Article

From Potential "*Nini*" to "Drop Out": Undocumented Young People's Perceptions on the Transnational Continuity of Stigmatizing Scripts

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Abstract: Based on two years of ethnographic data gathered, including 81 h of life-history interviews and 70 h of participant observation with 10 youth who migrated to the United States from Central America, this paper argues that negative labels that often stereotypically depict immigrant youth experiences are often socially imposed on immigrant youth prior to migration. More specifically, this article examines youths' understanding and perceptions of the ways in which family members employ socially available "stigmatizing scripts." Stigmatizing scripts, as described by study participants, are often used by family members in an attempt to protect youth. Analysis of the data suggests that the youth experienced stigmatizing scripts as a way to describe their lives "at-risk" and in need of protection, while simultaneously criminalizing many of their experiences. Furthermore, the article details youth description of the transnational continuity of stigmatizing scripts by describing family members 'usage of scripts but in the US context. The article expands on immigrant families' scholarship, highlighting family dynamics and their impacts on youths' wellbeing and families' unintentional contribution in youths' stigmatization and criminalization.

Keywords: undocumented youth; stigmatization; criminalization; transnational families; youth migration

1. Introduction

"It's fucked up to think about it. Like I'm seen in the same way, but like I didn't need to come here to feel that way. I don't think they [his parents/family] knew what they were doing when they got me here. Feel me?"

Miguel told me this in a conversation we had in January 2020 after sharing he had learned about the term "*nini*" in a work-related training on Positive Youth Development in which he needed to participate as an outreach worker for gang-associated youth near Washington DC. "*Nini*," a term used by non-governmental agencies or government entities in Latin America and the Caribbean, is a stigmatizing label used colloquially to describe the experience of marginalized young adults who do not attend school nor work (*ni estudian, ni trabajan or ninis*). "They're *ninis* over there" Miguel said over the phone, "Like that's what they call youth who are out-of-school and can't get a job, but there's like no help for them, you know. Here we got programs and stuff, but not there. *Ninis*, like *ni trabajan and ni estudian.*"

Before migrating from El Salvador to the United States, Miguel became what I call a *potential "nini"* because he did not fit the age frame described in scholarship on "*ninis*." Because Miguel was 13 years old when he migrated to the United States, instead of between 15 and 21 years old, as the literature on "*ninis*" suggest, his experience does not quite fit into the description of what this label means in the context of Latin America (Buitrón et al. 2018; de Hoyos et al. 2016; Negrete and Leyva 2013). Nonetheless, according to Miguel, being a potential "*nini*" or at-risk of becoming one, motivated his family to use socially available *stigmatizing scripts* that depicted him as gang-associated. Miguel's perception

on his family's usage of scripts highlights their attempt to protect him from actual gang-involvement by motivating his migration to the United States to reunite with his father who had left El Salvador ten years before. Despite the family's attempt to protect Miguel, they subconsciously stigmatized and criminalized him. Ironically, the fear of becoming a "*nini*" in El Salvador became a reality after migrating and Miguel became a high school "drop-out." Like he said, "I didn't need to come here to feel this way." That is to say, he did not need to migrate in order to feel isolated, criminalized, or stigmatized based on the many barriers and challenges he had experienced in his life.

Miguel's insight into how he was stigmatized and criminalized in his country and in the United States is useful in thinking about the importance of understanding immigrant youths' experiences in their countries and how these shape their lives after migrating to the United States. More specifically, it is important to understand Miguel's perspective on how parental and familial fears of children becoming something perceived as negative catalyzes youth migration. In this article, I argue that stigmatizing labels, such as "*nini*," "drop-out," or other synonymous labels, are socially imposed on youth such as Miguel prior to migration to the United States, and particularly within their families. Based on study participants' narratives about the stigmatizing scripts they heard about themselves, I contend that stigmas and labels followed youth through their migration and settlement process. More importantly, the scripts youths detailed in our interviews are often based on the relationships youths maintained with their family in their countries and in the United States. Particularly, I illustrate how participants' perception of their relationship with their family members helped them understand how their stigmatization primed their criminalization after arriving in their host communities. I suggest that what I call *stigmatizing scripts* used within family networks carry a *transnational continuity* because the youths heard similar stigmatizing scripts before and after migration. Explicitly, analysis of the participants' narratives suggests that in cases where there was a fragile relationship with family members with whom youth reunited after years of separation, participants experienced family members employing stigmatizing scripts similar to those they experienced in their country of origin. I suggest in this paper that the transnational continuity of *stigmatizing scripts* prompts undocumented youths' further criminalization and marginalization in the US-context.

It is important to note that the objective of this article is not to blame parents and other family members for the utilization of stigmatizing scripts. Rather, my goal is to highlight how stigmatizing scripts are internalized, interpreted, and often normalized by both immigrant youth and their family members. Scripts are socially available as a result of the use of such scripts by policy writers, governments, and the media in an attempt to blame marginalized families for the hardship, poverty, socio-economic inequality, and long-lasting logics of colonialism and militarization that these families have been forced to endure. As historians and Latin Americanist scholars have written, governments and their institutions should be responsible for the structural inequality experienced by families in the Central American countries from which my participants migrated. I acknowledge the severe stress many families experience as a result of the socio-economic injustices that have taken place around them. These stressors easily become part of tropes and narratives that blame those marginalized, including family members of the young people in my study. Nonetheless, I do not mean to say that family members are producers of the stigmatizing scripts used on children because they have normalized and internalized them. Instead, I suggest that they are utilizing what is socially available as a reactionary coping mechanism in an attempt to protect the children in their families.

