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## Discursive De/Humanizing: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Television News Representations of Undocumented Youth

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**Abstract:** This article addresses television news coverage of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act of 2010, which would have created a path to legal residency for thousands of undocumented immigrants in the United States. Considering the role that news media play in socially constructing groups of people, through an analysis of English- and Spanish-language evening television news coverage of the DREAM Act of 2010, the author examined discursive practices used to represent undocumented youth in both dehumanizing and humanizing ways. The author discusses the implications of these types of discourses for education policy understanding by the public and education stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Immigrant students; undocumented immigrants; critical discourse analysis; media analysis; critical race theory; race; racialization

**Des/Humanizar discursivamente: Un análisis multimodal crítico de discursos de las representaciones de jóvenes indocumentados en las noticias de televisión**

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**Resumen:** Este artículo se enfoca en la cobertura de los noticieros televisivos sobre la propuesta *Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act of 2010*, que hubiera creado un paso hacia la residencia legal para miles de inmigrantes indocumentados en los Estados Unidos (EEUU). Considerando el papel que los medios de comunicación noticieros juegan en construir socialmente a grupos de personas, a cabo de un análisis de noticieros televisivos en español e inglés que cubrieron el *DREAM Act of 2010*, la autora examinó prácticas discursivas utilizadas para representar a jóvenes indocumentados de maneras que deshumanizaron y humanizaron a este grupo. La autora discute las implicaciones de estos tipos de discursos para el conocimiento de la política de educación por el público y para personas involucradas (*stakeholders*) en el sistema educativo.

**Palabras-clave:** Estudiantes inmigrantes; inmigrantes indocumentados; análisis crítico de discurso; análisis de medios de comunicación; teoría racial crítica; raza; racialización

**Des/Humanizar discursivamente: Uma análise dissertativa crítica multimodal a respeito de representações televisivas sobre jovens indocumentados em noticiários**

**Resumo:** Este artigo centra-se na cobertura televisiva de notícias feita sobre a proposta *Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act of 2010*, que criaria um caminho em direção à residência legal para milhares de imigrantes indocumentados nos Estados Unidos da América (EUA). Tendo em consideração o papel que os meios de comunicação de notícias desempenham na construção social de grupos de pessoas, a partir de uma análise das notícias de televisão que cobriram o *DREAM Act of 2010* em espanhol e inglês, a autora examinou práticas discursivas usadas para representar jovens indocumentados de maneiras que desumanizam e humanizam esse grupo. A autora analisa as implicações desses modelos de discurso no entendimento de políticas de educação para o público e para pessoas diretamente envolvidas (*stakeholders*) no sistema educacional.

**Palavras-chave:** Estudantes imigrantes; imigrantes indocumentados; análise crítica de discurso; análise de meios de comunicação; teoria racial crítica; raça; racialização

## Introduction

Immigration was one of the most prevalent and divisive issues noted during the 2016 Presidential election. During Donald Trump's first year in office, immigration continued to be a centerpiece of his agenda as he signed a far-reaching ban on immigration, which prompted protests at airports nationwide (ACLU-Washington, 2018). Moreover, he touted and implemented plans for a border wall between the United States and Mexico (Taylor, 2019), and inflamed anti-immigrant sentiment with racist language (López & Matos, 2018). More recently, his administration is responsible for the separation and inhumane detention of asylum-seeking families from Central America (Bala & Rizer, 2019). This political context has been covered in the mass media, and media coverage of issues like this shape the ways the public responds to immigration issues and immigrants (Gil de Zúñiga, Correa, & Valenzuela, 2012). However, it is important to note that this current context is connected to and preceded by a long history of anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican sentiment (Menchaca, 1993).

Focusing on an issue that gained attention in 2001, this paper addresses the television news coverage of one of the most publicized policies related to U.S. immigration and education: The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. Following the 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* Supreme Court decision, undocumented children gained the right to a free public K-12 education in the United States (Olivas, 2012b), but their access to higher education and immigration status were left largely unaddressed (López, 2004). In response to the uncertain futures faced by thousands of undocumented youth upon high school graduation each year, the DREAM Act was first introduced to Congress in 2001 (Olivas, 2004). If passed, this Act would have created a path to legal residency for young undocumented immigrants, sometimes referred to as "DREAMers,"<sup>1</sup> living in the United States who met a number of requirements including earning a high school diploma or GED, college attendance or serving in the military. Today, the issue remains relevant and unresolved in politics, education, and the public sphere, and most importantly, undocumented youth and their families continue living with much uncertainty (Gonzales, 2015; Olivas, 2013).

### Purpose

The recent political and anti-immigrant context that impacts the lives of undocumented and mixed-status families in this country underscores the timeliness of this study that examines the social construction of undocumented youth in English- and Spanish-language evening television news coverage of the DREAM Act of 2010.<sup>2</sup> Considering Haas' (2004) argument that news media play a large part in how education policy issues come to be understood by the public, I examined how framing was used to represent undocumented youth. More specifically, I explored the following question: How were undocumented youth socially constructed in television news? To explore my research question, I conducted a multimodal (Kress, 2011) critical discourse analysis (CDA; Luke, 1995; van Dijk, 2002, 2003). I argue that public understanding of the DREAM Act and undocumented immigrants was influenced by media coverage of this topic. In education, this

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, I refer to the group who would benefit from the DREAM Act as DREAMers and undocumented youth, but it is important to note that not all undocumented youth refer to themselves as DREAMers. Additionally, depending on the age requirements of different versions of the policy, not all undocumented youth qualified for the DREAM Act.

<sup>2</sup> Although social media news consumption is steadily on the rise (Pew Research Center, 2015), evening television news continues to be the main source of news for many and during the time this study focuses on, several evening news networks experienced higher ratings (Bauder, 2011).

framing has implications for how education stakeholders come to understand the immigrant students they serve and the policies that affect them.

## **Background and Literature Review**

### **Policies Targeting Undocumented Youth**

Along with the federal policy issues mentioned above, state-level education policies have also impacted undocumented college-age youth. From the time the DREAM Act was first debated in Congress in 2001, 18 states passed in-state tuition legislation, which do not create a path to citizenship but do allow undocumented individuals to pay lower college tuition rates than international or out-of-state students (Olivas, 2004).

