American individualism and the social incorporation of unaccompanied Guatemalan Maya young adults in Los Angeles

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This study prompts a re-examination of segmented assimilation by investigating the social incorporation of unauthorized Guatemalan Maya young adults who arrive to the USA as unaccompanied minors to work while their families remain abroad. Unaccompanied Guatemalan Maya young adult participants of a Los Angeles support group show that Americanization and the adoption of American individualism equips youth growing up without parents or supportive social institutions with the rhetoric and behaviours of self-responsibility necessary for emotional, psychological and financial stability. As youth become expressive individuals, their social commitments move from the transnational family to the local community, which bolsters social incorporation and shapes aspirations for socio-economic mobility.

Keywords: Guatemalan Maya; unaccompanied minors; unauthorized youth; immigrant incorporation; support group; individualism

Immigrant youth incorporation scholarship focuses on resources garnered from two socializing institutions: family and schools (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Previous research emphasizes that immigrant children are members of a local family unit with the potential to sustain strong ties to the co-ethnic community. Accordingly, individualistic behaviours threaten incorporation and socio-economic mobility as community collectivity and embeddedness decline (James 1997; Rumbaut and Komaie 2010). In the USA, support groups are spaces where participants engage in personal narrative development and self-construction, known as expressive individualism (Wuthnow 1994a). While some fear that individualism, in any form, comes at the expense of the public good, expressive individualism learned in support groups might bolster social mindedness. Thus, Americanization through support group participation among unauthorized, unaccompanied young adults may be a catalyst for social incorporation for a group that lacks access to a local family unit and to academic mentors and guides.

Young Mayan migrants who leave their families behind to work low-wage jobs in the USA find that work structures much of their daily lives. Disparaged for their dark complexion, short stature and cultural differences, indigenous migrants receive little support in a resource-poor Latino community (Menjivar 2002). Research finds that mutual aid societies play an important historical role in cultivating capital in immigrant communities (Moya 2005); furthermore, ethnic identity is a resource in
hostile contexts of reception (Popkin 1999). Among unaccompanied Mayan youth in Los Angeles, developing alternative spaces to build community and achieve social incorporation, which may include cultural preservation programmes (Batz 2014; Estrada 2013), community garden groups (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2014) and support groups (Canizales 2014), is fundamental to navigating life in the margins of US society and social commitments to families abroad. This paper focuses on a support group of unaccompanied Mayan youth in the Pico-Union neighbourhood of Los Angeles.

This study draws on ethnographic observation of a support group community for unaccompanied young adult migrants and in-depth interviews with group members to examine if Americanization, and the adoption of individualism through support group participation more specifically, threatens the social incorporation and mobility prospects for unaccompanied young people, or whether it acts as a catalyst for incorporation. First, to what extent do unaccompanied youth support group participants adopt the rhetoric and behaviour of the host society? Second, does Americanization lead to downward mobility and loss of social mindedness among unaccompanied youth with transnational commitments? Third, how does individualism learned in a group setting shape ethnic and community identity? I find that participation in this support group encourages practices of expressive individualism, which equips youth growing up without parents or supportive social institutions with the rhetoric and behaviours of self-responsibility necessary for emotional, psychological and financial stability. As youth become expressive individuals, their social and financial commitments are not severed but shift from the transnational family to the local community, and aspirations for mobility emerge. In all, individualism thus serves to bolster, rather than threaten, incorporation.

Examining the adaptation of unaccompanied Central American young-adult migrants is important for several reasons. First, between 2008 and 2013, the USA saw a fivefold increase in the number of unaccompanied minors apprehended at the US southern border, from 8,041 to nearly 40,000 (US Customs and Border Protection 2014). Over 67,000 child migrants were apprehended at the US southern border by the end of fiscal year 2014. In 2012, the rate of unaccompanied minor migration from Central America, namely Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, outpaced that from Mexico (Center for American Progress 2014). Fleeing violence and poverty, some children migrate in hopes of family reunification (Chavez and Menjivar 2010); others leave their families behind to find work in global cities such as Los Angeles. Our understanding of this population is limited to data collected in federal institutions (Heidbrink 2014; Kennedy 2014), creating a conceptual gap in immigration and immigrant youth integration literature.