Historian Natalia Molina (2014) employs the concept of "scripts" to describe how racialized people are inscribed within certain discourses or tropes that are used and reused over time in order to racialize and criminalize them. For example, Molina points to similar scripts that have been used historically to criminalize immigrants from Asia and Latin America, although at different historical junctures. I build on Molina's notion and incorporate a transnational perspective, arguing that youths' criminalization is not just

in relation to US-racialization or racial configuration as Molina proposes, but also in connection to class, gender, racial, and urban-based prejudice from a Central American context. In this paper, I define *stigmatizing scripts* as socially available tropes that consciously or unintentionally criminalize or stigmatize the actions, behaviors, and experiences of people. Borrowing from the work on stigma by Erving Goffman (1963), I suggest that the functionality of stigmatizing scripts serves as an explanation of a supposed inferiority based on racial, physical, behavioral, and social differences between people. Stigmatizing scripts, in the case of my study participants, also serve as an opportunity for family members to consciously or subconsciously label youth in a way that motivates their families' desire for them to migrate as a method of prevention and protection from potential criminalized activities and behaviors. For instance, a family member's labeling of a young person as "gang member" might serve as a "push factor" that motivates the parents to plan and execute a young person's migration as a way to save or protect them from a social ill taking place in their community, such as gang violence. The socially available stigmatizing scripts used by family members and larger community augment a supposed fear about the young people's actions and behaviors, and the consequences that those might bring the community that depicts youth such as Miguel as either "dangerous" or "endangered"— as anthropologist Jennifer Tilton (2010) has suggested about minoritized Black youth in Oakland, California.

This article problematizes the role of families in order to highlight that family units are not always heroic or supportive, despite their desire to love and improve the lives of children. Families too can be harmful or have deep-rooted dynamics that may cause stigmatization of children, notwithstanding their positive intentions. I build on the way scholarship describes immigrant transnational families, which often describe tensions and fractures between family members as a result of migration. I expand on this body of literature by highlighting undocumented young people's perceptions of their family members' utilization of labels and stigmatizing scripts in their country of origin as well as in the United States. In addition, this article also adds to the growing transnational families literature which centers the voices of children and youth instead of mainly focusing on parents as the central figures. I also examine the importance of understanding family reunification as it plays a role in the stigmatization of youth after their migration to the United States. That is, reunification is often romanticized and the negative impacts of it are often overlooked. This is not to mean that family reunification is generally negative, but rather that because families are complex units and reunification can have multiple outcomes including the stigmatization and criminalization of children, whether intentionally or not. Many of my study participants experienced some of the negative consequences of reunification, while others did not. My objective is to provide a nuanced point of view based on my participants' experience within their family.

In the following pages, I first provide context by discussing existing scholarship that captures the dynamics of transnational families broadly and more specifically on the tensions that result from migration and reunification. Next, I present my conceptual framework by bridging the literature on transnational families with the utilization of stigmatizing scripts by framing families as a social institution and relating it to Molina's (2014) notion of "scripts." I then describe the design of this project and the ethnographic methodological approach used to gather the data. My findings suggest study participants recognized that family members used stigmatizing scripts as an attempt to protect them, but the outcomes were different than expected, leading youth to migrate and separate from family and often criminalizing or stigmatizing their experiences and behaviors. Stigmatizing scripts were similarly experienced by study participants after migration. More specifically, I found that youth experienced stigmatizing scripts similar to those used in their home countries after migrating to the United States. I argue there is a need to understand the role of family dynamics in the way in which undocumented youth experience stigmatization, criminalization, and marginalization. We know from previous scholarship how states and institutions stigmatize migrant youth, but we know little of how family dynamics play a similar role

as the state. I also focus part of the discussion on the gender perspective based on the analysis. In this section of the discussion, I particularly focus on utilization of normative and cis-gendered roles and expectations on immigrant youth while also highlighting the role of women in families who mainly employ stigmatizing scripts on young people.

1.1. Literature Review: Immigrant Transnational Families

The growing literature on transnational families offer various insight into the importance of understanding the complexities of kinship beyond national borders. For instance, according to Foner (1997), transnational immigrant families create networks that facilitate the migration experience of other members. Castañeda (2013) highlighted the family's connection between two different geographical locations through remittances and their importance in shaping development in receiving and sending localities. Schmalzbauer (2008) added that remittances, usually in monetary form, improve the lifestyles of children of migrants who stayed behind in their home countries instead of traveling with their parents. In addition to the economic aspect of transnational connection between families, researchers have also demonstrated a social dimension to the transnational connection between family members, or "social remittances" between family members in two geographical locations (Levitt 2001; Schmalzbauer 2008). At times, these social remittances can be "gossip" narratives that are important relational connections within family networks, as Dreby (2009) has proposed. In many cases, gossip and rumors shared within transnational families contribute to tensions and frictions of the family networks, even across national boundaries.

1.1.1. Tensions and Frictions in Transnational Families

Indeed, no two transnational families are uniform nor behave in a similar manner. In fact, each family may employ different mechanisms or ways in which they preserve their own definition of family and its dynamics (Bryceson and Vuorela 2020). Some transnational families will attempt, at times successfully, to maintain healthy and balanced relationships between members, especially when led by women in the family (Oliveira 2018; Bruhn and Oliveira 2021; Van Hook and Glick 2020). However, there are often inequities that play out in different families, especially in relationships with children who are separated from parents as a result of migration. Inequities within families are especially present in the way in which power dynamics develop or foster between children and migrant parents (Dreby 2006). Scholars have also noted that physical distance between members can impact the family dynamic and create tensions that linger and exacerbate overtime (Dreby 2010; Parreñas Salazar 2005). Physical and at times emotional distance, however, are not the only factors that create tension within the family.