On a federal level, since its introduction, the DREAM Act has been close to passing multiple times, on varying occasions receiving bi-partisan support (Barron, 2011). However, during former President Barack Obama's first year as President in 2009, the DREAM Act largely lost support of the Republican Party. This loss of bipartisan support occurred at a time in this country's history when immigration supporters continued to await the passage not only of the DREAM Act, but also of a larger comprehensive immigration reform (CIR) that could affect many, including the parents of the undocumented youth (Olivas, 2013). Although there was hope that CIR would be passed during President Obama's first term, this was not the case. On the contrary, the last decade has been marked by strong anti-immigrant sentiments all throughout the United States, made evident by the passage of several state bills targeting immigrants in states such as Arizona, Alabama, and Georgia beginning in 2010 (Fryberg et al., 2011; Noriega & Iribarren, 2011; Olivas, 2013), and most recently in Texas through Senate Bill 4, that requires local police to cooperate with federal immigration authorities (Svitek, 2017).

From 2009 to 2012, during President Obama's first term, the highest number of DREAM Act proposals in Congress occurred in 2010, with eight versions of the DREAM Act proposed either as amendments to larger bills or as stand-alone bills. For example, at one point the DREAM Act of 2010 was included as part of a defense spending bill along with the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Ultimately, in December of 2010, the DREAM Act (H.R. 1528, 2010) almost passed when it was approved in the House and failed by only five votes in the Senate. Even with their Democratic advantage, due to a Republican rule, the Democrats needed 60 "yes" votes in the Senate in order for the Senate version, S. 3992 to pass, which they did not receive (Olivas, 2012a).

Although on a federal level the DREAM Act failed, on June 15, 2012, President Obama issued an executive order called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) that granted students eligible for the DREAM Act a renewable 2-year work permit and a Social Security number; in some states this also meant they were eligible to receive a driver's license (Olivas, 2012a, 2013). It is estimated that 1.2 million individuals immediately qualified under this executive order, and as of July 2014, 587,000 individuals were granted deferred action (Batalova, Hooker, & Capps, 2014). Although this order granted opportunities to many, undocumented youth still face a dilemma considering their long-term uncertainty without the passage of CIR (Olivas, 2013). Subsequently, with President Obama's re-election in 2012 and with over 70 percent of Latino voters supporting him (Foley, 2012), many expected increased activities related to the DREAM Act legislation and CIR, but this was not the case. In November 2014, President Obama announced an expansion to the DACA program and a new program, Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA), which would protect parents of United States citizens and legal permanent residents from deportation. Both DAPA and the DACA expansion were blocked from being implemented by a federal district court in Texas. Then on September 5, 2017, President

Trump rescinded DACA, although it currently still stands after litigation, and the possibility of the DREAM Act passing continues to be part of the national dialogue.

These state- and federal-level policies have direct implications for an estimated 98,000 undocumented students who graduate high school each year and the more than 680,000 who hold DACA status (Zong & Batalova, 2019)—not to mention the undocumented young adults who aged out of DACA and would not be included in DREAM Act as it has been proposed previously. Given this reality, the public and education stakeholders' (i.e. teachers, administrators, other educators, education researchers, policymakers) understanding of these policies is critical.

### **Media Framing of Immigrants & the Latinx Community<sup>3</sup>**

According to Lakoff & Ferguson (2006), “frames structure the way we think, the way we define problems, the values behind the definitions of those problems, and what counts as ‘solutions’ to those frame-defined problems” (para. 2). One of the most obvious ways the “problem” of immigration has been framed in the media is by referring to undocumented immigrants as the term “illegal.” Several scholars argue that the use of this term represents anti-immigrant ideologies (Noriega & Iribarren, 2011; Pérez Huber, Lopez, Malagon, Velez, & Solórzano, 2008). Noriega and Iribarren (2011) for example, found in their qualitative content analysis of talk radio that a new kind of “hate speech” was often used in the language surrounding Latinos, people of color in public office, undocumented immigrants, and immigration. In one segment of the Lou Dobbs Show, they found that the word “illegal” was used 44 times (p. 9). Within the political sphere, there have been several attempts to remove the words “illegal” and “alien” from official government policy documents—the most recent being proposed in 2019 by Congressman Joaquín Castro (H.R. 3776, 2019). There is a need to critically analyze this type of dehumanizing language and how it has become more prevalent in the last decade.

In his CDA of newspaper representations of Latinos, Santa Ana (2002) employed cognitive metaphor theory and found that the metaphor used to represent immigrants in the media the most was “animals.” More recently, in a multimodal examination of more than 12,000 television news stories, he noted that the representation of Latinos is largely missing and that the metaphor used to refer to immigrants is “criminals” (Santa Ana, 2013). Cognitive metaphor theory “claims that the conventionalized everyday metaphor constitutes the social values of people who use these ways of speaking” (Santa Ana, 2013, p. 21). Cisneros (2008), who also examined metaphors in text and media images, identified the metaphor “immigrants as pollutants” (p. 569) and argued that this deficit framing has consequences for how immigrants in this country are treated and how immigration policies are designed. Both metaphors identified by Santa Ana and Cisneros represent dehumanizing ways of representing immigrants, which can influence how the public perceives these groups and the policies that could possibly benefit them.

Fryberg et al.'s (2011) analysis of Arizona anti-immigration bill, Senate Bill 1070, investigated how divided Arizona state politicians were on the original bill and how unclear the issues were for the public as they learned about what the bill entailed. The authors added that, “how the media presents the relevant issues and what issues receive attention is likely to play an important role in how people understand this important social and political issue” (Fryberg et al., 2011, p. 2). Through their content analysis, they identified frames used in the arguments for and against anti-immigration policies found in three weeks' worth of newspaper stories in Arizona and national newspapers. One of the frames that stood out to them is, “immigrants as a threat” (p. 12) to American values, the economy, and national security.

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<sup>3</sup> I use Latinx to be gender inclusive. However, if I am citing another author directly, I will refer to the term they used.

According to Branton and Dunaway (2008), there are only a handful of studies that compare English- and Spanish-language media and their perspective on immigration (Abrajano & Singh, 2008; Rodriguez, 1999). One of the earliest comparative content analysis studies of Spanish-language and English-language television news shows was by Rodriguez (1996, 1999). Rodriguez conducted a multi-method study, including an ethnography of the production of Spanish language news show *Noticiero Univision* as well as a comparative quantitative content analysis of the *Noticiero* and ABC's *World News Tonight* where she noted the similarities and differences in their newsmaking. In their quantitative content analysis, Branton and Dunaway (2008) examined the difference in how immigration was covered in 1,712 English- and Spanish-language newspaper stories by looking at frequency and tone with which immigration was talked about. They used economic theories to argue that Spanish-language newspapers will speak about immigration in a neutral and positive light to increase their Spanish-speaking viewership and their profits and that English-language newspapers speak from a negative perspective guided by the beliefs of their particular viewership (Branton & Dunaway, 2008).

