. Laura, who had been trained as a facilitator for these sessions, described it as “the person who has committed the injury, the person who has been injured, come together” (personal interview). These two people needed to agree to come together to discuss the issue at hand. Once they did, others (their respective support systems) arranged themselves in a circle around them (sometimes the circle is called a healing circle). Antonio explained that “we hold a circle with the people that have been harmed and the perpetrators of the harm and you go around, and you talk about it in a structured way”(personal interview). A symbolic “talking piece” was an object endowed with some form of symbolic value. It was then used to give participants a turn to speak.

At the start, there was a “grounding” that consisted of a meditative moment that allowed participants to center their thoughts. The grounding also helped participants formulate a “community agreement” or ground rules of the session. “Some of those agreements,” Laura noted, “can be like respecting the talking piece, speaking your truth; ensuring that people are not censuring themselves when they are speaking; speaking with I statements and not saying ‘we felt,’ but speaking for yourself” (personal interview). Once the actual session began, a mediator helped guide questions, remind participants of the agreed-upon rules, and guide the communicants. Antonio noted, “What is interesting is that you actually ask a specific question. People are asked, ‘What is the specific harm?’ It helps people to get to the root and it also gives time for people to respond, to be like, ‘This is why this has happened, what do I take responsibility for.’ Obviously, sometimes, because it is part of accountability, some people can push back. And that’s why in a circle you can address that. ‘Cause a lot of the times it’s people in power that harm others” (personal interview). He went on to note the importance of having other people attend the session. “The space is hard to conduct without support. We talk about the harm that is done, but also getting other people’s perspectives, so maybe you see a pattern” (personal interview). Participants could serve as corroborating
witnesses who support the injured party or injuring party. This, according to Antonio, could help the accused realize the nature of their transgression. At times, Antonio noted, these sessions led to an epiphany. “Oh wow, I didn’t see that. I was doing that because of this. And then it’s like, ‘Okay, why did this happen?’ And you brainstorm and you figure it out” (personal interview). Laura described her role as a mediator in one of these sessions:

One thing I was able to mediate was the . . . Coalition. Someone brought up that they felt that there were certain power dynamics that were taking place, certain privileges that people maybe weren’t aware of. I was able to walk us through some of that. . . . We had some sort of community agreements, I developed guiding questions and we all were able to speak about the privileges that we had coming into that space. And talking about how we felt that those privileges were positive, how is it that we can use our privilege to uplift others. From what I understand, folks in the coalition space really felt that that was powerful. And we’re more cognizant of those things now moving forward in those spaces. (personal interview)

These sessions used intensive communication to identify the specific issue and restore equilibrium within the group. As somebody who had experienced such a session as a perpetrator, Antonio recounted, “It’s really beautiful. And me in particular, I’m being part of a process, because there were call-outs on Facebook about some of the things I had done as well.” In spite of his generally positive experience, he added, “Some things I felt were exaggerated” (personal interview).

Mediators and facilitators assumed an important role in these sessions. Many either had professional experience in social work and related fields or had acquired the skill through their work in conflict resolution in the movement. It had become an increasingly skilled and quasi-professional position. One prominent facilitator was Juliana. Olivia recounted Juliana’s role as a facilitator. “I don’t know if you met Juliana. She was leading the undocucircles. . . . There would be like circle keepers [facilitators] and the circle keepers would have their own therapy circle, ‘cause you got to unload in that too. . . . She’s one of my badass friends who has helped engrain in me like ‘organizing needs to center healing’” (personal interview). Juliana also facilitated a session with Mariana. Mariana used the gender-neutral pronoun “they” to talk about Juliana. “They are like a health justice advocate, queer rights organizer. But, they do a lot of help on mental health. What they do on their own is facilitate these conversations, the call-ins, these negotiations” (personal interview). She went on to describe Juliana’s work:

With Juliana, the way they handle an accountability session is that all parties involved, there is a lot of prework and postwork. They [Juliana] have a whole entire process. So even before we met in the room, they called each one of us and had a conversation individually around “okay, what are your feelings? How are you feeling?” Just to assess if the situation was even solvable. And then
they cater whatever the conversation needs to go. Which is cool, because we get
to participate in and talk about our feelings. But for us, it was just like how
folks felt and then resolution, which I think was really effective. I don’t want
to spend half a day just talking in a room; it was like an hour and a half. (per-
sonal interview)

As these sessions assumed great importance in the movement, facilitators
grew in esteem and status. While they were officially neutral parties, they
were using the language, codes, and mannerisms of the movement to resolve
conflicts. Their high status and seeming neutrality helped to further legit-
imate the new rules of the game. The accused could question the accusers,
but they had greater difficulty questioning the language and norms that
underlay the accusations against them. A facilitator further naturalized the
language and norms by using them to direct their intervention and guide
their judgement. Calling-in ceremonies ultimately served as “consecration
rituals” where the rules of the discursive game and the leading representa-
tives, especially the facilitators, were sacralized (Bourdieu 1991).