Stress also contributes to family tensions and creates many challenges. Researchers have pointed to immigration enforcement and other legal mechanism that foment stress in transnational families (Dreby 2015; Enriquez 2015; Dreby et al. 2022). Scholarship has highlighted the tensions and stress that legal status brings to mixed-status families where some members are documented while others are not (Abrego 2014; Castañeda 2019). While stress is important to understand given its commonality in transnational families, it is also imperative to understand the trauma caused by family separation and disruption. That is, given that transnational families are based in more than one geographical location, families have to be separated and there is traumatic experience in this process (Castañeda 2019; Heidbrink 2016; Ruehs-Navarro 2022; Terrio 2015), thus contributing additional stressors to transnational families' experiences. An additional stressor within transnational families often occurs during family reunification attempts. Family reunifications take place when a child and a parent or surrogate family is reunited after separation due to migration (Terrio 2015, p. 137). Reunifications are marked by tensions when there are new siblings, cultural norms have shifted, and children's expectations of parental behavioral management have changed (Dreby 2009, 2010; Oliveira 2018; Bruhn and Oliveira 2021). Emily Ruehs-Navarro (2022) has rightly argued that, for many young immigrants, reunification does

not actually bring the parent–child relationship they desired. Ruehs-Navarro furthers her argument by suggesting that state and family figures often "romanticize" family reunification (Ruehs-Navarro 2022, p. 61) without accounting for the challenges, stressors, and tensions that reunification actually creates or exacerbates.

The tensions, frictions, and fractured relationships that arise in transnational families as a result of stress, migration, economic burdens, and cultural pressures are important to understand. However, the way in which undocumented youth in transnational families interpret and experience stigmatizing scripts used by their family members has not been detailed in the literature. In this article, I build on the literature on transnational families, expanding specifically on how transnational family dynamics impact the life of young people prior and post migration and in the process of either reunification or settlement in the host communities.

1.1.2. Stigmatizing Scripts and Families as a Social Institution

Molina (2014) employs "racial scripts" to describe how racialized people are inscribed with certain discourses or tropes used over time in order to racialize and criminalize them. For example, she suggests that similar scripts have been used historically to criminalize immigrants from various backgrounds in a similar manner, but at different historical junctures. For Molina (2014, pp. 6–7), there are three important functions of "racial scripts." First, it helps us understand how racialized groups are "acted upon" by institutions and ordinary citizens. Second, racial scripts serve as an analytical tool that functions to highlight how different racial projects work simultaneously and how they affect different groups at the same time. Lastly, scripts serve to help understand how racialized groups create counter-narratives or "counterscripts" that often challenge the normative tropes about them.

The discourses or narratives often used to stereotypically describe immigrants are good examples of "scripts." Donald Trump's negative depiction of immigrants from Latin America as "rapists" or "criminals," as he mentioned during his presidential campaign in 2016, are tropes that become available scripts to use on anyone racialized as immigrant or foreigner. That is, scripts become readily available for a range of actors that utilize them in order to further marginalize immigrants. Such narratives and tropes about immigrants as described by Donald Trump, for example, come from an institutional place of political and social power. They also have a historical trajectory that predates Donald Trump's presidency. In other words, these are not necessarily new racist and criminalizing tropes about Latinx people, but rather recycled xenophobic tropes that, as Leo Chavez argues, become "part of a grand tradition of alarmist discourse about immigrants and their perceived negative impact of society" (Chavez 2013, p. 4). Nonetheless, others beyond those with political power are also able to use scripts on a quotidian basis to discriminate, marginalize, and exacerbate the criminalization of immigrants. Importantly, not all scripts are overtly used in public discourse, but are also employed through obscure messages or microaggressions causing similar impact on the targeted person (Bonilla-Silva 2014).

I rely on the first function that Molina (2014) offered from racial scripts. That is, I look at the ways in which institutions and, more specifically, ordinary people such as family members "acted upon" children within the family, and how those actions played a role in children's migration. However, I examine families' employment of scripts from the perspective of undocumented youth and their understanding on how mentioned scripts helped construct, foment, and exacerbate their criminalization in their country and in the United States. I build on Molina's notion and incorporate a transnational perspective, suggesting that youth's criminalization is not just in relation to US racialization or racial configuration. I argue that their criminalization and the stigmatizing scripts immigrant youth acquired socially are also based on class, gender, racial, and urban-based prejudice based in a Central American context. For instance, when a young person in my study is labeled a "marero" or "gang member" by a family member, the meaning behind the script changes based on the context, especially because parents and family members may be using those scripts in the manner in which they are used in Central America, not necessarily in

the United States. In other words, "gang member" may have an alarming connotation given the focus on gang violence in Central America, but it may have a different meaning or symbolic value, based on the family members' utilization of it, than what we may imagine gangs in places such as Los Angeles, California, might be.

To bridge transnational families with the notion of stigmatizing scripts, I borrow from scholars who describe family as a social institution (Bau and Fernández 2021; Demir and Drentea 2016; Stacey 1996; Waite 2000). I use Bau and Fernández's (2021) understanding that "the family is a key unit of intergenerational transmission of social belief. This transmission leads to outcomes to persist over time, even in cases where the environment that gave rise to particular traditions or attitudes is no longer the same" (Bau and Fernández 2021, p. 2). With this in mind, I highlight how my participants' experiences within their families prior and after migration shape "social beliefs" about them that transcend national boundaries and persist overtime. The institution of the family into which each study participant is born is complex, at times loving and caring, but hostile and able to cause harm at other times, even if unintended. I detail how undocumented youth perceived their stigmatization based on their family's usage of labels that unintentionally criminalized or stigmatized their realities, engendered migration, and fomented youth's criminalization after migration.

2. Materials and Methods

I draw on ethnographic data collected between 2019 and 2021 in a wealthy, progressive, and inclusive suburban locality near Washington, DC. The data collected for my dissertation aimed to answer a larger question about how immigrant youth who "drop-out" of high school negotiated deservingness and belonging while simultaneously avoiding criminalization. While this article is not central to the question asked in the larger project, the young people I interviewed and followed for two years found the topic of families' role in their criminalization an important point of discussion. My aim in this project is to center the voices and the narratives of young people perceived as criminals or underserving, and found the themes highlighted in this article important to detail in order to nuance the perceived experience of immigrant's youth, which are often based on merit-focused narratives of educationally high achievers or DREAMers.