Few studies have examined the representations of Latinx and immigrant youth in news media. Jefferies (2009) addressed meritocracy and how the issue of access to higher education was framed for undocumented students in Massachusetts. He examined newspapers in Massachusetts from September 2002 to 2008 that made mention of in-state tuition policies, and he identified three frames prevalent in this coverage: the fiscal frame, the American dream frame, and the legal frame. Vélez, Pérez Huber, Lopez, de la Luz, and Solórzano (2008) examined how Latina/o youth were framed in newspaper articles about Latina/o student activists amid anti-immigrant climate. They found that Latina/o youth were framed in positive and negative ways, sometimes within the same story. In instances where they were framed in negative ways, Latina/o youth were racialized in racist nativist ways which they define as, “a form of racism that is specifically directed toward immigrants who can be racially identified as Latina/o” (Vélez et al., 2008, p. 22). They called for more forms of media to be examined in comparative ways, such as television in English and Spanish. Employing Critical Race Theory (CRT), LatCrit, and the analytical tool CRT policy and media analysis, Alemán and Alemán (2013) examined newspaper articles from three states (Texas, Utah, and Georgia) during their 2011 legislative sessions, a year with many anti-immigrant legislative issues. They found that, “legislators were the dominating influence throughout the discourse, which reflected both deficit views about the educability and worthiness of undocumented students, as well upheld unquestioningly the right to higher education for White students” (p. 106).

Santa Ana (2013) argued that journalists have a responsibility to inform the public and that having a well-informed public strengthens our society as a democracy. He said that by not including Latinos adequately, “the electorate . . . will not be equipped to address contentious issues that it associates with this population” (p. 14), and secondly, that good coverage and stories of political issues allow the electorate to “participate in the civil discourse necessary to sustain a strong democracy” (p. 150). Therefore, if coverage about a group of immigrants such as DREAMers is either inadequate or dehumanizing on mainstream networks, the public will not be equipped to address the issues entailed in this complex policy in a way that fully acknowledged and humanizes this group of people.

The research I have discussed demonstrate that framing of immigrants and the Latinx community is often conflated, and that the mainstream representations can sometimes be dehumanizing to immigrants and the Latinx community. Given this evidence, there is a need to look more critically at media representations and framing, such as this study does by taking a multimodal approach and by also examining Spanish-language television news coverage. Within the education field there is also a need to further examine policies such as the DREAM Act and the youth directly

impacted by these policies in interdisciplinary and nuanced ways that might include, but also go beyond research typically found in education.

## **Theoretical Framework**

My theoretical framework centers on understanding immigration in the United States as a racialized issue (Pérez Huber et al., 2008) and I used Bonilla-Silva's (2014) frames of color-blind racism and CRT to guide the analysis of my findings. Along with these lenses, this research was also guided by my positionality as the daughter of formerly undocumented immigrants from Mexico and El Salvador, and as a former college outreach counselor who, in the mid-2000s, worked with many undocumented students in Texas who would be impacted by the passage of the DREAM Act.

### **Color-blind Racism & Color-Evasiveness**

Color-blind racism is a racial structure that argues racial discourse is “covert” and embedded in everyday speech (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). I draw on frames of color-blind racism that sociologist Bonilla-Silva calls abstract liberalism and cultural racism in order to provide a theoretical tool for understanding the way undocumented people were represented through a racialized lens. These frames may not always appear outright racist, so in this study when examining how undocumented youth and other immigrants were described, I identified discourse that seemed to come from a cultural deficit perspective and that were “effective in defending the racial status quo” (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, p. 77). I also acknowledge the contributions of scholars Annamma, Jackson, and Morrison (2017) who expand on theories of color-blind racism and put forth a racial ideology of “color-evasiveness,” which challenges ableist language in the term color-blind. They address multiple ways that this ideology can help further dismantle racist ideology, and argue that color-evasiveness is, “not simply a commitment to updating our language, but an opportunity to expose the (un)spoken norms thriving in the racial ideology of color-blindness.” These (un)spoken norms were critical to examine in media coverage of the DREAM Act of 2010.

### **Critical Race Theory**

I employed CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) to further identify instances of racism that might appear in the media coverage of the DREAM Act. CRT was developed in the area of law and allows one to examine how issues of race and racism continue to play out in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). I look to the media as one of the aspects of society where racism might reveal itself. Another aspect of CRT that I employed is that of counter-stories (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Through telling their stories, undocumented youth and their supporters challenged the dominant narratives and dispelled many of the stereotypes found on mainstream television news.

Guided by critical race scholars, in my analysis I discuss the dehumanization and humanization of immigrant youth in news media, or what I call the de/humanization. I use the slash as a symbol of disruption. For example, Annamma, Connor, and Ferri's (2013) use of “dis/ability” where the slash “disrupts misleading understandings of disability, as it simultaneously conveys the mixture of ability and disability” (p. 24). Delgado Bernal and Alemán (2017) use Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of “nos/otras,” which pointed to collectivity and divisions among groups in the community. Anzaldúa and Keating (2000) explained that the use of nos/otras as, “The Spanish word ‘nosotras’ means ‘us.’ In theorizing insider/outsider I write the word with a slash between nos (us) and otras (others). Today the division between the majority of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is still in tact” (p. 254). In my use of the slash between “de” and “humanizing,” I acknowledge the push back that exists

against dehumanizing discourses through counter-stories, as well as the political nuance and cognitive dissonance that are evident in many media representations of immigrants.

## Methods

### Conceptual Framework

The findings shared in this paper draw from a larger multi-method study (López, 2015). First, through content analysis I examined DREAM Act policy documents that were presented in the United States Congress during President Obama's first term in office (2009 - 2012). Along with understanding what the policy entailed, I also examined how undocumented youth were legally constructed (Johnson, 1996) within the policy. In the next stage of the study, I conducted a multimodal qualitative CDA (Kress, 2011; Luke, 1995; van Dijk, 2002, 2003) of national television news coverage of the DREAM Act of 2010. Using CDA's tenets, I conducted a critical examination of social and political problems reflected in discourses such as those found in the news media (van Dijk, 2003). I was also guided by van Dijk's (2004) three themes about minorities and immigrants: 1) the behavior of the Other as deviant, 2) difference of the Other, and 3) Others portrayed as a threat to the United States. van Dijk (2002) argued that by engaging in CDA and going beyond the "content-analytical quantitative research" often conducted on mass media, one should be "able to actually explain why media discourses have the structures they have, and how these affect the minds of the recipients" (p. 152). Thus, in my analysis of the news media, I make a connection between the discourse used and the ideologies undergirding this discourse, with the aim of identifying how viewers might make sense of this educational policy issue.