Second, immigrant youth incorporation scholarship acknowledges the importance of social, economic and community context in determining immigrant outcomes, but previous research, guided by segmented assimilation theory, limits its scope to young people’s socialization through family and school. The unconventional trajectory of immigrant youth who do not live with parents in the USA and who are workers rather than students provides an opportunity to evaluate the mechanisms assumed to shape incorporation, such as Americanization and individualism, and explore alternative socializing spaces, like support groups. Understanding the self-construction and orientation process of unaccompanied youth gives insight into neglected spaces and catalysts of incorporation.
Theorizing the incorporation of lone child migrants

Relying on segmented assimilation theory, sociological scholarship on immigrant children outlines three potential trajectories of socio-economic incorporation (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993). The first path is that of straight-line assimilation into the white middle-class mainstream. Second, immigrants may downwardly incorporate into the minority underclass. Finally, segmented assimilation proposes a delayed or selective assimilation pathway where children remain embedded in the immigrant community while drawing on its ‘moral and material resources’ to achieve social, economic and political incorporation (Neckerman, Carter, and Lee 1999). Selective assimilation emphasizes the parents’ role in providing resources of aid and mobility to their children by slowing acculturation and exposure to discrimination from the cultural mainstream to prevent downward mobility into a minority underclass (Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008). Parents do this by embedding their children in a supportive co-ethnic community in order to delay Americanization and maintain parental authority. Children are at risk of downward mobility, or dissonant acculturation, when they Americanize more quickly than their parents by adopting American behaviours and practices (James 1997; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

In addition to strong familial and co-ethnic ties, researchers find that access to a ‘really significant other’ or a non-parental figure who takes ‘a keen interest in a child’ is decisive in immigrant children’s socio-economic assimilation trajectory (Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008, 26). Gonzales (2011) finds that ‘trusting relationships’ with teachers or other adults are a key variable in determining the mobility pathways of undocumented youth as they transition into adulthood and ‘illegality’. Parents, the co-ethnic community, and significant others buffer children from societal sentiments and mechanisms of exclusion as they discipline and guide them towards success. Immigrant parents view success as synonymous with educational attainment and upward mobility (Waters 2000). However, children growing up in US society view success as the acquisition of material goods and bounded in competitiveness and American individualism (Waters 2000), the core of American culture (Lamont 2000; Lipset 1996). Downward mobility occurs among poor, urban youth when low-wage working parents are unable to meet their children’s expectations of consumption, causing a loss of parental authority, the rupture of family ties, children’s rejection of their co-ethnic community, and deviant behaviour (Zhou and Bankston 1998).

Children’s perceived dependence on parents and their peers and their assumed role as consumers of knowledge, culture and goods relegates researchers’ analysis of Americanization and individualism to its utilitarian form, which has affinities to economic advancement and maximized self-interest (Lipset 1996). These studies ignore expressive individualism, which places emphasis not on achievement, but on the development of one’s feelings and self-fulfilment by doing what feels good and right for the individual (Bellah et al. 1996). Communitarian sociologists suggest that individualism and community collectivism are unable to coexist and therefore create an ‘unbalanced society’ as individual values dominate social ones (Etzioni 1996). Others contest this when arguing that becoming individualistic in self-expression can enable social mindedness if one associates their self-fulfilment with promoting the public good of a community (Lichterman 1995; Wuthnow 1994a).
Researchers find this to be true among individuals who ‘identify a personalized form of public commitment’ as they construct ‘a unique and personal self’ within community group settings (Lichterman 1995, 276). A study of support groups elucidates that while more people are engaging in expressive individualism, they are not withdrawing from the community but are developing a new sense of commitment founded on the social ties and solidarity that accompanies personal storytelling whereby individuals ‘turn their own experiences into a collective event’ (Wuthnow 1994b, 298). Mutual aid relationships may evolve into social capital based on shared experiences of ethnic discrimination and community marginality (Batz 2014; Menjivar 2002). Thus, rather than threatening immigrant incorporation and mobility, individualism can serve as a platform for social mindedness, social capital cultivation and incorporation in the host society.

Studies of expressive individualism focus on middle-class Americans who employ self-help resources, therapists and psychologically oriented support programmes (Kim, Sherman, and Taylor 2008; Lichterman 1995; Wuthnow 1994b). Scholars have accounted for self-help and mutual aid groups for youth coping with stigmatization of their sexual orientation (Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer 2006) or disease (Grant 1988). The adoption of expressive individualism in the immigrant youth socialization and incorporation process has yet to be sociologically explored. I hypothesized that support groups may be particularly important for young unaccompanied migrants who must navigate the host society without mature social support networks while negotiating transnational commitments.