From October 2019 until December 2021, I interviewed and followed 10 young people who migrated to the United States from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala after 2013. Study participants' ages ranged from 18 to 22 years old during data collection. I intentionally made a criterion for participants to have arrived in the United States after 2013 as to not qualify for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). The participants in this study all lack any immigration protection. However, one of participants has a pending case for asylum, but since those cases can take years to resolve, I continued to engage the participant in the study. The participants all have in common that they attended school after arrival in the United States, but did not complete high school or "dropped-out" of school. They all live in the same suburban county bordering Washington, DC, but all reside in various locations of the county and did not attend the same school when they were enrolled. Four participants were born in El Salvador; three others were born in Honduras; and the last three originate from Guatemala. In terms of gender, the sample is broken down as follows: seven youth self-identify as men and three self-identify as women. In addition, all but one participant clandestinely crossed the Mexico–US border. The youth who did not, arrived via airplane using what he described as "other people's papers."

I relied on "purposive sampling" and "snowball sampling" in order to recruit the participants for my dissertation study (Bernard 2006). I wanted to recruit participants that I would be able to follow over a long period of time and interview more than once about their lives and their migration experiences. I relied on personal networks of social workers and social service personnel I had created while I worked in the same community years prior to the beginning of the data collection phase of the research. I contacted old co-workers and youth allies who would help me recruit for this study. The process of recruitment was challenging, and the continued connection with youth very difficult. Through purposive

sampling based on the networks I had created years before, I was able to meet, recruit, and engage in the project eight young people. The other two youths were referred by a youth who had already agreed to participate in the project. I did have other young people whom I interviewed once or twice, but not in the depth I had desired. The data collected from those one-time interviews are not used in this project, but I did analyze them in the larger dissertation project to add context and compare experiences based on the collected data.

I conducted life-history interviews and participant observations with each study participant after they all consented to participating in the project. Because I wanted to have in-depth conversations over a long period of time with each participant, I decided to engage participants in unstructured interviews where I as the researcher kept themes in mind that I wanted each participant to address, but mainly allowed participants to lead the discussion and conversations (Bernard 2006, p. 211). I interviewed young people in locations where they thought would be private, if meeting in person. For example, a park, on a walk, a deli, or coffee shop. I also held interviews virtually as a result of in-person restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the virtual interviews with youth took place through Zoom, but this mode often seemed unreliable and new for the participants. They often preferred WhatsApp as a source for communication, especially for virtual interviews. After the in-person restrictions of the pandemic were eased by my university's review board, I was able to conduct in-person interviews and observations.

I was ready to do field-work more intensely in the Spring of 2020, but the global pandemic brought things to a halt. While this brought many challenges, the virtual or hybrid aspect of this research created opportunities worth highlighting. For example, while doing in-person data collection, participants never invited me to their homes. Although I had built strong relationships, many of the participants did not feel comfortable with me in their homes for various reasons. I respected this and never asked to be invited to their residences. However, the virtual interviews and meetings we had in a unique way allowed me insight into participants' lives in their homes. Because many of the virtual interviews took place in the home, I was able to see inside of their homes with their permission, see pictures that otherwise they would not be able to share with me, and even greet family members with whom they lived, or friends who happened to be there when we talked. When others were present, however, I did not record nor considered the interview process. Instead, I waited for the participants to be alone to begin interviews. In total, I gathered 81 h of interview data, averaging 8 h of in-depth interviews with each participant. The interviews both virtually and in-person were recorded, transcribed, translated if collected in Spanish, coded, and analyzed only by me.

I also relied on participant observation (Bernard 2006, p. 343) of the young people in their places of work, in the community parks and other public spaces where they connect with others. I also observed youth in General Education Development classes and programs where they were working on attaining their High School Equivalency Diploma. Similar to interviews, the observations were in-person when possible, but I also relied on virtual observation. For instance, I was invited to multiple GED classes via Zoom and I attended. With youth who worked in one locality, I was able to join them during their work day, especially for those who worked with other young people in the same community in which they reside. In these observations, I examined how youth interacted with others, how their behaviors might change depending on those around them, how they talked, and how they expressed themselves and their identities while in each of the locations in which I observed them. In addition to observing the participants of the study, I attended virtual County Council and Board of Education meetings when they would speak about immigrant and disconnected youth. While doing observations, I jotted down notes about what was taking place, quotes said by participants, and other important details of the surroundings or setting in which they were. I would later translate those into more coherent and extensive field-notes that would then be openly coded and analyzed for the project. In total, I gathered more than 70 h of participant observations data that were analyzed for the dissertation research project.

3. Findings: Stigmatizing Scripts on the Lives of Undocumented Youth

Next, I detail some of the findings based on the empirical evidence from the data collected. First, I detail undocumented youths' perception of their stigmatization by family members prior to migration. Study participants perceived that family members, especially women, used stigmatizing scrips in their country of origin and in the United States upon reunification. While participants rightly noticed the consequences of the usage of stigmatizing scripts, scripts were not always intended to be used in a criminalizing manner.

In one of our interviews, Zulma shared about the family tensions and the challenging conditions she experienced while living with her grandmother in El Salvador after her mother migrated to the United States. "They used to kick me out of the house," she said and her voice cracked, but continued her thought, "I used to sleep outside, on the sidewalks sometimes. And news got to my mom here in the U.S. that . . . they were telling her that I was selling drugs, that I was *malcriada*[1] with my grandmother, and that I was going to places of prostitution. So my mom decided to bring me here." Zulma's migration experience, as detailed in her account, was rooted in the social stigmas and labels that she thought were intended to criminalize her while in her country. Her migration is not, by any means, the result of this one instance stated above. Multiple labels, including some used by her family members, led to what immigration scholars consider a "push factor" for migration. However, family dynamics and the role it had in encouraging stigmatizing labels about Zulma were, undoubtedly, salient to her migration trajectory.