### Data Sources

I set my search parameters to include both time before and time after the DREAM Act almost passed on December 18, 2010—including segments from September 1, 2010 to December 31, 2010. I focused on evening news stories that were televised anytime between 6:00pm - 7:00pm EST. I searched all major news networks during the same time frame to document what each covered during the same time slot, and compared coverage across networks. Once I entered these search criteria along with the term "DREAM Act" in the UCLA NewsScape<sup>4</sup> and Archive.org,<sup>5</sup> my total sources of information included 120 news stories from eight major English- and Spanish-language television network (see Table 1).

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<sup>4</sup> The UCLA NewsScape Archive is accessible at <http://newsscape.library.ucla.edu/>. Access is restricted to the UCLA campus community and Red Hen Lab researchers.

<sup>5</sup> I used Archive.org to access Noticiero Telemundo coverage, which was not available on NewsScape.



Table 1  
*Evening Television News Sources*

Network	Evening news show	Cable	Language	Number	Total minutes	Average minutes
Telemundo	Noticiero Telemundo	No	Spanish	38	202.7	5.3
Univision	Noticiero Univision	No	Spanish	37	98.9	2.7
FOX News	Special Report with Bret Baier	Yes	English	17	37.2	3.1
MSNBC	The Ed Show	Yes	English	12	32.3	1.9
CNN	Situation Room	Yes	English	8	16.3	2.0
ABC	World News with Diane Sawyer	No	English	3	3.4	1.1
NBC	Nightly News	No	English	3	3.4	1.1
CBS	CBC Evening News	No	English	2	0.6	0.3
TOTAL				120		

*Note:* Data Sources: UCLA NewsScape Archive & Archive.org). Search parameters: Search term “DREAM Act,” aired between September 1, 2010, and December 31, 2010, between 6-7pm EST. Table sorted by number of news stories.

Of the eight networks, Telemundo and Univision had the most coverage with 38 and 37 stories respectively. The English-language non-cable television networks had the lowest number of stories (2 or 3 each). The stories about the DREAM Act within each episode also spanned a wide range of time from as short as one second to as long as 21 minutes. In terms of frequency of coverage, I found that in December 2010, the highest coverage of the DREAM Act occurred when it was mentioned in 62 news stories spanning the eight networks. As a comparison, in November 2010 the DREAM Act was mentioned on 35 news stories and the month before that, only five times across the networks.

### Data Analysis

The multimodal aspect of this research occurred by documenting and critically examining the visuals, graphics, texts, spoken words, and audio sounds (Altheide, 1996; Erickson, 2006; Kress, 2011; Santa Ana, 2013) in news stories. In terms of engaging with television news, one can think of the multiple screens present in airports and gyms and how they often play without sound. Even without the sound, a message is conveyed to the viewer. For each news story, I created content logs where I included the duration, a transcription of what was said either in Spanish or English, and where I noted speech elements such as tone. I also wrote descriptions of the photographs, images,

and videos shown on the screen during the news coverage. After creating the content logs, using qualitative software ATLAS.ti, I applied deductive codes (Erickson, 2004) based on my theoretical framework, where I looked for instances in which immigrants and undocumented students were framed and socially constructed in either positive or negative racialized ways. I also used my literature review to create deductive codes based on the arguments for and against the DREAM Act as well as codes that came directly from my policy analysis of the DREAM Act related to the content, purpose, and requirements of the Act as well as the legal construction of undocumented individuals within the policy document. Then I created inductive codes (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) based on other themes I identified from the data. These codes pointed to what was shown in the news coverage of the DREAM Act (e.g. text, still images, and videos) and the name of the reporter and person being interviewed, as well as their stance on the DREAM Act. By applying both deductive and inductive codes I could capture the individuals present in the media coverage of this policy, the ideological position they reflected through their talk, and the accuracy of their policy arguments.

## Findings & Analysis

In this section I discuss the negative and positive social constructions of undocumented youth I identified on English- and Spanish-language news. Negative social constructions were dehumanizing and/or racialized in covert and overt ways, positive social constructions humanized immigrants and allowed them to speak their voice directly. These different social constructions have implications for the ways the public thought about this group and the policy being considered (Schneider & Sidney, 2009). Schneider and Sidney (2009) describe social constructions as, “an underlying understanding of the social world that places meaning-making at the center. That is, humans’ interpretations of the world produce social reality; shared understandings among people give rise to rules, norms, identities, concepts, and institutions” (p. 106). In my analysis, I found how the social construction or “meaning-making” about undocumented youth was de/humanizing—both dehumanizing (English-language news) and humanizing (generally Spanish-language news).

### Immigrants as the I-word: Dehumanizing Discourses on TV News<sup>6</sup>

When undocumented youth were described in the news, this occurred in language often used to frame Latino immigrants in marginalizing and racist ways (Pérez Huber et al., 2008). Negative social constructions appeared most often on English-language news stories—by negative construction, I mean the combination of words and images that were used to dehumanize, criminalize, or problematize undocumented youth. Considering the most prevalent descriptions I found, in this section I elaborate on the ways that undocumented youth were described as “illegal immigrants” and “illegal aliens.”<sup>7</sup> I also found that sometimes positive-sounding language could reiterate negative framing through images. The term “illegal immigrant” has been described as an inhumane way to describe immigrants and there is a movement to get major media outlets to begin using more positive terms such as “undocumented immigrant.”<sup>8</sup> Some television networks have banned the use of the term “illegal immigrant,” something that had not yet occurred at the time

<sup>6</sup> The I-word refers to the word “Illegal,” which I prefer to not name in a title.

<sup>7</sup> Throughout this article, I state the actual dehumanizing terms I identified in the news media when recapping news segments. I do this to be accurate and also direct about the language that should be omitted when describing immigrants.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://colorlines.com/droptheiword/>. Other alternatives they offered were “unauthorized immigrant” and “NAFTA refugee.”

period I focused on here.<sup>9</sup> For example, among the networks in my sample, ABC, NBC, and Univision banned it unless it is used in a direct quote, whereas CBS encourages reporters to use alternatives but still allow it to be used. However, today, these terms are still widespread.

**The dominant discourse of illegality.** Undocumented youth were described as “illegal immigrants” on seven of the eight networks. This negative term was used most often between December 8 and December 20, during and right after the votes on the DREAM Act of 2010 in the House and the Senate. On English-language news, this term was said mostly by reporters to describe DREAM Act beneficiaries. Below is one example from September 17 of the use of this term on FOX News:

Reporter Jim Angle: Illegal immigrants could also stay here by volunteering for military service [on screen: “MILITARY SERVICE” over the scene of the busy city], and after 2 years of service [on screen: “SERVICE or COLLEGE earns GREEN CARD”] or attending college, illegal immigrants could get a green card, the last step before citizenship.