In all, segmented assimilation theory proposes a ‘top-down acculturation model’ wherein immigrant youth’s successful incorporation is dependent on embeddedness in the family unit and co-ethnic community, and slowed Americanization (Estrada 2013, 2). Parents who remain abroad are unable to buffer their children from discrimination, poverty and social isolation and exclusion, a taken-for-granted factor in segmented assimilation theory. Low-wage unaccompanied migrant youth workers are limited in their ability to participate in school. Thus, young people develop and participate in alternative spaces of support, such as the informal support group studied here. Research on expressive individualism contends that support groups facilitate participation in American therapeutic culture by creating a shared space through which people construct their narrative while building ties of trust and reciprocity and bolster public commitment. This work bridges these two bodies of literature by demonstrating how unaccompanied young adults who lack access to traditional supportive institutions in the host society adopt American ideals of individualism, self-fulfilment and self-duty. Rather than posing a threat to incorporation, individualism becomes a catalyst of social incorporation by fostering mechanisms of mental, emotional and financial stability and orients young people towards the local community.

Data and methods

This study is based on the ethnographic research conducted between July 2012 and August 2013 of Voces de Esperanza (Voices of Hope), an informal support group for unaccompanied Guatemalan Maya young adults in Los Angeles. While Guatemalan
migration to the USA began in 1954, Maya migration to Los Angeles became notable during the 1970s and increased as the Guatemalan civil war intensified in the 1980s (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Manz 1988). More than one million Guatemalans live in the USA and Los Angeles is home to the largest Guatemalan community outside of the home country (US Census Bureau 2013). Guatemalan immigrants concentrate in Pico-Union and MacArthur Park, two poor neighbourhoods in urban Los Angeles. Approximately 50–60% of Guatemalans in Los Angeles are Maya (Estrada 2013).

*Voces de Esperanza* is oriented towards promoting self-help and community connectedness among unaccompanied Guatemalan Maya in Pico-Union. It has about forty members, aged eighteen to thirty-one, who migrated as minors (between the ages of twelve and seventeen). Led by two coordinators, Jorge and Wilfredo, *Voces de Esperanza* meets for two hours a week, during which participants are encouraged to ‘develop’ in seven areas: physical, intellectual, moral, emotional, spiritual, social and sexual. Dialogue opens with the simple question: ‘How was your week?’ Responses vary from descriptions of experiences at work to more intimate discussions of family, physical, mental or emotional health. The highest level of education earned among group members is sixth grade, with the exception of one respondent who earned a General Education Development (GED) degree after ten years of study in the USA. These youth predominately work in downtown Los Angeles garment factories, among other low-wage, unregulated and exploitative jobs.

I spent several hours each week attending support group and coordinator meetings, as well as community garden clean-ups, book club gatherings and other cultural events attended by *Voces de Esperanza* participants. During group meetings, I kept a small notebook and pen with which I recorded keyword jottings, scenario paraphrasing and verbatim quotes. The latter were preferred and employed as often as possible. My notes centred on personal narratives and interactional responses in order to stay true to ‘indigenous meanings’ (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 140). Keywords and paraphrasing were written in English and direct quotes were written in Spanish to strengthen interpretive validity.

In addition, between December 2012 and July 2013 I conducted seventeen semi-structured in-depth interviews with *Voces de Esperanza* participants, including the two group coordinators and fifteen participants (thirteen men and two women). Although I set out to interview an equal number of men and women, men were oversampled due to their more consistent participation in *Voces de Esperanza*, likely stemming from gender ideologies and occupational structures that confine Maya women to private spaces (Hagan 1994; Menjivar 2000). Interviews lasted between forty and seventy-five minutes and were conducted in Spanish. All interviewees agreed to be audio-recorded.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using Dedoose qualitative data analysis software. The extended case method guided my analysis of data in light of existing theories of immigrant youth incorporation, support group participation and individualism (Burawoy 1998), while the grounded theory method directed coding and data analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1994). Pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity.
Results

Support group participants adopting expressive individualism

This research investigates the extent to which unaccompanied youth support group participants adopt the rhetoric and behaviour of the host society. As Voces de Esperanza gathers in the dimly lit dining room of a cooperative housing complex in Pico-Union, Los Angeles, newcomers shake hands with those who have already arrived. Young men greet me with a ‘Hello, Chep!’ and a chuckle. Chep is the Mayan K’iche translation for Stephanie. Young women offer a timid hug and a soft smile. The dining room chairs scattered about are brought together to form a circle at the centre of the room and we make small talk until the meeting begins.

One night Gabriel, a twenty-year-old from El Quiche, Guatemala, was asked to open the meeting. He stood up to introduce himself and to welcome others to an ‘alternative group’ founded on ‘honesty and an open mind’. Customary to weekly group introductions, Gabriel began explaining how this support group helped him cope with the traumas of migration and settlement in a new society. Arriving in Los Angeles from Guatemala when he was sixteen to provide for his mother who remains in El Quiche, Gabriel began working in downtown Los Angeles’ garment industry. Like others, he was disappointed to find that Los Angeles was not the land of opportunity that his older brother, who migrated a few years before him, had described. Rather than finding wealth and opportunity, wages were low and the cost of living was high, leaving very little of his earnings to remit to his expectant family.