When Zulma was 14 years old, she did not have a school to go to because the *canton*[2] near Chirilagua, where she grew up, did not have secondary school. Traveling to a nearby city for secondary education would be too costly for her family, even with the remittances sent by her mother from the United States. Instead of attending school, and in an attempt to reject her grandmother's desire to have her stay at home and engage in daily tasks based on specific gender roles, Zulma became involved in an abusive relationship with an older man. This relationship further strained family tension. Her grandmother did not want her to be part of any relationships with any men, especially an older man such as the one Zulma was dating. Zulma interpreted her grandmother's intended protection as sheltering, abusive, and "oppressive," to use her own words. Zulma, on the other hand, saw her relationship with the older man as a way to gain independence from her family. In turn, her grandmother and *tía* Flor shared what they perceived was Zulma's wrongdoing with Zulma's mother in the United States, often hyperbolizing her experience of dating an older man as "going to places of prostitutions" as a way to alarm her mother to the point of reacting and planning Zulma's migration to the United States in order for her to escape the complex circumstances Zulma and family were facing in El Salvador.

According to Zulma, after several more incidents where her grandmother thought she was being disrespectful, her mother called her from the United States and said, "I'm going to bring you here because I don't want you to end up like one of *those* people." Zulma's mother feared her daughter would become a gang-involved young person, someone criminally associated, or pregnant, which would bring many personal challenges to Zulma. Her family in Chirilagua thought she was a deviant young person that needed to be saved from the negative actions that supposedly painted her future based on her actions as detailed above. As a result, without allowing space for discussion or to hear Zulma's thoughts about the idea, her uncle, Carlos, showed up at her grandmother's house one early morning in April 2015 and said, "'your mom already told me that I have to take you to the capital today so you can go to her.'" Zulma recounted that, "from that moment on I started the very long journey [to the US]."

Miguel discussed a similar experience to that of Zulma in one of our interviews. Although Miguel's dad, Santiago, had migrated north to the United States 10 years prior to their reunification in Maryland, Miguel never thought about leaving his hometown to live a new life with his father. Miguel was only three years old when Santiago made his way to California for better work and earning opportunities. They talked several times each month; some months more than others. Miguel never thought his family's plan was to

send him to live with his father although they had maintained semi-frequent conversations throughout the years. According to Miguel, after several incidents that his mother and grandmother perceived as worrisome for Miguel, his family planned for his migration to reconnect with Santiago. In an interview Miguel told me:

> **Miguel:** I knew some of my friends that I used to call cousins because we were really close, [they] started getting into things that would land them in trouble and caused problems.
>
> **Eric:** Like what? What were your cousins doing? ¿cómo qué?
>
> **Miguel:** Well, you know the *maras* were already near [our town] and they would send them to do things in Santo Domingo. And they [cousins] began participating.
>
> **Eric:** And you as well?
>
> **Miguel:** No, no. But my family thought that because I saw them often and always said hi or something to them, that I too was involved. And that's why my dad one day called and said, "tomorrow someone is coming to pick you up and you are going to travel with your aunt to come to the [United] States." And that's it. Maybe they thought I was going to be a vagabond, a good for nothing, and I understand that, I think.

Gender roles and gendered dynamics within families played an important role in the types of scripts used to create an alarming scenario where youths were perceived as "endangered" and needing to be protected by the act of motivating migration. In other words, if families used socially available stigmatizing scripts that aligned with the behaviors of the young person, families can paint a picture where children's best option is to migrate and escape the social dynamic taking place in their hometown. The analysis of Miguel and Zulma's experiences underline the gender tones behind how the participants remembered family members used scripts towards them. On the one hand, Zulma's relationship with an older man signaled to her grandmother and aunt that she is "going to places of prostitution." The stigmatizing script used to describe Zulma's experience is one that underlines promiscuity, shames sexual relationships, and implies that others may have control over her body and actions in a relationship. On the other hand, it undergirds gendered stereotypes and gender roles where women are seen as promiscuous or sexually driven, and men are hypermasculine and associated with violence. The latter is exemplified by Miguel's alleged involvement in gang activity as a result of having people he associated with locally involved in an alleged criminalized activity.

Analysis of youth narratives suggests that women in each of Miguel and Zulma's families were primarily using stigmatizing scrips. In the case of Miguel, it was his grandmother and mother, while Zulma's grandmother and aunt used scripts that were then used as evidence of their need for protection through migration. That is, in both Miguel and Zulma's case, the women in their family who had remained with them in their country of origin used scripts on the participants in an attempt to protect them from potential violence or precarious conditions and experiences. In other words, the intentionality behind the utilization of scripts by family members was not necessarily about stigmatizing or criminalizing their experience. However, despite the intention of protecting the children in the family, youth felt stigmatized and criminalized as a result of family usage of scripts.

Zulma and Miguel's experiences exemplify how family as a social institution shapes and employs stigmatizing scripts that migrant youth carry across borders and spaces, causing a "transmission of social belief," as Bau and Fernández's (2021, p. 2) suggest, once immigrant youth have migrated and reunited with family members in the United States. That is to say, once youth in my study internalized the stigmatizing scripts used by their family members, the mentioned scripts also carried a transnational continuity through youth migration process. According to the young people I interviewed, they also experienced similar scripts once they reunited with family members after migrating to the United States.