Thus, when enforcement is too coercive, as it was with calling out, rep-
resentatives risk engendering conflicts and generating feelings of political
alienation. Aggrieved activists can question the motives of representatives,
push back on them, or simply leave the movement. Rather than ensuring
the new representational order by enforcing rules and obscuring the underly-
ing power relations, conflicts and political alienation drive many to question
the rules and those responsible for producing and enforcing them. Facing the
evident shortcomings of coercive enforcement, activists began to embrace
calling in as a way to address conflicts, increase critical mass, and bring trans-
gressive activists back into the movement. In contrast to calling out, calling in
involves structured interventions and a specialized mediator to administer
the process. The mediator is vested with important symbolic power because
she or he ultimately arbitrates between parties, makes an assessment or judg-
ment, and makes recommendations for resolving the problem. Such inter-
ventions help enforce “the new social contract of inclusivity” while reinforcing
the legitimacy of the movement’s rules. This allows leaders to produce a new
and more inclusive identity, ensures that different actors buy into the hierarchy
of representation, and mitigates political alienation and conflict by obscuring
the power lines underlying this new representational order.

NEW DILEMMAS: BETWEEN POLICY GOALS
AND REPRESENTATIONAL GOALS

The undocumented immigrant youth movement successfully created a new
mode of representation: directly impacted people served as representatives
of their movement and new representations were radically inclusive and
intersectional. This formed, as one activist aptly put it, “the new social
contract of inclusivity.” This process reflects a broader sociopolitical trend and connects to the movement’s interlinkages with other movements, such as BLM and the queer movement, that also stressed the importance of radical inclusion and intersectionality. This move reflects an important change in how the undocumented youth movement conceived of its goals.

In the first phase of the movement, the leadership conceived of the movement’s goals primarily in terms of policy. The goal was to achieve the legalization of immigration status either through the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act or Comprehensive Immigration Reform (Nicholls 2013a). In this context, representations were conceived narrowly as an instrument to achieve a policy goal. These representations aimed to generate maximum resonance across the United States by presenting undocumented youth as an exceptionally deserving population. Such assimilationist representations achieved their aims, creating broad public and political support for a highly stigmatized group of immigrants that simply did not exist in the public imagination 10 years before (Nicholls 2013a; Bloemraad et al. 2016; Voss et al. 2019). Narrow yet resonant representations may have been effective to achieve policy goals, but they could also generate feelings of political alienation and potentially debilitating conflicts within social movements.

For the case at hand, these conflicts introduced a second goal in the movement, in addition to the external policy goal: asserting control over the means of representation and transforming the representational process internal to the movement. Although activists continued to struggle for external policy goals, representations were no longer subordinate to these goals. The representations that emerged were intersectional and radical. Such representations enabled activists and organizations to develop alliances with other social movements, especially LGBTQ and BLM movements (Heaney and Rojas 2014; Terriquez 2015; Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales 2020), movements that were undergoing similar transformations toward radical inclusivity and intersectionality. However, it remains unclear whether these new representations helped or harmed the achievement of core policy goals during the last years of the Obama administration and the early years of the Trump administration. We do know that radical representations and claims (e.g., Defund the Police, Abolish ICE) can be used by adversaries to stigmatize movements, undercut support among key parts of the public, and generate a political backlash (Alter and Zürn 2020; Della Porta 2020; Baranauskas 2022). As new generations of activism have come to embrace both policy and intersectional representational goals, they confront a dilemma concerning whether the achievement of one goal (intersectional representations) could potentially undercut their other principal goal (policy) and vice versa. As both representational and policy goals are given equal status, there is no clear way to resolve the dilemma.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has used the case of the undocumented immigrant youth movement to assess the formation of representational hierarchies in social movements and their impacts on relations between activists. Most social movements develop their own hierarchies for who represents whom and what gets elevated in representations and what gets silenced. Such hierarchies are particularly prevalent in movements of marginalized and stigmatized people. In recent years, activists in movements as different as Occupy Wall Street, BLM, fourth-wave feminism, LGBTQ, and the immigrant rights movement have all sought to address the issue of representational inequities in their movements by focusing on the importance of inclusion, intersectionality, and being represented by directly impacted people. They have created more opportunities for directly impacted people to speak and lead and generated representations that embrace the intersectional identities making up their movements. Thus, representational hierarchies have long shaped movements of marginalized people and have become an important issue for activists in some of the most important movements today.

