

“No soy DACA, ni soy de allá” I am not from here, nor there

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The title is a play of words based on a song written by the late Argentinian composer, Facundo Cabral, “No soy de aquí, ni soy de allá.”

When I was 13 years old, my parents decided to leave my country of birth, Argentina, and drag me along with them to the United States. With the passing of time, I learned English and slowly adapted to the American culture, but I always held on to my Argentine roots. Not being able to adjust my immigration status for years, I lived in the shadows – paying thousands of dollars in non-resident tuition so I could attend community college and altering my social security card so that I could get a job. Most of my friends did not know that I was undocumented because of the shame and fear I felt. When I was finally able to return to Argentina years later, I was treated like a visitor. It was then when the title of one of Facundo Cabral’s songs began to play over in my head: “No soy de acá, ni soy de allá,” which translates to “I am not from here, nor there.” This dichotomy has been the core of my experience as an immigrant, and how many immigrants feel as well.

The United States has become home for many individuals who were brought to the country as young children with their families. Many were brought when they were infants and have never gone back to their native country, making the United States the only country they have ever known and the place they call home. These children grow up speaking English as their first – and sometimes only – language, and since they are undocumented and thus unable to travel internationally, they have never left the United States. Many of these children do not find out about their immigration status until they graduate high school, when they attempt to obtain a driver’s license or to enroll in college. Imagine the shock, the confusion, and the frustration these young people feel. They did not choose to come to this country and be uprooted from their native land. And they certainly did not decide to be subjected to all the obstacles they face as a result of being undocumented. Suddenly, these young people realize that they and their families are different from other American families. Due to the negative stigma associated with being undocumented, these young kids tend to keep their undocumented status a secret from their peers. They suffer in silence, feeling alienated from their American friends and sometimes distanced or resentful toward their parents, who brought them here in the first place.

Efforts to fix this problem date back to August of 2001, when congress failed to pass a bipartisan act called the DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors), a bill that would provide conditional permanent residency to certain young immigrants who meet specific requirements. In June of 2012, President Barack Obama signed an executive order to curb the deportation of certain young undocumented immigrants. This policy, known as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), allows certain undocumented immigrants who entered the United States as minors to obtain a renewable work permit and may prevent their deportation. They are able to apply for a driver's license, join the military, and in some U.S. states they can attend universities and qualify for in-state tuition. DACA was a compromise for the DREAM Act. Although it is not in and of itself a path to citizenship, it allows these undocumented individuals to build a future for themselves and to contribute to society. Almost 800,000 Dreamers between the ages of 16 and 36 are currently able to attend college and graduate school, to work, and to pay taxes because of this program. They do not have to live in fear of being deported for not having legal immigration status. Their U.S. citizen relatives do not have to fear being separated from those they love most and their families being torn apart.

This past September 5, the new administration announced that it will rescind the DACA program. For those currently in the program, their permits to work and attend college will begin expiring in March of 2018 – unless Congress passes legislation allowing a new channel for temporary or permanent legal immigration status. Trapped in a broken immigration system, intelligent and hard-working youth must confront an uncertain future because of the barriers to continuing their education, working, or joining the military. These 800,000 young people, who once felt a sense of hope and who have been contributing to this country's growth, are now faced with having to go back to the shadows. They fear being deported from the country they call home – the only country they know – to a foreign land. As President Obama (2017) said in a beautiful Facebook post: “These Dreamers are Americans in their hearts, in their minds, in every single way but one: on paper.”

Immigrating to a new country entails numerous losses: the loss of one's familiar surroundings, their loved ones, possibly language, and even culinary customs, amongst others. The extent to which a person is able to accept such losses determines one's ability to adapt to the new host culture (Volcan, 1993). For example, a person who was forced to leave their familiar surroundings and who does not want to rescind their customs and way of life will have a much harder time adapting to the new environment and culture, especially if it is very different from what they are accustomed to. This is also mitigated by age (older individuals tend to struggle more than young children) and whether the relocation will open doors to a more prosperous future.

Individuals whose departure is involuntary are more prone to experience culture shock – a general feeling of disorientation due to a sudden introduction to an unfamiliar culture,

environment, and way of life (Garza-Guerrero, 1974). This unleashes a stressful, anxiety-laden process whereby one struggles to adapt to the changes while grieving the losses inherent in the transition. The combination of mourning such profound personal losses and a forceful introduction to a new environment challenges the stability of a person's psyche (Akhtar, 1995).

One can only imagine the negative effects that being removed from the United States, the only country many of these young Dreamers know, will have on them. It's true, these people who were brought to this country are not from here, but they are also not from there. Regardless of what Congress decides to do about these 800,000 Dreamers, damage has been done by highlighting the fact that they do not belong. And believe me, it hurts.

Note: * Dreamers are those who would qualify for benefits under the DREAM Act, even though such act has not been made into law. They are immigrants who were brought to the United States as children (prior to age 16), who have been residing in this country continuously since 2007, and who were younger than 31 years of age by June of 2012.

References

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