That night, as Gabriel’s eyes shifted from one side of the room to the other, he shared that he spent close to one year in a deep depression brought on by loneliness and fear. Although Gabriel lived with his brother, he lacked parents and a social support network that could buffer against intense feelings of loneliness and isolation. As Menjivar (2000) demonstrates in her study of Salvadoran immigrants, social ties, including familial ties, are fragmented under severe conditions of poverty and disadvantage. Gabriel’s desperation eventually drove him to the edge of a Los Angeles bridge where he contemplated suicide. His mother’s words to ‘always fight’ echoed in his mind and he returned home that night. Gabriel recalled that in that moment he thought: ‘There is no hope for me. There is no life for me.’ After nearly a year of attending Voces de Esperanza, he was able to tell his story to desahogar (vent). He explains: ‘There is healing in talking. My life is different now.’

The formal focus of Voces de Esperanza is to identify, discuss and overcome daily obstacles with ‘honesty and an open mind’. Voces de Esperanza participants share similar experiences to those detailed by Gabriel week after week as Jorge and Wilfredo, the group coordinators, encourage them to ‘share [their] story’ with others because ‘dialogue will bring healing’. The unaccompanied Mayan youth workers in this study enter impoverished communities and exploitative workplaces, experience discrimination and stigmatization from the Latino immigrant community, and have incomplete or non-existent access to institutional networks of support. These factors coalesce to create psychological and emotional traumas that complicate their acculturation process (Padilla and Perez 2003). Gabriel’s narrative exemplifies the way that young migrants without parental guidance struggle with loneliness, isolation
and poverty. Support group participation, desahogando (venting) and constructing a personal narrative are coping strategies for some and survival mechanism for others.

Unaccompanied young migrants express overwhelming emotions that come from being neither here nor there, but both here and there. Those who leave their home countries to financially provide for their families hinge on a narrative of filial responsibility and familial obligation. Voces de Esperanza participants work ten-to twelve-hour days, six days a week. They struggle to meet their financial obligations to their families in Guatemala when they too are sufriendo (suffering). Group participants share that concern for their families in Guatemala have led them and others to vicios (vices) like alcoholism and others as far as suicide. Indeed, fieldwork included attending the funeral of a Maya youth who hung himself from his bedroom doorway for this reason.

One evening, I arrived to the group meeting a few minutes early and found Wilfredo huddled around a dining table with three others. As I cautiously walked towards the nearest empty chair I overheard one young man, Marcos, confess: ‘Thoughts of Guatemala do not leave me alone. I am always thinking about what’s going on over there. Me da tristeza y ansiedad [it gives me sadness and anxiety].’ Zavella (2011, 158) explains this as a state of ‘perpetual mourning’, where migrants feel sadness over the loss of their ‘families, homeland, language, identity, property, religious or cultural rituals, geography, or status of their home countries’. Tristeza is consistently expressed by youth who, while struggling to survive, simultaneously describe their aspirations to attend school, learn English, find better employment and improve their lives. In this way, efforts to maintain social commitments to families abroad become a burden on their mental, emotional and physical health and financial stability. Youth are encouraged to practise expressive individualism in light of overwhelming local and transnational demands and social isolation and marginality in the host society.

The night Marcos shared his concerns for his family in Guatemala, the remainder of the dialogue circle followed suit. One by one, young men and women detailed their most recent interactions with family members by phone, video or in person. After each person had spoken, Wilfredo broke away from his typically reserved position as moderator to exclaim:

Bichos! [Kids!] You must control your situations. Control your economy. Don’t let yourself be pressured! I know you have debts still, and even more your family over there puts pressure on you. Ervin [a young man in the group] keeps telling us … I think he has really opened himself up to us really well. We can see how he gives and gives and gives to his family and I congratulate you but at the same time I don’t see where you are going. You, with your life, you … where are you? We have seen that you open up for your brothers and your sisters, you are always looking out for others. You are the youngest of everyone and you are the one taking care of them. Be careful. Take care of you. Be careful each of you because even from Guatemala you are getting a lot of pressure economically. I understand, I understand. That whole thing about the American Dream? It’s dead. Don’t dream so much. But you [all], with your self-motivation and attending a group like this, you can take new paths.
Wilfredo draws on the distinction between utilitarian and expressive individualism and alludes to the myth of the American Dream to advise youth to forget about the utilitarian ends and think about the ‘new path’ that they can take. That is, enhanced self-duty that leads to self-fulfilment and will assuage tristeza and ansiedad. As he advises youth, Wilfredo acts as a cultural broker who exposes support group participants to American ideals of self-responsibility. He also plays the role of a significant other who recognizes the ‘traumas’ and ‘disorientation’ of unaccompanied young adults and guides to think about strategies for achieving stability in the group’s areas of focus. While literature explores the potential of significant others in shaping students’ lives by guiding them through academic and leadership opportunities, Wilfredo provides insight into navigating financial, emotional and social life.