In this example, Mr. Angle employed repetition of the term in one short segment. Also, by saying “illegal immigrants could also stay here,” he gave the impression that recipients would not become part of this society, but only have a physical presence in this country. In this segment, he also indicated that recipients would have a fast route toward citizenship after earning a “green card.” Here, he used the term “green card” instead of using the legal term of “legal permanent resident.” Lastly, he diminished the stringent requirements of the proposed policy and painted the DREAM Act as something that was too lenient.

In another example, on December 10, Mary Snow on CNN used the term when showing a positively constructed segment:

The legislation [camera on young woman’s face as she talks on the phone] would give a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants like her, [old photo of young woman shown when she was a little girl, in another country] who were brought to the US as children by their parents . . . [Young woman talks to a group of students and she says to them, “It means I’m undocumented and...” and then her voice fades out.]

In this example, Ms. Snow socially constructed this young woman as an “illegal immigrant”—the way I observed most reporters on English-language news. This racialized term represents here a dominant term that perhaps is more easily understood and accepted by those watching. But at the same time, the young woman was characterized positively several times in this segment. Here, her photo was shown as a little girl, supporting the story that her parents brought her as a small child. Then, in a contradictory way, the young woman was shown talking to other students and explaining to them that she was, “undocumented” right after Snow referred to her as an “illegal immigrant.” It was not clear whether Snow or CNN thought of these terms as interchangeable, but the young woman’s use of a positive term calls into question why Snow would say “illegal immigrant” when the subject of her story clearly did not subscribe to this label. Then on December 22, NBC reporter Samantha Guthrie used the term to summarize President Obama’s statements after the failure of the DREAM Act when she said, “. . . the president sympathized with children of illegal immigrants who have no path to citizenship.” In reality, the president said: “Their parents were undocumented. The kids didn’t know.”<sup>10</sup> Although Ms. Guthrie was not directly quoting the President, her use of “illegal

<sup>9</sup> See <http://fusion.net/story/28845/the-illegal-index/?hootPostID=3134025180ce046ddcf6e6344434d6c0>

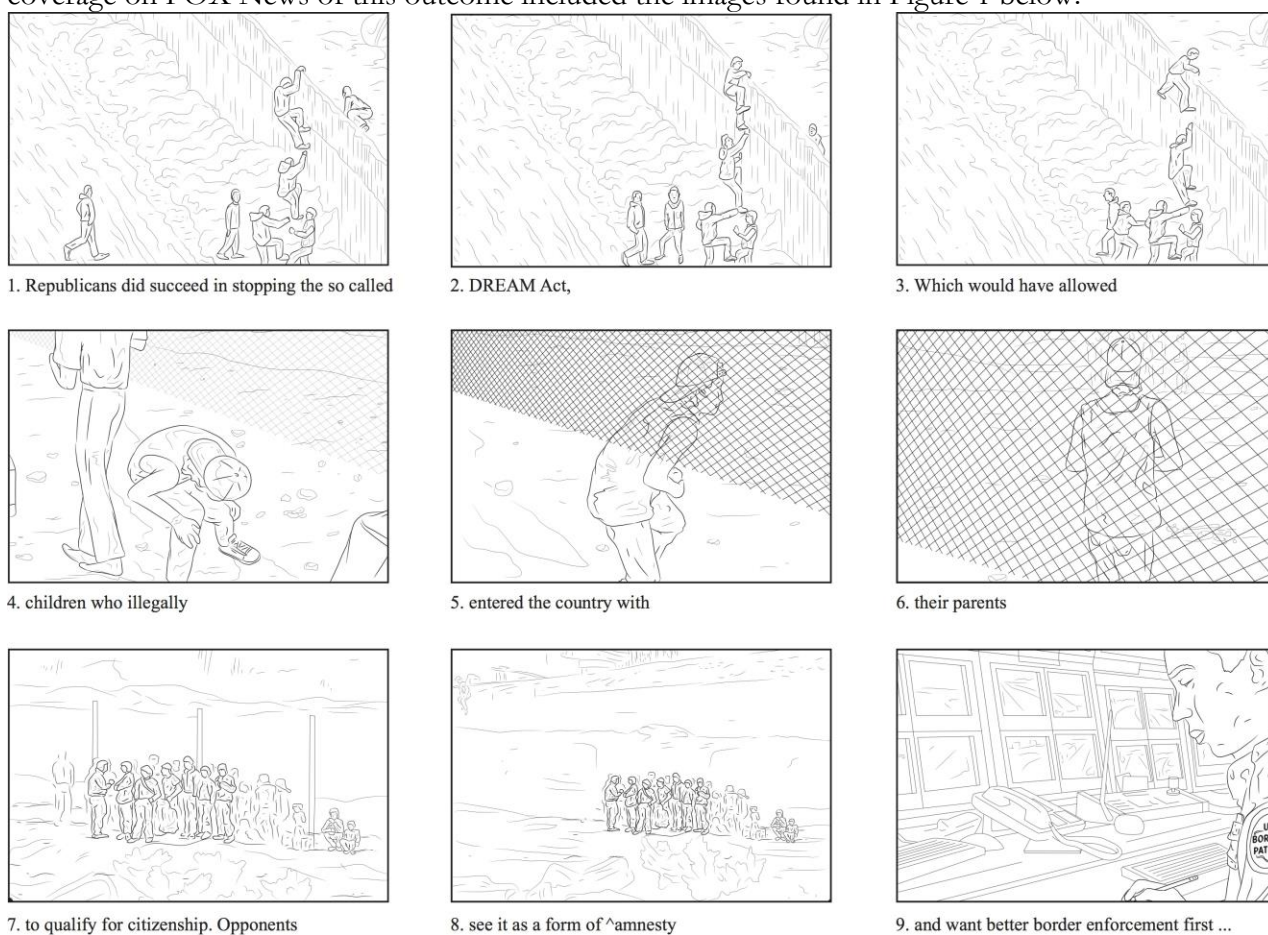
<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/22/news-conference-president> for transcript.

immigrants” stood out and, similar to CNN reporter Snow above, she made the decision to use the more negative term to recap the president’s support for the DREAM Act.

