

Finding DREAMer's "Equality of Recognition" by Cassandra Zarina Calle
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Imagine you are an excellent student; you surpass expectations and you are top of your class in high school. On the first day of your sophomore year in high school, you walk into a Driver's Education class. You, just as every other sixteen-year-old, are extremely excited to take and hopefully pass your driver's tests so that you can finally drive! You pass the written test with a 100% so then you are off to apply for a test date for your driving test. On the form one of the questions asks for your social security number, so you ask your mother. Your mother reluctantly replies, "You don't have one," and after a long conversation, you find out you are an illegal immigrant. You do not remember migrating to this country you call home, the United States, because you were only months old. So now you realize, you are stuck in a country where you are denied the right to drive, vote, get a job, take out a loan for college: you are denied the right to do many things. You think of returning to the country you were born in but it just seems counterproductive, because you do not know the language, the culture, or anything about the country. For some this is only an imaginary story, but for others, this is reality. This is how undocumented resident children and adolescents feel every day.

This situation brings up a compelling issue with humanity and human dignity. The idea of human dignity is very strongly discussed by Francis Fukuyama in his essay "Human Dignity." According to Fukuyama, human dignity is the right every single human shares because of Factor X (Fukuyama). Factor X, as defined by Fukuyama, is the "essential human quality" one is left with when all the genes inherited in the "genetic lottery," the pool of inherited traits someone randomly receives from his or her parents, are stripped away (143, 148). Since undocumented resident children either unknowingly or unwillingly came to the United States illegally, they are

stripped of the many rights other American citizens enjoy on a regular basis. Innocent, illegal immigrant children are not granted equal rights. This is due to society's inability to sympathize with them. Society cannot see past the fact that the choices that were made for undocumented resident children, are illegal, and therefore they do not acknowledge the suffering these children endure. This struggle with, as Fukuyama defines it in the essay "Human Dignity," "equality of recognition" for undocumented resident children, has been a long battle, but there is hope. Fukuyama further describes the search for "equality of recognition" as the desire for every human to respect one another the way everyone deserves (Fukuyama 142). According to the Immigration Policy Center, the DREAM act, "Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors," would allow illegal minors to be awarded permanent residency in the United States, which is an important step to rewarding these children with human dignity. Despite the fact that this law has been denied multiple times, small steps towards the DREAM Act have finally been put in place. Unfortunately, there are still many citizens who do not agree with the DREAM Act, and this dilemma has brought forth the Achieve Act, which in reality, does not acknowledge undocumented youth's dignity. Although the United States is not yet granting full rights to illegal immigrant children, the new movements towards the DREAM Act demonstrate that the United States is making progress in creating, what many people believe to be, a more equal application of human dignity that would relieve young, undocumented residents from the plights they endure.

Many children or young adults become illegal once they stay in the United States past the date stated by their Visa. Others are illegal due to the fact that they illegally crossed the border from Mexico to the United States. Once these individuals become undocumented residents, they lose many *human* rights. Undocumented resident children and young adults

cannot legally work, receive a license, vote, open a bank account, take out a loan, receive government aid, or apply for financial aid or scholarships. In other words, illegal immigrant children cannot live a successful life in the United States - they live in the shadows of society. The conditions that undocumented children and teenagers have to deal with seem unreal, but there are countless stories that shine light on these unbelievable difficulties.

The story of Gilbert Mejia is a very strong example of a real life undocumented young adult who lives in the shadows. The Mejia family's struggle is depicted by Theo Rigby in a PBS film, *Sin Pais*. The film begins with Gilbert and his parents illegally entering the United States in 1992 to escape the extreme hardships in Guatemala. The undocumented family struggled from day to day to live a comfortable life in the United States. Gilbert's parents, who also had two other daughters that were born in the United States, ages 13 and 3, peacefully lived in a house in the United States for over 15 years. Then, in March of 2007, the Mejias were rudely awakened to a raiding by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which later turned out to be a case of mistaken identity. The children saw their father and mother arrested and taken into custody. Despite the fact that the Mejia family had no criminal records, and lived a very peaceful, quiet life, Gilbert's parents were deported to Guatemala immediately, while Gilbert's case was reviewed.