As my time with Voces de Esperanza participants progressed, I noticed that the language used during meetings permeated conversations outside of the support group as youth referenced illustrative calls to self-responsibility. For example, on a separate occasion when Wilfredo spoke about the importance of taking care of one’s own financial responsibilities to avoid becoming overwhelmed with stress, worry and frustration, he said: ‘If the ship is sinking, even if mom and dad are there, let it go. If you are okay, that is enough.’ In an interview four months later, Miguel Antonio, a nineteen-year-old who has lived in Los Angeles for four years, asserted his self-orientation by saying:

Voces has opened my mind to the idea that the important one is yourself. Like Wilfredo says, if the ship is sinking … as long as you save yourself, “bye”, that is the most important thing. Well, that’s what I’ve come to understand. It’s the reason why Voces is my energy. It’s my strength. It’s what has helped me. It has taken me out of traumas from different things.

No longer afraid to speak in public, Miguel Antonio attends English classes and boasts of his participation. With the guidance of a significant other and cultural broker, unaccompanied young-adult migrants adopt a way of speaking and behaving that places priority and precedent on the well-being and fulfilment of the self. In time, youth begin superando (overcoming) the traumas of isolation, poverty and marginality.

Andrés, a twenty-year-old who had been living in the USA for five years at the time of our meeting, aptly explains this socialization process. Typically energetic and talkative, Andrés solemnly shared that he did not know how to handle all the things he felt responsible for when he arrived in Los Angeles, particularly his alcoholic brother. He said: ‘My brother drinks and I don’t know how to take care of him. When I started coming here [Voces de Esperanza], I learned I’m not responsible for my brother. He is responsible for himself.’ Nodding his head as if affirming himself, he continued: ‘Now I know what I will be doing.’ He described Voces de Esperanza as ‘a place of mental training’ where he learned what his priorities should be. When I followed up with Andrés some months later, he explained that he had now focused on succeeding in the USA because no opportunities for education and employment await him in Guatemala. He was actively leading a local church youth group, taking guitar lessons and diligently pursuing his advancement in English language classes.
Andrés’s trajectory demonstrates that the adoption of expressive individualism and cultivation of self-duty may heighten personal stability and facilitate social adaptation by alleviating the burdens that impede participation in community organizations and education. Becoming individualistic in self-expression and self-definition did not lead Andrés, Gabriel, Miguel Antonio or others to deviance, as segmented assimilation theory emphasizes, but to greater social participation. Thinking of individualism as a way of learning and reorienting the self, rather than as the pursuit of material goods, can uncover its potential for promoting the social adaptation of immigrant youth. Finally, Andrés’s claim that the support group is a ‘place of mental training’ suggests that support groups are also socializing institutions for marginalized immigrant youth.

**Shifting social commitments**

Expressive individualism is not only practised in self-talk but also in self-orientation. Communitarian sociologists view individualism and collectivism as incompatible ‘riders on a historical seesaw – personalized expressiveness ascending, commitment descending’ (Lichterman 1995, 276). Critics of this seesaw model argue that while expressive individualism is permeating US culture, there are multiple outcomes of adopting individualistic language. Rather than weakening social ties, personalized expressiveness may motivate social mindedness. I ask how adopting expressive individualism influences the social mindedness of unaccompanied youth with transnational commitments, and how individualism learned in a group setting shapes ethnic and community identity.

Findings show that expressive individualism does not sever the social commitments of Voces de Esperanza youth; instead, three patterns of reoriented commitments emerge. First, youth’s economic attachments to the home country attenuate as personal well-being is prioritized. Second, identification with indigenous language or culture strengthens and becomes a greater part of self-presentation as youth learn to value their personal narratives and identities. Finally, the valuation of personal narrative is accompanied by the conceptualization of the self as a potential community leader or role model. Together, these draw the individual to a more localized understanding of the self with the intention of reaching social stability and adaptation and the increased desire to see similar transformations within the community. With time, youth may develop growing aspirations for permanent settlement and socio-economic mobility, signalling increasing incorporation in the host society.