Despite the importance of such hierarchies, the social movement literature focuses on use of representations in social movements (e.g., as frames, to challenge dominant codes, to construct identities), but it does not theorize the formation of representational hierarchies and the effects of these hierarchies on activist relations. To fill this gap, we turn to theories of intersectionality and symbolic power. Intersectionality theory shows that such hierarchies have played a structuring role in past and present social movements. Such hierarchies emerge, the theory explains, because privileged actors within dominated groups become leading representatives of movements (e.g., white women in feminism, Black men in civil rights). Replacing these actors with more representative actors would help to resolve such hierarchies. Despite its many strengths, this part of the theory is not consistent with what we see in the undocumented immigrant youth movement, suggesting a weakness in the theory’s conception of hierarchy. To address this weakness, we turn to Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power. The theory suggests that replacing unrepresentative leaders with more representative leaders results in new hierarchies. Representation requires legitimacy, and the resources needed for legitimacy (symbolic capital) are unevenly distributed to the actors making up a social movement. Those in possession of more and better-quality symbolic capital tend to rise to the top of the hierarchy and assert their control over the means of representation.

We bring these different conceptions of representations in social movements together to generate four theoretical arguments that structure the narrative of the article. First, representational hierarchies are particularly acute in movements of marginalized people where representatives are not
Representational Hierarchies

(or only partially) directly impacted by the forces of marginalization. Representatives generate frames and narratives that reflect their own strategic positions and not the lives and realities of their constituents. The disconnect between the represented and representatives can give rise to feelings of alienation and, in certain instances, open conflict over the means of representation. Such conflicts were apparent in the first two years of the undocumented immigrant youth movement and gave rise to insurgents who sought to radically democratize the movement’s representational process.

Second, the construction of new representations entails producing new language, frames, narratives, norms, moralities, and truths for activists. The more they become the normative reference for good and proper speech, the more deviations from this speech are viewed as moral and political transgressions. In the movement, intersectional representations assumed dominance, and activists felt compelled to employ such language and concepts to talk, think, and feel about their political struggles. It was, as one activist noted, the “new social contract of inclusivity.” Those who used the language well rose in status, while those who struggled were sometimes criticized and treated condescendingly. These deviating activists had to “unlearn a lot of unhealthy habits” on the road to political emancipation. Third, the representatives charged with producing representations require legitimacy, the resources of which (symbolic capital) are unevenly distributed within a movement, especially movements of marginalized people. Those in possession of more legitimating resources are in a stronger position to assert their symbolic power over a social movement. In our case, activists in possession of academic training and authenticity derived from being directly impacted rose to the top of the representational hierarchy and asserted control over it. Those who lacked these resources—especially academic training—acceded to those with more knowledge of the new language and norms, ultimately delegating their political voice to the movement’s leadership. Fourth, maintaining symbolic power within a social movement depends on naturalizing dominant representations and ensuring that the movement’s hierarchical underpinnings are “misrecognized” by subordinate members of the movement. When subordinates fail to recognize hierarchy, they accept it as normal and contribute to its reproduction. Organizational mechanisms and strategic maneuverings by leaders (e.g., strategy of condescension) contribute to naturalizing representations and obfuscating the hierarchy responsible for giving rise to representations. In the case at hand, calling out and calling in were important mechanisms that helped ensure compliance and obscure the representational hierarchy underlying the movement. We also show that leaning too heavily on coercive methods (calling out) could be counterproductive because it can give rise to new and potentially debilitating conflicts that alienate people from the movement and reveal hierarchy rather than render it invisible. Consensual methods (calling in) are shown to be more effective methods to ensure
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acceptance of the dominant representation and mask underlying power relations. Rather than appearing as partisans seeking to advance their own interests in the movement, leaders were perceived as high-status, impartial judges working for the good of all to ensure general compliance with the “new social contract of inclusivity.”

REFERENCES


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