Although the term “illegal alien” is similar in some ways to “illegal immigrant,” it stands out from other terms used to describe immigrants. As legal scholar Johnson (1996) describes, “Illegal aliens is a pejorative term that implies criminality, thereby suggesting that the persons who fall in this category deserve punishment, not legal protection” (p. 276). The use of “alien” in this way has an even greater dehumanizing function, and considering Johnson’s statement above, it makes sense that those news anchors and reporters who referred to undocumented youth as “aliens” believed that they did not deserve the passage of the DREAM Act. This term appeared on CNN and FOX News. This finding dispels the notion that dehumanizing discourses only appear on one major network. For example, on December 9, the day after the successful vote on the DREAM Act in the House, when CNN reporter Jack Cafferty asked the public to answer his poll, “Should illegal aliens who came here as children, be given a path to citizenship?” Because the reporter used a negative term and combined it with a statement that seemed like recipients would be given citizenship as opposed to earning it, he took a stance on the issue under the guise of asking for public opinions. His use of the term “illegal aliens” appeared on two segments within the same episode, first in the introduction of the poll, where he repeated the term five times as he explained the proposed policy, and then the results toward the end of the show, where he repeated the question. As he first explained the DREAM Act, the phrase “illegal immigrants younger than 16 when they arrived” appeared on the screen, but Cafferty read it as “illegal aliens . . .,” showing that he either preferred “illegal aliens” as a term or that he used both interchangeably. Given Johnson’s argument, these terms are not equal, much like “undocumented immigrant” and “illegal immigrant” are not equal. Yet, marginalizing words such as “illegal alien” continued to be prevalent in the media even when more humane alternatives were available.

With the exception of the CNN example, FOX News used “illegal alien” almost exclusively when compared to other networks. One of the most vivid uses of the term appeared on September 17, when the DREAM Act was presented as an amendment in the Defense Spending Bill. In this segment, reporter Jim Angle began discussing the DREAM Act and said, “an emotional and pointed debate is raging in the senate, where Democrat Harry Reid has inserted into a key defense bill a measure to make it easier for illegal aliens to gain citizenship.” What stood out the most in this segment was when video was played as Angle said, “measure to make it easier. . .” showing a male appearing to be Latino being walked in handcuffs by another man (race unclear) wearing a jacket with the words POLICE ICE across the back. ICE stands for Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The combination of this image with Angle’s statement above pushes the false idea that immigrants are largely Latino, or even more specifically only Mexican, that they are criminals, and that the DREAM Act would halt enforcement and security on the border. The imagery used here by FOX News represents how some visualize the term “illegal alien” as well as the intentionality that comes with selecting images when discussing immigrants and immigration. A little more than a minute after Jim Angle spoke, Republican Senator David Vitter was shown speaking on the Senate floor and he said, “it will provide a powerful incentive, for more illegal immigration, by allowing states to grant in-state tuition to illegal alien students.” Here he coined a new combination of the term “illegal alien” by adding the word “student,” but his statement paralleled the one reporter Jim Angle had just shared, adding that this group would also be entitled to benefits. These two examples show how negative social constructions of undocumented youth were coupled with arguments against the DREAM Act.

**Abstract and covert racialized discourses.** There was also an abstract use of undocumented young people’s status in this country mentioned on MSNBC by guest Laura Flanders, when she said the following in October 20: “...DREAM Act that would give kids like that and those in that class a chance...” This was a very short segment and not a lot of context was given other than this being a comment on Harry Reid’s stance on immigration. Although Flanders said “kids,” she alluded to their status by saying, “kids like that” and “in that class” in abstract (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Johnson, 1996) and color-evasive ways (Annamma et al., 2017). This furthered the notion of undocumented immigrants as the Other (van Dijk, 2004) and showed how discourse can be racialized even when abstract words are used. On two occasions on FOX News, undocumented youth were described as “children” but as this word was read, simultaneously an image of the border fence, presumably the border between Mexico and the United States, was shown. In these instances, there was once again dissonance between what was said and what was shown. As an example, on December 20, 2010, two days after the failure of the DREAM Act in the Senate, the 26-second coverage on FOX News of this outcome included the images found in Figure 1 below:



*Figure 1.* Rendering of FOX News Segment, December 20, 2010

Note: 1-second interval frames, FOX News Special Report with Bret Baier, aired 12/20/10 at 3:00pm PDT. Artist Credit: René A. Cárdenas. Images have been recreated based on original news video.

In the nine seconds shown in Figure 1, host Bret Baier covered the DREAM Act solely as an immigration issue, presumably about the United States and Mexico border. He also discussed it as a partisan issue although historically the bill was bipartisan. Through the emphasis on large groups of what viewers may assume to be Mexican males crossing the border (Frames 1-3), he de-emphasized

the education focus of the bill and redefined it as “amnesty,” a negative framing of the policy for a group socially constructed as an undeserving population. Additionally, the individual shown crossing the accessible border was described as a child, yet appeared to be a young man (Frames 4–6), giving the impression that children were not the ones crossing the border. This further dehumanizes adult immigrants and paints them as underserving of immigration reform. Then, once on the US side of the border (Frames 7–8), a large number of immigrants who crossed as well as an individual jumping into the US side were shown. Finally, in the last frame, border enforcement was mentioned as a priority over the DREAM Act. Multiple frames that served to strengthen racialized and criminalized ideas of Mexican immigrants and the United States: Mexico border were communicated in only nine seconds. Throughout the long 26-second coverage, the actual content of the DREAM Act was never mentioned.

In three of the examples I have shared so far there were clear alternative terms that reporters were presented with, yet, “illegal” was still used. The question arose as to how and why then reporters made the decision to socially construct and marginalize this population in the ways I described above. It is important to note that on English-language news the actors who pushed these social constructions were reporters and commentators who were against the policy. These instances demonstrate a combination of covert (Bonilla-Silva, 2014) and overt racialized discourses evident through spoken words, text, and images that serve to dehumanize this group, thus rendering them undeserving of something such as this proposed policy. In the following section, I focus on positive social constructions that in some ways serve as counter-narratives to the negative examples I have discussed here.

### **Humanizing Representations of Young Immigrants on TV News**

Similar to the negative social constructions I described in the previous section, positive social constructions included descriptions used to verbally discuss undocumented youth as well as ways that they were framed through text, visual images, and videos. Positive social constructions were much more prevalent on Spanish-language news and the amount of airtime devoted to each story tended to be much longer on Telemundo and Univision; this meant that there were more opportunities for positive frames to appear. I identified four over-arching themes of DREAMers as: youth, students, extraordinary, and undocumented immigrants. Describing this group as youth reaffirmed the idea that the DREAM Act was about younger and perhaps not older immigrants who are often represented in dominant narratives as the Other who made the decision to migrate to this country. The second category of students strengthened the argument that the DREAM Act was about education first. The third theme occurred when this group was described as extraordinary, such as young leaders and as top students—in many ways as exceptional. These categories stand in direct opposition to the negative social constructions that described undocumented youth as “illegal immigrants,” “illegal aliens,” and in many ways as law-breakers. Lastly, in terms of immigration status, on Spanish-language news those who would benefit from the DREAM Act were described by reporters as undocumented or DREAMers/*soñadores*.