Cesar, a thirty-year-old who has been living in Los Angeles for the past fourteen years, exemplifies the first pattern. For nine years, he lived in a small, one-bedroom apartment with multiple people and frequently fell ill as he worked long hours to support his family in Guatemala. He started to overcome depression, alcoholism and drug addiction after meeting Wilfredo and receiving guidance on the importance of finding one’s gifts and purpose and setting personal goals. Cesar retells this story every few weeks when he attends Voces de Esperanza meetings. When it is his turn to share, he casually leans back in his chair, his arms hanging by his side, while he explains that he feels ‘free’. He explains that he no longer feels obligated to send money to Guatemala each week, but remits money when his personal budget permits. Rather than causing a downward social trajectory when becoming more
individualistic, Cesar began to overcome the emotional and psychological burdens that stemmed from his inability to sufficiently provide for his family. Cesar left the garment industry for a less exhausting and less exploitative job as a store clerk. With more leisure time, Cesar explores Beverly Hills, Hollywood and other parts of Los Angeles that many of the group have not yet visited despite their time in the USA.

Marlon is another example of this pattern. He arrived in Los Angeles when he was fourteen to support his younger brother’s education, remitting $250 every week. Marlon was invited to Voces de Esperanza to meet Wilfredo after he confided in a friend that his employer had withheld about $9,000 of Marlon’s pay in one year. Marlon described that he too received an ‘orientation’ after meeting Wilfredo where he learned ‘how youth live here [in the USA]’. He said that he gained insight into ‘the purpose of life’ and that he did not just have to work but could also pursue his own dreams, whatever they may be. Marlon is essentially acculturating to the US mainstream’s idea of youth behaviour and inculcating expressive individualism to define self-fulfilment. Marlon quit his job, applied for another that would allow him to attend school, and informed his family that after his brother received his degree, he would no longer remit money home. In our interview, Marlon switched between Spanish and accented, sometimes broken, English. With a smile on his face, he shared his goals of completing high school and attending culinary school – an example of how personal stability can create inroads to increased aspirations for socio-economic mobility. Marlon explained to me that he believes Voces de Esperanza has made him think in terms of the purpose and meaning of his own life. Although he would like to continue providing for his family, he says that he very seldom considers returning to Guatemala and recognizes that in order to succeed in the USA he must focus on his education.

These examples corroborate research that highlights that immigrants who ‘feel that their extensive financial and social obligations have circumscribed their choices and prevented them from achieving more economic stability’ must distance themselves from family obligations to get ahead (Agius Vallejo and Lee 2008, 25). Focusing on the self promotes immigrants’ emotional, psychological and financial stability and in turn social incorporation by allowing youth to set personal goals and concentrate their sparse resources on attaining those goals. The inverse relationship between individualism and social responsibility is an outcome that communitarians sociologists might expect to see (Bell 1976; Lasch 1979), as doing what works and feels right for the individual seemingly comes at the expense of social ties to the home country and families that remain there. Immigration scholars would anticipate that weakened social ties between young migrants and their families would lead to increased risk of downward mobility (Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2005). However, Cesar and Marlon demonstrate that decreasing transnational financial commitments may coexist alongside increasing desires for social incorporation in the host society and socio-economic mobility. Although transnational commitments are attenuated, local commitments are strengthened.

A second form of reoriented social commitment is found in the increased importance of identification with indigenous culture as youth learn to value their personal narrative. In their home countries and upon arrival in Los Angeles, youth fear ethnic discrimination. They are often referred to as the derogatory term indio, or
Indian, and thus resort to self-isolation to avoid mistreatment. Parents reinforce fears of discrimination and violence when instructing their children to keep their indigeneity private and maintain their distance from those who are not from their village or who are of a lighter skin tone. Strikingly, part of the self-orientation that I observed among youth includes learning the meaning and value of one’s cultural identification and participating in a strengthening of the Mayan co-ethnic community in Pico-Union (Popkin 1999).

Aaron, who is twenty-five years old and has been living in the US for nine years, articulately describes how this transition occurred in his life. Upon arrival in Los Angeles, he did not identify as Guatemalan, but through education and self-preparation he began to awaken to a new reality:

I did not accept that I am Guatemalan. I felt that I am rejected there. I am rejected here. I could not find help. I fell into depression and everything was bad; nothing was good. I asked myself why other people are okay and I am not. I would tell myself, “Well, it’s because I am an indio.”