Family Reunification and Continuity of Stigmatizing Scripts

Analysis of the data suggested that stigmatizing scripts youth internalized in their home countries followed them to the United States based on the types of relationships they maintained with their reunifying families. Migrant youth migrate to reunite with parents or loved ones whom they had been separated from for years (Heidbrink 2020; Lukes 2017; Ruehs-Navarro 2022). My study participants shared their ambivalence in reuniting with their family members, especially parents. Research represents the ambivalence my participants experienced. In her work on immigrant unaccompanied youth, for instance, Ruehs-Navarro (2022, p. 56) states that family reunification is often romanticized. The youth I got to know similarly shared about "romanticized family reunifications" (Ruehs-Navarro 2022) by highlighting the tensions and frictions they experienced with parents, siblings, or step-parents after settling in their host community. Instead of detailing stress-free and caring moments with family members, there were many challenges and often physical violence that impacted the participants. Migrant youths' fragile and often unsafe relationships with family members in the U.S. context made them feel similarly stigmatized as they did in their home countries as a collateral consequence of family members' employment of stigmatizing scripts. Participants felt these scripts impacted their attempt to fit-in within the family unit after migrating to the United States. Importantly, participants did not always present parents and family members in a negative light. They described the complexity of family dynamics where at times parents may be loving and caring, but at others they may be unsafe and fearful.

Maria, for example, who was 20 years old when I met her in 2021, shared about her family reunification in a way that described Ruehs-Navarro's conceptualization. Maria left Santa Rosa de Copán in the western part of Honduras in 2015 to reunite with her mother, Claudia, in Maryland. Maria and Claudia were separated when Maria was just four years old. They had been separated for 12 years. Claudia migrated north, first to Texas for a few years, and then settled in Maryland, where she found work cleaning houses with a cousin. Like Zulma and Miguel, Maria's migration was abrupt after she witnessed gang violence in her town. Her mother was eager to have her travel to the United States, but she hardly had the monetary resources to pay for her to travel. Claudia borrowed $4000 for Maria to come to the United States.

Maria opened up a lot about her relationship with her mother in our conversations. She described the relationship as "fragile" and at times, "toxic," especially when Claudia attempted to connect with Maria over religious beliefs and attending church. The most friction took place a couple of years after the two reunited in Maryland. Maria enrolled in Western High School after migrating and moving into her mother's apartment in Rockland. Maria felt she was excelling in her English as a Second Language (ESL) program and had made some friends that helped her socialize and become more accustomed to life in the country. There were many issues she brought up in our interviews that described her negative experiences in school, such as bullying, lack of educational and social support, and other racialized experiences that contributed to her dropping-out. Maria stopped attending school in the middle of her second year in high school. She also felt additional pressure from Claudia, which contributed to her sense of shame and decision to leave school.

During a walk we took together in June 2021, Maria shared more about her relationship with her mother. I pushed my then one-year-old daughter, Lucha, in her red stroller while Maria and I walked on the sidewalk of Weller Ave. It was loud from the zooming cars and windy enough to wave Maria's dark and wavy hair into her face. We usually talked in English, but this time she changed to Spanish to say,

> Nunca me he llevado bien con ella. [Ella] siempre quiere que sea una 'niña sana.' Antes me quería llevar a su iglesia pero nunca lo quería. Y por mis amigos, o como se veían, pensaba que estaba metida en drogas. Sí, yo fumé varias veces, pero a los 17 quedé embarazada. No le quería decir nada a ella. La mamá de una 'amiga' (doing quotes with her fingers) le dijo a mi mamá. Ella me llamó 'puta,' *slut* y que me fuera de la casa.

You would not call your daughter a slut, right? That tells you how it is with her [Claudia][3].

In a sad turn of events, just shy of three months into her pregnancy, Maria had a miscarriage and lost the baby. She felt depressed, she said, often wanting to just "give up and not do anything." Maria moved in with a friend after Claudia pushed her out of the house when she was pregnant. They have since mended their relationship, but Maria feels it is more superficial and she does not live with her mother, saying "she can't control my life" that way.

Eduin had a similar reception with family after reuniting with his mother whom he had only known for 5 months of his life before she migrated to the United States. At age 12, Eduin migrated to reunite with his mother. Eduin's reunification was momentarily lived, however. Just a year after he reunited with his mother, he left the house. "I knew it, like a year in. Like I knew I had to go. At 13, over there [in Guatemala] you're already working or looking for work. You already a man. I didn't want any more of their shit, their abuse." It has been eight years since Eduin had a stable place to live, often underemployed or unemployed, making ends meet one day at a time. Sometimes, making ends meet turns into problems and further challenges in his life, as he often relied on criminalized activity that consequently impacted his life. However, Eduin decided it was better for him to live almost a clandestine life than having a relationship with his mother and the family she created in the United States. Eduin mentioned in an interview that he thought his mother's immigration status had changed and had since become a naturalized citizen. If such is the case, Eduin could be eligible for immigration protections. Nonetheless, that would require having a relationship with his family, and he chooses not to do that in order to, in his words, "validate myself. I don't need them. It ain't about pride, just don't feel they did good for me."

Eduin and Maria's insights about their family dynamics are not very different from the experience Miguel and Zulma had in their home country. The unhealthy and, at times, abusive family dynamics pushed them to leave their home after feeling stigmatized and criminalized by their own family members as either "at-risk" of criminal behavior, or assuming they were already involved in criminalized activities. However, instead of fleeing to another country where family was perceived to be welcoming and desiring to connect with them, as in the case for Zulma and Miguel, Eduin and Maria were trapped in a country that did not want them based on the immigration laws and policies. They were also without family support, and learning to navigate "illegality" with many odds stacked against them.