The deportation of Gilbert's parents left the family with the very uncomfortable topic of deciding where the two American citizens, Gilbert's sisters, should go. Gilbert's parents thought Dulce, the three-year-old, would be too much of a responsibility for Gilbert, so they brought the little girl with them to Guatemala. On the other hand, Helen, the fifteen-year-old, was doing very well in school, and therefore decided to stay in the United States with Gilbert to finish her education. With Gilbert and Helen in the United States, struggling to live normal lives without

parents, and Gilbert's parents and Dulce in Guatemala, barely making enough money to live, the family was stressed and depressed (Rigby). This family has been shoved to the shadows and their dignity has been ignored. The Mejia family was not seen as a hard-working, caring family who deserved a better life, but as a law breaking family who should be punished for their "crime." The Mejia family shares the plights of other undocumented families and youth; although they are helpless, they must fight for their "equality of recognition;" although they are silenced, they must speak up.

Undocumented resident children are silenced, because they cannot participate in the privileges granted to American citizens. Undocumented resident children's silence mimics that of the unborn children in the United States. Fukuyama states that an embryo "has the *potential* to become a full human being" and should therefore be granted the rights it deserves (162). This potential that unborn children possess is shared by the potential illegal immigrant children have to succeed in the United States. Since this potential is not recognized by society, these two groups of individuals are not seen as living humans. Take for example, the situation with the border between Mexico and the United States. Many people believe that the fence used to create this border should be replaced with an electrical fence. In the United States, electrical fences are many times used for dogs and zoo animals. Therefore, by using electrical fences on the US, Mexico border, the society is stating that the "animals" may not cross the border. This example could not more efficiently demonstrate how far the society has come to dehumanizing illegals. All "equality of recognition" is evidently lost within this situation.

Another situation in which undocumented youth is dehumanized, is when they are referred to by the public with certain demeaning names. Some names used to refer to undocumented youth are illegal alien, undocumented worker, undocumented immigrant,

foreigner, illegal immigrant, and many more. To refer to someone as an “alien” is one of the most demeaning ways to disrespect an individual. Calling someone an “alien” completely dehumanizes them because aliens do not share the same basic human qualities all humans are born with. Additionally, calling someone “illegal” is demonizing because it promotes society to look at them as criminals. Criminals often commit crimes that are harmful to an individual and are therefore seen as dangerous individuals. Why would undocumented children be seen as a threat to society? How often is it that a group of children pose a threat to a whole country? This does not happen very often, if ever. Calling undocumented youth “aliens” or “illegal” only promotes dehumanization, or demonization.

Calling these children illegal immigrants encourages America to view them as law breaking, harmful humans, and therefore society cannot sympathize with them. Society begins to lose respect for individuals once they “commit crimes.” Since undocumented resident children and adolescents do not directly make the choice to go against the law, they should not be punished for their actions. The “crimes” undocumented youth commit are not by choice. Even if these illegal minors did make the choice to illegally immigrate, when does it become acceptable to lose all sympathy for the individuals? As mentioned earlier, according to Fukuyama, all humans contain a common Factor X. In Fukuyama’s essay, he explains that since every human does share this Factor X, every human should be awarded human dignity. It is obvious that illegal immigrant children have Factor X, so why does society lack sympathy for these individuals? If everyone feels as though they should be respected in the ways they deserve, they should also give that respect. Through this common respect one learns to sympathize.

Fortunately, some individuals in the United States have begun sympathizing with the large population of undocumented resident children and adolescents. This sympathy is

demonstrated through the DREAM Act. The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, was created by Senator, Richard Durbin and Representative, Howard Berman, in 2001 and has since gained many supporters (The DREAM Act). The DREAM Act is meant to literally relieve undocumented resident children and young adults by giving them opportunities to build their futures. The DREAM Act would make this possible by granting undocumented high-school graduates or GED recipients conditional legal permanent resident status if they have been living in America at least five years and were younger than 16 when they first entered the United States (The DREAM Act). If the undocumented young adults receive either a bachelor's (or higher) degree or serve in the military for at least two years, in six years, they will be granted legal permanent residency status. This means that illegal young adults would be granted the opportunity to reside in the United States and give back to the country they call home. The DREAM Act would allow undocumented young adults to receive federal education grants, participate in federal work study programs, and receive student loans (The DREAM Act). If these opportunities were to become a reality for illegal immigrant children, Fukuyama's idea of human dignity would apply even more so to all of society. Passing the Dream Act would demonstrate that these undocumented resident children to have Factor X, and therefore are worthy of "equality of recognition." When the DREAM Act was first introduced in 2001, it was not passed. The last time it was brought up, was in December of 2010, when it fell five votes short in the Senate.

