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“I am just like everyone else, except for a nine-digit number”: A Thematic Analysis of the Experiences of DREAMers

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Abstract

This qualitative thematic analysis study explored the experiences of DREAMers, undocumented students raised in the US awaiting the passage of the DREAM Act. We used a phenomenologically-informed textual analysis which resulted in a summary essence of the experience of DREAMers, describing how even though DREAMers are like other contributing members of society “except for a nine-digit number,” certain characteristics make their experience unique. Two websites containing experiences of individuals identifying as DREAMers as they wait for the passage of the DREAM Act, were analyzed to draw out specific themes that represented DREAMers’ experiences. Results revealed the following themes, Uncertainty about the Future, Resilience in Spite of Barriers, Education as a Form of Identity and Empowerment, the Influence of Time, Family Sacrifices for a Better Life, Disconnect from their Countries of Origin, the Meaning of “Undocumented,” and “Collective Survival.” These were summarized in a description of the essence of the phenomenon. These themes suggest implications for researchers and mental health professionals working with this population and highlight the significance of the unique experiences of DREAMers.

Keywords

DREAMers, DREAM Act, Undocumented, Thematic Analysis, Phenomenology, Immigration

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“I am just like everyone else, except for a nine-digit number”: A Thematic Analysis of the Experiences of DREAMers

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This qualitative thematic analysis study explored the experiences of DREAMers, undocumented students raised in the US awaiting the passage of the DREAM Act. We used a phenomenologically-informed textual analysis which resulted in a summary essence of the experience of DREAMers, describing how even though DREAMers are like other contributing members of society “except for a nine-digit number,” certain characteristics make their experience unique. Two websites containing experiences of individuals identifying as DREAMers as they wait for the passage of the DREAM Act, were analyzed to draw out specific themes that represented DREAMers’ experiences. Results revealed the following themes, Uncertainty about the Future, Resilience in Spite of Barriers, Education as a Form of Identity and Empowerment, the Influence of Time, Family Sacrifices for a Better Life, Disconnect from their Countries of Origin, the Meaning of “Undocumented,” and “Collective Survival.” These were summarized in a description of the essence of the phenomenon. These themes suggest implications for researchers and mental health professionals working with this population and highlight the significance of the unique experiences of DREAMers. Keywords: DREAMers, DREAM Act, undocumented, phenomenology, immigration

Introduction

Roughly sixty-five thousand undocumented immigrant students who have lived in the United States for more than five years, graduate from US high schools every year (Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). However, these students face limited future options due to their status (Pérez et. al., 2010). Although court rulings have declared that undocumented children should not be penalized from earning an education, this policy ends once a student graduates from high school. These students, in efforts to enact political awareness, have identified themselves as DREAMers, waiting on the passage of the Development Relief and Education of Alien Minors Act.

The DREAM Act has two goals. The first is to eliminate federal provisions that penalize states for providing undocumented students access to in-state tuition (National Immigration Law Center, 2013). The second is to provide a path for undocumented students to acquire permanent residency if they meet the necessary qualifications. DREAMers are hopeful that

this legislation will pass and help raise awareness of their contributions to their communities, and their achievements in their American school system. It is this hope that has also empowered these students to defy the risk of deportation and share their stories publicly about their undocumented status.

Undocumented Students in the USA

Educational Success

Most undocumented students have spent the majority of their lives in the United States and completed a substantial amount of their education in American institutions, making them nearly indistinguishable from their peers who have legal status and citizenship (Enriquez, 2011). DREAMers often attain high distinctions, such as being valedictorian and making the dean's list, yet they encounter roadblocks to a college education (Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). Many DREAMers are awarded prestigious scholarships for college, but these awards go unused because of their status. Those who proceed to college often experience high levels of socio-emotional distress and other struggles related to the prospects for their uncertain future (Hernandez et al., 2010).

Political Strategies of the Undocumented Experience

Undocumented populations have been difficult to research because of their wariness of professionals. However, in the last decade many of these individuals have come out of the shadows and utilized their undocumented status as a political strategy. For example, these students have used methods of civil disobedience and organized advocacy efforts to raise awareness of their situation (Galindo, 2012; Gonzales, 2008). These individuals describe how living illegally restricts day-to-day life, causes fear of deportation, financial challenges, and hopelessness (Contreras, 2009; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012).

Characteristics of the Undocumented Experience

Hernandez and her colleagues (2011) shared autobiographical narratives describing what it is like to grow up undocumented, including: not being able to return to their country of origin, wanting to be acknowledged as Americans, and having fear. Others have found similar themes, including restricted educational accomplishments, scarce economic resources, marginalization, and segregating practices (Hipolito-Delgado & Mann, 2012). Pérez and his colleagues (2010) found that feelings of shame and discrimination were experienced by undocumented students, but also focused on coping mechanisms utilized by Latino and Latina college students, including connecting to institutional agents, peer influence and support, campus support programs, and civic engagement.

Abrego and Gonzales (2010) report that without access to additional education or employment opportunities, this population is at risk for poverty and other forms of societal adversity. These authors suggest that if undocumented individuals were given the opportunity to engage legally in society, using their bilingual and bicultural talents they would be an asset to taxpayers and the US economy.

In Spite of the Odds

Undocumented students are often resourceful and able to engage in a process of "patchworking" in order to reach their educational goals (Enriquez, 2011). They acquire

resources from multiple avenues, such as receiving emotional and economic support from family, friends, and educators. Pérez and colleagues (2009) found that undocumented students that had access to higher levels of personal and environmental protective factors indicated higher levels of academic success compared to students exposed to similar risk factors and less access to personal and environmental resources. Other studies have explored how “illegality” influences identity development, examined resilience and found that civic engagement by undocumented students can be a major element in helping give undocumented students purpose (Ellis & Chen, 2013; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012; González, Suárez-Orozco, Dedios-Sanguinetti, 2013).