Aaron recalls meeting Wilfredo and Jorge and admiring that they constantly spoke of learning new things. He enrolled in English as a second language (ESL) courses and began reading books that detailed Mayan history. Aaron described his feelings in an interview:

Aaron: I am barely awakening. I thought I was the only one that felt this way but then I saw that a bunch of youth from my culture and my country are suffering. Many youth are here but they are not studying and they just work and work. I started studying and noticed we don’t have leaders. We don’t have anybody.
Interviewer: You said you feel as though you are waking up, to what are you awakening?
Aaron: Well, before I thought I was someone without value … Before I thought that I was indio, now I know I am not indio. I am Maya. Why am I Maya? Because my grandparents and great grandparents are Mayan. My language is K’iche. Now I am seeing the reality, I am waking up. It does not affect me now when people say, “You are Maya.” I say, “Yes, yes I am” because I know who I am but the youth who do not know think that they is being humiliated. It’s not like that.

Through Wilfredo and Jorge, Aaron met other community leaders and role models who spoke with him about Guatemala, Mayan culture and his indigenous language, which gave Aaron a sense of cultural pride. Many youth describe moving from thinking of themselves as indio to feeling pride in identifying as Mayan. Indeed, symbols of Mayan identity were incorporated into Voces of Esperanza meetings. It became customary for a table at Voces of Esperanza meetings to be decorated with textiles in vibrant red, purple, blue and green with the word ‘Guatemala’ embroidered in yellow, a Mayan calendar and images of the Guatemala highlands. During special events, youth dress in traje, traditional Mayan clothing that includes embroidered shirts and slacks for men and white ruffled tops with floor-length skirts for women. The support group setting reinforces an American notion of the self as an individual. Mayan youth individually adopt a thickened indigenous ethnic identity, yet this process also occurs collectively. This new form of Americanization is one that could
only occur in a multicultural society (Scott 1992) and exemplifies that ethnic strengthening is a resource in hostile contexts of reception (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

Portes and Rumbaut (2001, 148) propose ‘reactive ethnicity’ as ethnic awareness in response to ‘perceived threats, persecution, and exclusion’. Interestingly, Guatemalan Maya youth experienced two instances of reactive ethnicity. The first, a denial of indigeneity, is a response to discrimination that dampens cultural identity and causes shame in being indigenous and results in self-isolation. Youth experience reactive ethnicity once again as they learn to value themselves. Youth have been taught their whole lives to dampen their own cultural identity because of real or potential discrimination. Becoming personalistic and valuing the self may heighten one’s willingness to identify with a larger group. Thus, a language of expressive individualism can buffer against sentiments of exclusion and discrimination, and promote social interactions and the beginning stages of adaptation.

The final case of a reoriented social commitment is related to leadership formation among youth who describe overcoming their traumas of fear, stress, depression and, in some cases, alcohol and drug addiction. These individuals express a personalized commitment to other immigrant youth in Pico-Union. In the excerpt above, Aaron states: ‘Many youth are here but they are not studying and they just work and work. I started studying and noticed we don’t have leaders. We don’t have anybody.’ Voces de Esperanza participants are often advised to think about how self-help can lead to helping others. In one instance, Wilfredo said: ‘Each one of you can get better … If you want to do what’s better for other people, see how to better yourself. Do that for yourself, and you will help others. Fight for that internal reconquista [reconquest].’ Individualism does not necessarily mean ‘do your own thing’, but it is associated with personal empowerment, an ‘internal reconquista’, to pursue unique interests and skills that might ultimately better one’s community. This type of talk became more evident over time, not only in the detail in which youth talked about helping others, but also in the number of people who adopted this mentality.

Andrés, introduced earlier in this paper, elucidates this trend. After having learned to prioritize himself, he began to realize that others around him required leadership and support. As I sat with Andrés in a Pico-Union community garden, he vehemently expressed:

I have to prepare myself more to help someone. Right now I don’t have the preparation to be able to help someone. I need to learn more, I have to work harder at school. So that one day I can help someone in my community. Where I come from there are many people in my community that way. So I need to put more effort into my dreams and my goals and more than anything prepare myself more, to be okay with myself to be able to help someone.

Expressive individualism personalizes Andrés’s desire to overcome the stresses and anxieties that accompany supporting his alcoholic brother and it is now the impetus for his pursuit of ‘preparation’, or education, that will allow him to advocate for his community. His incorporation into the host society is bolstered through individualism.

Francisco, now twenty-five, arrived in Los Angeles when he was fourteen. He struggled with alcoholism and homelessness during his first nine years in the USA.
At the time of this research, he had attended Voces de Esperanza for just over a year. In our interview, he explained that his goal upon arrival was to build a house for his family. Now, after having overcome addictions, he aims to reach out to others. He explained:

I think my greatest responsibility is to take care of my family. Take care … give them the best life. But I think my responsibility now that I have come out of addiction is to talk with other youth that are here because many are still very young. I have to talk to them so that they do not fall.