**Jóvenes.** The theme youth encompassed all ages of young people, from references of children or kids to references of young adults. “Jóvenes” [Youth] was the most used descriptor, and other similar terms appeared more often than any other term on English-language news. The highest use of *jóvenes* was on Telemundo and oftentimes reporters on this network and Univision did not point out that these young people were immigrants, they used the term meaning “young people” on its own. For example, on September 20, Telemundo reporter Lori Montenegro said the following, “Para miles de jóvenes, esta semana puede resultar ser el comienzo de sus sueños hacerse realidad.” [For thousands of young people, this week could result in being the beginning of their dreams

becoming reality.] Here, Montenegro used play on words regarding the word “dream” to make a reference to what the DREAM Act meant to this group. She also did not refer to them as young immigrants, but as solely “jóvenes” or young people—having a humanizing effect that is in contrast to othering or dehumanizing found on most of the English-language coverage of this issue.

**Estudiantes indocumentados.** The social construction of “students” was largely missing from the discourse in English-language media, although it was used by those in support of the Act and by reporters to describe two undocumented youth as honors students when they appeared on CNN and NBC on December 8, the day of the House vote on the DREAM Act. In contrast, on Spanish-language news, the terms “estudiantes” [students] and “estudiantes indocumentados” [undocumented students] were often used. Sometimes, the images accompanying these terms were the United States flag and young people dressed in graduation clothing. For example, on November 10<sup>th</sup> on Telemundo, youth in graduation clothing were shown while reporter Lori Montenegro described the DREAM Act—this stands in contrast to the footage of the border played on FOX News while the word “children” was said (see previous example). Similarly, on November 29<sup>th</sup> on Univision, undocumented youth were socially constructed in multiple positive ways within one short segment. Here, anchor Jorge Ramos called this group both students and activists. These terms coupled with the symbolic images of an American flag, books, and an apple framed the DREAM Act as both an issue of immigration reform and education policy. Throughout the coverage of the DREAM Act that I analyzed on both of these networks, the images of the American flag and students in graduation gowns were presented numerous times, images that have come to represent who the beneficiaries of the DREAM Act are thought to be: high school or college graduates without an opportunity to truly become American in the legal sense. Unlike the dominant dehumanizing narratives I described in the previous section, on Spanish-language news undocumented youth identities are deemed as congruent with American norms and society.

The widespread use of “estudiantes indocumentados” by Telemundo and Univision demonstrated humanizing language reporters used to talk about undocumented youth. The use of “undocumented” here and when used on its own can be seen as an alternative to the racialized and dehumanizing word “illegal.” Oftentimes, this term was used as a way to contextualize the legal and life situation of this group. For example, in a news segment on November 24, Univision reporter Jaime García said the following:

Anualmente, 60 mil estudiantes indocumentados se gradúan de las secundarias de los Estados Unidos, por lo que de aprobar el acta sueño, potencialmente, hasta 2 millones de jóvenes, pudieran obtener su residencia legal siempre y cuando concluyeran 2 años de colegio, o se hagan inscrito en el servicio militar.  
[Annually, 60 thousand undocumented students graduate from high school in the United States and by approving this DREAM Act, potentially up to 2 million young people could obtain their legal residence provided they complete 2 years of college or they register for military service.]

In this example, García gave factual information about who the proposed policy would impact and shared how many undocumented students graduate each year. He did not mention citizenship, but instead the legal residency that this group would gain from fulfilling the higher education or military requirement. On English-language news, usually it was stated that undocumented youth would acquire citizenship after completing one of these two requirements—leading one to believe that citizenship was given without being deserved or without stringent requirements.

**Exceptional youth.** When undocumented youth were positioned in exceptional ways, this usually happened on Telemundo and Univision, a few times and on CNN (December 8), and one time each on NBC (December 8) and MSNBC (December 10). I share some examples in Table 2 below of how this occurred on Telemundo:

Table 2

*Examples of Undocumented Youth Positioned in Positive Ways on Telemundo*

Date	Spanish	English Translation	Positioned as
11/29/10	<p><b>Reporter José Díaz-Balart:</b> ¿Por qué es TAN importante para ti ser militar de Estados Unidos?</p> <p><b>Young man 1:</b> Porque este es el único país que conozco, es el único país que yo llamo mi casa. Nací, y quiero servir este país como un abogado. Hablo cuatro lenguajes y eso es mi sueño, de dar al país que me ha dado mucho.</p>	<p><b>Díaz-Balart:</b> Why is it SO important for you to be a military member of the United States?</p> <p><b>Young man 1:</b> Because this is the only country that I know. It is the only country I call home. I was born and want to serve this country as an attorney. I speak four languages and that is my dream, give to the country that has given me so much.</p>	American Extraordinary Military
12/17/10	<p><b>Reporter Lori Montenegro:</b> El se dio a conocer cuando deshizo las suelas de sus zapatos, caminando de Miami a Washington con su mensaje de esperanza.</p> <p><b>Young man 2:</b> Fui criado en, aquí en los Estados Unidos, y yo no sabía nada sobre mi estatus migratorio, hasta que me iba graduar del bachillerato, y era entre, eh, los mejores estudiantes de, de mi colegio.</p>	<p><b>Montenegro:</b> He became well-known when he wore his soles (image: his foot covered with duct tape) of his shoes out, walking from Miami to Washington with his message of hope.</p> <p><b>Young man 2:</b> I was raised here, in the United States, and I didn't know anything about my migratory status until I was going to graduate from high school, and I was one of the best students of my college.</p>	Young Leader Extraordinary Activist American

In these examples from Telemundo, through these interactions with reporters who humanized them, the young men had an opportunity to share their own counter-stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002)—challenging dehumanizing dominant discourses. In contrast to English-language news, on Spanish networks undocumented youth often spoke for themselves, which is one way that counter-stories can be shared. These young men were positioned as extraordinary—the first young man because of his high aspirations through multiple careers and college degrees, and the second young man because he was described as having sacrificed by marching from Miami to Washington



as a vivid image was presented of his shoes being worn down to the soles. Both of these examples demonstrate how counter-storytelling, “can help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). Additionally, in terms of timing, these stories occurred during the week leading up to the vote on the DREAM Act in the House and one day before the failure of the DREAM Act in the Senate—so these were decisive dates that might inform the public’s opinion of the Act. Although the examples are positive representations of undocumented youth, it is important to note that some scholars and undocumented youth have questioned how this type of exclusive positive representation reinforces “deservingness” of only a select few in this complex and diverse immigrant population (Gonzales, 2015; Pérez Huber, 2016).