Similar to the scripts used in their country of origin, the stigmatizing scripts used by family member in the US-context were also gendered. Like Zulma, Maria perceived the scripts shamed, stereotyped, and labeled as a "slut," as Claudia called her. The scripts of "sluts" or "going to places of prostitution" are similar in their employability. However, an important difference is that, in Maria's case, the script was not employed in an attempt to protect her through migration, but rather to reject, shame, and justify her displacement from living with her mother. Claudia, Maria's mother, had certain unspoken social expectations of Maria, especially given that from Claudia's perspective, she was pulling Maria away from social dangers in Honduras. Maria, in Claudia's view, was not "a good little girl" like Claudia desired; Maria needed to be rejected from the lifestyle that Claudia had created for herself in the United States, thus justifying displacing her out of the house and into the streets.

Hypermasculinity is also apparent in Eduin's narrative, similar to that of Miguel, when family members used gang-association as a gendered and stigmatizing script. Eduin noted, "at 13 . . . you already working . . . you already a man," which highlights Eduin's internalized gendered role that had been ascribed to him prior to migration. He recalls that, at a certain age, young boys are socially expected to work in Guatemala, and that he could continue to do similarly in the United States. Moreover, Eduin's emphasis in becoming "a man" was also an attempt to gain autonomy from family he reunited with in the United States. His agency, though hypermasculine, challenges westernized and

popular, US-centered understanding about childhood and children's role in the family (Breslow 2021; Heidbrink 2020). Nonetheless, unlike Maria, who was kicked-out of her mother's apartment when she became pregnant, Eduin took it on his own to leave the home that he perceived as hostile. In contrast to Maria, he has never mended his relationship with his mother.

The family's attempt to protect youth from becoming further criminalized by the social dynamics taking place in their countries, as in the case of Miguel and Zulma, led them to be internally labeled negatively by their own family. For example, Zulma being labeled *malcriada* or promiscuous "going to places of prostitutions," as she mentioned, were created categories that fomented an "at-risk" panic in the family that motivated her migration to the United States. Zulma's mother's fear of Zulma becoming "one of those people" exemplifies how stigmatizing labels, or the potential of becoming stigmatized, are used as a motivation for youth to migrate. While the family utilization of stigmatizing scripts towards their own children may have been an attempt to protect them from a social issue, it also contributed to their migration, but also their criminalization and marginalization. Ironically, the fear of personifying some of the labels imposed on them while in their country became reality after migrating to a place they thought would only offer them opportunities of safety, growth, education, and economic prosperity—the false narrative of the "American Dream." Instead of opportunities, all the collaborators in the study were consequently labeled "drop-outs" after leaving high school before graduating. The "drop-out" label has carried a negative stigma and association with deviance and criminality since it emerged in the 1960s in the United States (Dorn 1996; Meyerhoff 2019; Rumberger 2011). As a result, the young people in my study had to learn to navigate immigration "illegality" (De Genova 2004; Dreby 2015), but added an additional layer of criminalization as a result of the "drop-out" label later acquired socially once in the United States.

It is also important to understand who in the family was using the stigmatizing scripts. For Zulma, her aunt and grandmother were the central actors in employing scripts that stigmatized her experience. This aspect of the labeling arises as a result of women participating in migration flows in search of safety, better socio-economic opportunities (Valdez-Gardea 2009; Oliveira 2018; Dreby 2010), or following the steps of other family members, especially husbands or life-partners (Cerruti and Massey 2001) while their children remained in the county of birth. Zulma's mother, in this dynamic, was not like her grandmother. Instead, she played the role of protector and "parenting from abroad" (Oliveira 2018; Dreby 2010). In Miguel's case, his grandmother and mother were primarily involved in the stigmatizing process, and his father the one doing the "parenting from abroad" and welcoming Miguel after migration process. Miguel's relationship with his father stalled or failed after several years post-reunification. Zulma's relationship with her mother, on the other hand, was strengthened by their reunification and has maintained a healthy relationship, according to Zulma.

Zulma's example of reunification is not a common one, however. Fragile and romanticized family reunification after youth migration played a role in further criminalization and marginalization after youths migrated to the United States. In the case of Maria and Eduin, for example, it led to running away, being forced out of their home, and experiencing unstable housing situations. Both participants felt it necessary to leave their home in order to escape what they perceived as harassment from their mothers whom they had reunited with after many years of separation as a result of migration. In both cases, women were at the center of the labeling of their children. In Maria's case, her mother used a gender-specific stigmatizing label when she used the word, "slut" to describe what she perceived was Maria's deviant behavior or hanging out with friends who were "pot-smokers." Claudia's actions in displacing Maria out of her house after discovering Maria's pregnancy is an example of her perceived gendered expectation for Maria. It also highlights family members' internalized ideas about normative gender expectations, where if youth did not fit into those narratives, family members relied on available social scripts that stigmatized their sexuality. That is to say, Maria's mother saw her child beyond the "good little girl"

perspective she had years prior, and switched the script to one where Maria's sexual activity was stigmatized as negative, wrong, or immoral.

In addition to feeling stigmatized based on normative gender expectations, participants also reported lack of social emotional support from their parents which led to failed relationships over time. Furthermore, the lack of emotional support they experienced from family members motivated participants to seek connection beyond the family networks. Miguel's example of his relationship with his father, exemplifies this point well:

> So like I would say, like my family, like they doubted me. Especially when I dropped out. Like even my dad when I was going to [the youth center] I was paying rent. I was going to [youth center] and I was working at Five Guys, so I'm paying rent. I was paying my dad rent. Not because, like no big deal, but like, "oh if you're not in school, you gonna have to pay rent, you working?" and I'm like, "I am in school [in a GED Program]" and he would be like "oh blah blah blah, that ain't shit, you ain't even doing shit blah blah blah, this and that." so like a lot of discouragement... not a lot of support, so yeah. So like I said, like I fucking moved out from my dad's. I was tired of sharing a room with that man.