Here, Francisco constructs a personalized version of his experience as the grounds for community role modelling. Francisco’s identification with youth who suffer from the circumstances that he was able to overcome is strengthened. In fact, his commitment to youth becomes an immediate responsibility, while his responsibility to look after his family, although still important, becomes a secondary goal. Community role modelling not only allows youth to overcome their isolation; it also cultivates social capital so that similarly situated Mayan youth do not squander years in homelessness, drug or alcohol addiction, or paralyzed with emotional and mental trauma.

In all, adopting a personalized self complements a stronger identification with certain social identities. Seeing the self as an individual on a personal journey causes an attenuation of youth’s sense of transnational economic obligation and fortifies the desire to achieve incorporation and socio-economic mobility in the host society. Thinned transnational obligation may simultaneously strengthen local social commitments as one experiences a thickened ethnic identity upon working towards discovering the self and helping others to do the same as a way to better the community. While unaccompanied Mayan youth cultivate an American notion of the self, they collectively cultivate an indigenous and community identity.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The central question of this research is whether Americanization, and adopting individualism specifically, threatens the social incorporation and mobility prospects for unaccompanied young people who are members of a support group.

The existing immigrant youth incorporation framework suggests that the precarious circumstances that unaccompanied Mayan youth encounter as they come of age in the USA without parents and with lower levels of education would prompt a very high risk of downward mobility into the underclass (Portes and Zhou 1993). Assimilation theory takes for granted an immigrant child’s familial context, as well as the potential resources and socialization inherited from parents. Americanization and individualism are deemed a threat to immigrant incorporation and mobility, and immigrant community cohesion (Waters 2000). Individualism in particular is viewed as the root of social fragmentation, loss of social mindedness and weakened community (Etzioni 1996).

Assimilation theorists have neglected to consider Americanization as the process of self-construction and the valuation of the personal self. Without a parent or guardian, unaccompanied Mayan young adult workers face social isolation and marginality and
economic vulnerability as they navigate acculturation to US society while supporting families abroad. Research finds that transnational economic commitments constrain immigrants’ social relations and their ability to form social ties in the host society, as migrants are unable to fulfill local commitments (Landolt 2001). Thus, transnationally committed migrants in the USA tend to have immature and unstable personal networks that are prone to fragmentation (Menjivar 2000).

I find that participation in support groups and psychotherapeutic cultures equips unauthorized, unaccompanied Mayan young adults with the individualistic language and behaviour necessary for garnering self-responsibility and establishing emotional, psychological, and financial stability, and influences aspirations for socio-economic mobility. Adopting personalistic language causes youth’s self-identity to move from the transnational to the local, whereby the collectivist ideologies born out of the socio-economic conditions of the sending country are transformed into ones of independence and individualism that characterize the host society (Lipset 1996). While self-actualization may not lead to economic gains in the context of the options available to youth in the Los Angeles labour market, by weakening financial ties with those abroad, youth attain greater financial stability and form locally oriented social networks of support to achieve social incorporation. Although transnational obligations attenuate, Mayan youth experience a strengthened Mayan identity, a newfound agency and valuation of the individual. Thus, individualism does not lead to downward mobility for unaccompanied youth, but to increased opportunities for stability in their lives.

Aligning with previous research (Lichterman 1995; Wuthnow 1994b), this study elucidates that expressive individualism learned in a support group setting does not result in severed social commitments but personalizes social commitment to the local community. That is, individualism and collective identity may coexist in immigrant communities. For unaccompanied Maya in Los Angeles, expressive individualism becomes a source of cultural capital that facilitates their incorporation by allowing them to focus on self-construction in the local community. As they participate in Voces de Esperanza and become motivated to join other groups, young migrants cultivate social capital through ties with significant others and support group peers. Mayan youth’s social incorporation is facilitated not only as their economic vulnerability declines, but also as they garner a greater sense of ethnic pride and envision themselves as community role models. Youth who once felt fear in interacting in public spaces, stigmatized for their ethnic identity, and suffered from loneliness, depression, and anxiety that caused self-isolation, feel more confidence in participating in the local community. As they seek opportunities to learn, grow, and attain a sense of self-fulfillment, Maya youth form narratives of social responsibility for similarly situated youth in the Pico-Union community. This case reiterates the important historical role of mutual aid societies in marginalized communities. The unconventional migration and settlement trajectories of unaccompanied Central American youth in the USA require that researchers evaluate the taken-for-granted forces said to bolster or hinder incorporation. The increase in unaccompanied minor migration into the USA in recent years warrants researcher’s attention to the alternative socializing spaces and resources youth construct and acquire that promote stability and potential mobility in US society.
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References


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