## Discussion

In this article I presented how undocumented youth who would be recipients of the DREAM Act were framed in dehumanizing and humanizing ways on evening television news, often times depending on the language of the news source. When these youth were socially constructed in negative ways, English-language network reporters were sometimes presented with more humane alternatives. However, they continued using the terminology that serves to dehumanize groups of immigrants of color in this country. This type of dehumanizing representation of undocumented youth occurred not only on networks that held a reputation for being against immigrants (e.g., FOX News), but also on multiple English-language networks that were viewed as more sympathetic to immigrants (e.g., CNN and MSNBC). These findings point to the need to critically question racialized language that has been normalized in multiple news venues regardless of perceived ideological leanings (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). One cannot assume that anti-immigrant discourse is present in only a minority of news sources.

On English-language news coverage, I found that undocumented youth were portrayed as criminals and deviants (van Dijk, 2004) not only through the words spoken by reporters and those against the policy, but also through the text and images shown by the networks. I demonstrate that it is imperative to conduct an analysis beyond the transcript of the spoken words. In particular, when examining the impact of the media as the image was portrayed in conjunction with the words being used, this multimodal analysis created a more robust understanding of the hidden ideology around the emotionally and politically charged topic. Additionally, undocumented youth were equated with being “Mexican,” where the ethnic descriptor became racialized (Pérez Huber et al., 2008; Vélez et al., 2008), demonstrating that sentiments about immigration in this country continue to be largely an anti-Mexican phenomena and not anti-immigrant about all countries of origin in general (Haney López, 2015). For instance, the DREAM Act was discussed while vivid images of the U.S.-Mexico border were being shown even though the population that would benefit from this policy is diverse. Although the negative social constructions against the DREAM Act on the English-language news numbered less in the aggregate, they are dominant and racialized discourses (Bonilla-Silva, 2014), reaffirming power structures. The implications of such racialized representations about undocumented youth and other immigrants in the news are many, but what do these representations mean for the viewers of these news sources? If someone only viewed English-language network, their views of this population might be shaped by racial stereotypes about Mexican people, leading them to believe that the policy should not be passed and that this group is undeserving of being called Americans.

Positive humanizing representations were the most numerous, but most of the positive social constructions occurred on the two Spanish-language news networks. One reason for this is because these networks’ reporters could relate to their viewers given their shared identities as immigrants

(Rodriguez, 1996). Among the positive representations, there were instances of counter-stories where undocumented youth portrayed themselves in positive ways (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In comparison, on key dates for the DREAM Act in 2010, the voices of undocumented youth were largely missing on English-language news. I refer to these conflicting, yet simultaneous representations as a process of de/humanization, where on the one hand undocumented youth and immigrants were dehumanized in the dominant space of English-language news, but Spanish-language reporters and immigrants interviewed disrupted this dehumanization through positive representations on Spanish-language news. Through the years, this group of young people have advocated for themselves to national audiences, yet they were not given the space on English-language news, a major segment of television news, to share their counter-stories when the policy was close to passing. Often, dominant discourses remain unchallenged due to the largely missing voices and perspectives in these spaces.

Multimodal CDA together with theories of racism provided analytical tools to bring to the fore and scrutinize racialized ideologies embedded in the varied media sources we interact with daily. It is important to note that both CRT and CDA as critical approaches call for social change, and I argue that identifying the covert and overt racism prevalent in the media against Latinx immigrants can be one step towards challenging dehumanizing practices towards this group. But how do we address and challenge the racial discourses (Bonilla-Silva, 2014) aimed at immigrants, specifically the Latinx community, on a daily basis? This question gets to one of the reasons I examined the DREAM Act and DREAMers on mainstream television news coverage. As an education scholar committed to social justice and equitable educational opportunities, I have been interested in the DREAM Act as a policy issue that would grant access to higher education to a marginalized and underserved group of students. Yet, the media coverage on this issue, especially as I witnessed on English-language news, continues to be embedded in the larger dominant discourse of “illegal immigration,” which has perhaps further hindered the passage of federal policies such as CIR and the DREAM Act. In the final section, I elaborate on the implications of such representations.

### **Implications for Educational Policy & Schooling**

I identified numerous instances of racialized discourse about DREAMers and other immigrants made apparent through images, videos, intonation and spoken words. This type of hidden discourse does not often get the public attention and outcry that overt instances of racial discourse get, but the implications of this type of speech are very real. The news stories that I analyzed represented the racial ideologies of the networks, their reporters and the guests they invited to speak on the issue. These ideologies were then relayed to those watching, people whose positions on the DREAM Act and views of DREAMers might be influenced by these representations. For example, scholars such as Zúñiga et al. (2012) demonstrated that exposure to news coverage on FOX News influenced negative perceptions that not only conservative, but also liberal viewers had of immigrants and immigration policies.

Scholars have argued that media are another form of education (Collins, 2009; Moses, 2007; Paguyo & Moses, 2011). Thus, the implications are great and the education that the public received about this group of people greatly varied depending on the language of the news source. This form of education is not just a source of information, but it promotes ideologies about immigrants and can eventually lead to how people (including educators) show support or opposition toward a policy issue such as the DREAM Act and how they think about a group like undocumented students. Additionally, if viewers are not familiar with or interact on a daily basis with Latinx immigrants, they may interpret the messages about DREAMers and immigrants on English-language news as truths

about this group of people. Further research is needed to identify more explicitly the impact of these discursive practices on the viewers. Beyond how viewers' perceptions are shaped, DREAMers and the greater immigrant community might also be impacted by the way they are portrayed in the media (López, Del Razo, & Lee, 2019).

When reflecting on the fact that the DREAM Act failed and that the coverage on some networks leading up to this vote was either inaccurate or almost nonexistent, I think about the implications of this lack of coverage and how I, as an education researcher, can work to improve how policies are understood by the public. Education researchers were only interviewed on NBC, Telemundo, and Univision and the dehumanizing perspectives often came from reporters or guests against the policy. Welner (2011) argues that education researchers need to consider how their research is taken up in spaces beyond academia. As such, he shared the following about education researchers as policy actors:

The challenge for education researchers, then, is to bridge work that is currently presented in academic journals over to the parallel conversation taking place among think tank advocates, media and policymakers. Active participation by the mainstream researcher community in those conversations will help to infuse serious research into everyday public discourse. (p. 22)

By considering this perspective from Welner, along with the fact that the perspective from educators and education research was largely missing in the 120 stories I examined, there is a great need to infuse the perspective from academic research if not into this medium, into other forms of media that have the potential to influence, change, and challenge the dominant public discourse around policies that impact undocumented immigrants.

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