The lack of social and emotional support also played a role in the employment of stigmatizing scripts by family members towards the youth. Miguel, for example, was called "marero" or gang-member by his father on multiple occasions, according to Miguel. Ironically, this occurred prior to Miguel's gang association because he befriended someone involved in gang activity, and maintained a relationship with this person for many years.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

While scholarship has rightly concentrated on family networks, supports, and at times, tensions within them, the ways in which reunification has been studied overlook the family's role in the unintentional criminalization and stigmatization of migrant children. In other words, we know that social institutions such as schools and other government entities stigmatize and criminalize young people in given country contexts (Galli 2019). In the context of Central America, for example, scholars have written about youth marginalization as a result of lack of educational access, employment opportunities, or other social and personal necessities (de Hoyos et al. 2016; Negrete and Leyva 2013). Similarly, scholarship about immigrant stigmatization and racialization in the United States often focuses on macro-level producers or contributors to immigrant's criminalized and stigmatized experience (Chavez 2013; Molina 2014; Ngai 2005). In this article, however, I contribute to the abovementioned scholarship by providing insight into the family's role in the employment of socially available stigmatizing scripts on children and the consequences of the utilization of scripts.

The analysis shows that families do not always intentionally utilize these scripts as a form of punishment or intentional marginalization. Instead, scripts are used as an attempt to protect children and youth from certain social dynamics that place their lives at risk. Yet, the consequences of the utilization of scripts are severe in many cases. On the one hand, for example, it creates a dimension of youths' experiences in their countries as "at risk" of involvement in criminality and motivates youth migration to the United States in order to escape that social experience. On the other hand, the scripts actually criminalize youth experiences in a way that perceives youth activities as deviant or criminally-bound.

In analyzing youths' narratives on their perceptions of family members' employment of scripts, I found that stigmatizing scripts are highly gendered. The gender perspective that analysis shows is twofold. First, it is important to know who mainly employs stigmatizing scripts within the family. Female figures, such as mothers, grandmothers, and aunts were the main people in the family who used stigmatizing scripts. This is an important contribution that expands on the literature on immigrant mothers and transnational families by highlighting the micro-level families' mechanism and dynamics that intentionally or unintentionally harm children. In many cases, as is stated above, the intention is not harming or stigmatizing children, but actually protecting them from different experiences.

Nonetheless, the outcome of scripts impacts youth development of well-being, safety, security, and sense of belonging. In the examples of Miguel, Maria, and Eduin we see how stigmatizing scripts are internalized by youth to the point of developing mechanisms that allow them to resent their family for lacking emotional, social, and financial support. In the examples above, we see the outcome of house displacement and, in extreme cases such as Eduin's, homelessness or unsafe housing.

Secondly, stigmatizing scripts are gendered as they rely on normative and cis-gendered roles and expectations for immigrant youth. That is, youth feel they are boxed into specific gender roles and expectations because of the types of stigmatizing scripts youth and family members internalize. For example, Maria's expectation to be a "good little girl" by her mother was shattered by her sexual activity and her pregnancy. Zulma too felt stigmatized because of her relationship with an older man and was perceived by women in her family in El Salvador and in the United States as "going to places of prostitution" because of her relationship. In both cases, the young people were perceived to not adhere to normative gender and sexual expectations of young women. As a result, their sexual activity was treated by family members as immoral.

The stigmatizing scripts placed on young men like Eduin and Miguel were also gendered. In these cases, the scripts used were based on ideas around hypermasculinity, especially the notion of providing for oneself or in connection to violence. Eduin's narrative illustrates the internalization of masculine ideas of self-sustainability, especially when he said that at a certain young age one is supposed to already "be a man" and already be able to provide and sustain oneself by working. Miguel's case is more clearly connected to issues on violence, especially in connection to gang-violence.

The labels and stigmas that families employ towards children, I have argued, are not only impacting youth personally, but also impact youths' relationship with their family members. These relationships are often weakened to the point of needing to separate from parents and family prior to and after migration. In addition, the stigmatizing scripts experienced by the young people in my study carried a continuity in the young people's lives and arguably serve as socially available stigmatizing scripts that other actors beyond the family network can use to further criminalize immigrant youth.

While scholarship on transnational families is broad and covers different social, emotional, and financial aspects, this body of literature does not detail the process of stigmatization of young people as a result of their family relationships. In this article, I have expanded on the literature about transnational families that describes tensions and fractures between family members as a result of migration. However, I contribute to understanding of the ways in which family members, especially parents, and more specifically mothers, contribute to the labeling and stigmatization of immigrant children in their countries of origin and in the United States after migration.

While the article makes several contributions to explain some nuances in transnational immigrant families' dynamics, this research is not meant to be generalizable. The analysis provided in this article is solely based on experiences of the ten participants in my study. I know an important limitation is that of the sample size. I acknowledge that despite the depth of ethnographic data gathered, a larger sample size may have produced a different analytical outcome than that described here. Future research can hopefully further my analytical and conceptual contributions and highlight more nuances in immigrant youths' experiences in transnational families.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted following ethical guidelines by the University at Albany. The research did not require IRB approval, according to the Institutional Review Board at the University at Albany.

Informed Consent Statement: Verbal informed consent was obtained from all the study participants involved in this research.

Notes

[1] Translation to English is "spoiled" or "bratty." These meanings, however, are interpreted much more harshly by older family members in Latin America and the Caribbean.

[2] Translation: commonly used in Central America to describe a small village or hamlet, usually in rural areas.

[3] "I have never gotten along with her. She always wanted me to be a 'good little girl.' Before, she wanted to take me to her church, but I never wanted to. And because of my friends, or because of the way they looked, she thought I was involved in drugs. Yes, I smoked several times, but when I was 17 I became pregnant. I didn't want to tell my mom anything, but the mom of a 'friend' (doing quotes with her fingers) told my mom. She called me a slut, a slut, and that I should leave her house. You would not call your daughter a slut, right? That tells you how it is with her [Claudia]."

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