But that has not drained the hope of DREAM Act activists and supporters. On June 15 of 2012 all illegal immigrant children and adolescents gained a little piece of worth from America. President Obama explained the new law that aids undocumented children and adolescents, *Consideration of Deferred Action For Childhood Arrivals*, by stating that it is a "temporary

stopgap measure that lets [the United States] focus [their] resources wisely while giving a degree of relief and hope to talented, driven, patriotic young people” (Obama). Finally, there is a sense of hope, and undocumented resident children are seen as humans who have *potential*. This sense of relief and hope is a method for the United States to sympathize with illegal immigrant children. The *Consideration of Deferred Action For Childhood Arrivals* grants undocumented resident individuals who came before they were sixteen and have been living in the United States for at least five years, a working permit, temporary license, and the ability to receive loans for a two year period. After these two years are over, the individuals must reapply (USCIS, 2012). Even though it is not exactly what the DREAM Act strives to accomplish, it is a huge step forward in recognizing and sympathizing with undocumented children. In President Obama’s speech announcing this decision, he also leaves the DREAM Act supporters with a grander sense of hope. He claims that if the DREAM Act were to pass Congress and reach his desk, he would sign it without hesitation. This statement brings future hope for illegal immigrant children and foreshadows the further ability for the United States to demonstrate Fukuyama’s idea of “equality of recognition” for undocumented resident children and young adults.

Senator Bob Menendez agrees that immigrant youth deserve the respect that all humans desire. Emily Durey restates Menendez’s message in her article, “Senator Menendez Calls for Immigration Reform,” when she states, he believes that ““immigration reform is the civil rights issue of our time,” and that Republicans need to wake up to the fact that hardline immigration policies will not gain them Latino votes” (Durey). Unfortunately the Republicans do not understand this very vital piece of information. With most civil rights movements, there is one step forward and two steps back. This is exactly the case with immigration reform. With the

DREAM Act and *Consideration of Deferred Action For Childhood Arrivals*, there was a giant step forward; but very recently there have been two steps back - the Achieve Act.

The Achieve Act was presented by Republicans Jon Kyl and Kay Bailey in late November but was highly rejected by DREAM Act supporters. The Achieve Act would aid many of the same individuals as the DREAM Act would, but the Achieve Act does not create a path to citizenship for these innocent children and adolescents. Therefore, this means that once undocumented youth finish their studies or serve in the military, they must return to the country they were born in (Ross). The Republicans are failing to see that these innocent victims deserve all the rights other American citizens enjoy. Fukuyama states that society “severely” takes away basic rights from criminals for “lacking a basic human moral sense” (Fukuyama 161). Society has taken away almost all basic rights from undocumented youth, but these children and adolescents have the same “basic human moral sense” as any other human; so why is this happening (Fukuyama 161)? It is extremely hard to understand how an individual’s human dignity could be dismissed. These innocent children and adolescents are simply asking to escape from the shadows they constantly remain in. Luis Gutierrez explains undocumented youth’s hopes perfectly when he states “we’ve asked for one simple thing - fairness” (Durey). Fighting for the rights illegal immigrant children deserve is a slow process, but eventually their dignity will be acknowledged.

The United States is slowly making progress in finding the mutual respect Fukuyama explains through movements such as the DREAM Act and the *Consideration of Deferred Action For Childhood Arrivals*. For a plethora of years, illegal immigrant children have been prohibited from working, driving, or opening a bank account. They have been referred to as “alien” and “illegal.” Many United States citizens have even gone so far as to dehumanize the population of

illegal immigrants by demanding an electrical fence on the border of the United States and Mexico. Due to the common Factor X we all share, all persons should respect others and be respected. The Achieve Act that the Republicans have recently presented does not demonstrate this respect and understanding. As Senator Menendez stated, “the problem with the Achieve Act is it does not achieve the dream” (Deruy). However, with movements such as the DREAM Act and *Consideration of Deferred Action For Childhood Arrivals*, it is apparent that the United States is moving closer to understanding the dignity that all individuals possess. Even with one step forward, and two steps back, innocent illegal immigrant youth will one day fulfill their dreams and become “DREAMers.” With patience, persistence, and the inching towards “equality of recognition,” innocent, undocumented resident children and young adults will come to see the day the long awaited DREAM Act is passed. Imagine you are an illegal immigrant young adult who came into this country as a very young child. You are very bright, and thanks to the *Consideration of Deferred Action For Childhood Arrivals*, you are able to work hard and go to school. One night, you come home after a long day of school and work, and find out that the DREAM Act has passed. You begin to tear because you realize, “I no longer have to live in the shadows. Very soon, I will be a proud American citizen.” One day, this imaginary story will hopefully become a reality for all undocumented immigrant youth.

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