González (2011) examined the transition to adulthood among the 1.5-generation of 150 undocumented Latino young adults. He described how these individuals possess higher levels of resources available to them compared to their parents who may have limited English proficiency and limited education. The participants reported how the transition from early adolescence where the school system provided a sense of inclusion was significantly different than their transition to adulthood where they were restricted from participating in most institutional rights due to their undocumented status. These challenges are similar to those experienced by undocumented workers who feel marginalized and develop “survival skills” that help to navigate life in the US without legal status (Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012).

How to Serve and Support Undocumented Individuals

Due to the high numbers of undocumented persons in the US (particularly in the south and southwest), it is likely that professionals will work with families and individuals of this status. Existing suggestions for professionals include getting up-to-date on the DREAM Act and what it means for these families, and taking the time to understand the relevant issues, especially for young people who may be leaving high school and entering a new period of uncertainty as they try to find future education or employment (Kim, 2013). This work can be a form of not just support, but advocacy (Ellis & Chen, 2013).

Current Study

This project provides an additional voice to these individuals by analyzing and representing their experience. The purpose of this study was to answer the following research questions. First, what are DREAMers’ experiences and challenges related to their undocumented status? Second, what are the unique characteristics of DREAMers that emerge as a result of these circumstances? By gaining insight into this population we hope to act as advocates for these individuals and engage in action research that has the goal of bringing representation to a group that is historically under heard (Denzin, 2010). We used a qualitative thematic analysis using phenomenological assumptions with a social constructivist epistemological perspective to analyze existing published accounts of DREAMers’ experiences. This approach fit well with the aims of the research because it focused on a deep understanding DREAMers’ inner feelings and experiences, using their own words.

Method

Research Design

We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis with phenomenological assumptions, using a subjectivist epistemological stance (Anderson, 2007). Phenomenological methods are appropriate for analyzing how people make meaning of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

However, this project was not a pure phenomenology, but instead used thematic analysis tools to analyze secondary data in a meaningful manner. Thematic analysis allowed us to report DREAMers' experiences, and identify, analyze, and report emerging patterns of meaning present within the data and the relationships between them (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The phenomenological underpinnings of the thematic analysis included the first two researchers analyzing the data for significant statements or quotes which helped to create a vivid description of how the participants experienced the phenomenon of being undocumented. Additionally, we employed Moustakas (1994) strategy of writing about our individual experiences and the contexts and circumstances that influenced our experiences. Also, following the generation of structural and textual descriptions, we wrote combined accounts that portrayed the "essence" of the phenomenon experienced by DREAMers (Creswell, 2007).

Procedure and Sample

We conducted a general Internet search of "DREAMer stories" using the Google search engine and used this phrase as the key term. The richest source of data on this topic was found in stories submitted on WeAreAmerica.org and tumblr.com. This data was selected because they were detailed, first person accounts of DREAMer stories. At the time the first two authors conducted the search, WeAreAmerica.org was a website dedicated to advocacy and community relations devoted to addressing the issues of the "broken immigration system." The site served as a platform where people connected with others in similar undocumented situations and shared their stories of success, grievance, support, and resources. Tumblr.com was a microblogging and social networking website where users posted different forms of media and content to supplement their blogs. Tumblr.com's content was a looser forum of expression than the more structured content found on WeAreAmerica.org, but these various accounts provided rich, personal data to answer the research questions. The stories varied in length and ranged from a few paragraphs to several pages. We selected stories that were longer in length with the assumption that they contained more detail. Stories that met criteria included first person accounts where the self-identified DREAMer described their experiences in ways that addressed the research questions, including struggles, disappointments, resources, successes, and so forth. The literature on undocumented students often reflects the perspective of those of Latin heritage, however we were open to varying cultures and ethnicities that are affected by the DREAM Act. From the 15 selected stories that met the criteria, we selected eight narratives from WeAreAmerica.org and seven narratives from tumblr.com. The accounts on tumbler.com were from seven females and male DREAMERS submitted the majority of the stories obtained from WeAreAmerica.org. We did not get an exact number regarding gender from the WeAreAmerica.org because some of the stories selected were anonymous and did not hint at the possible gender of the DREAMer. We remained aware that people published their narratives without the intention for the narratives to serve as research data. Therefore, we considered the ethical issues related to using blogs or other Internet related research material such as the potential for creation of "hero stories" or the potential to interfere with the author's autonomy (Heilferty, 2011). For example, because we obtained the DREAMer narratives from the Internet, considered public domain, we were unable to obtain informed consent from the people that submitted their narratives. Despite not being able to obtain informed consent, we maintained confidentiality of the narrative authors, by not using demographic descriptions or names other than referring to individuals as man, woman, or DREAMer (Heaton, 2008). However, internet data of this type does have advantages over traditionally-gathered stories. For instance, these accounts are shared by those who feel strongly about the topic, and are thus a kind of self-selected theoretical sample (e.g., Eysenbach & Till, 2001). Also, these accounts come from various geographic backgrounds that would be difficult to obtain in local research.

Data Analysis

A part of ensuring trustworthiness and rigor in research occurs through reflexivity, and awareness of the role of the researcher. This includes acknowledging biases and influences the researchers brought to the process. In our case, the first author is a graduate of an accredited MFT program with clinical and research experience working with the Latino populations. Also, the first author is the child of parents who were at one time undocumented with close friends and family who remain undocumented. The second author is a graduate of an accredited MFT program with research interests and personal experience with some of the descriptions reflected in the DREAMers' stories. The third author is a faculty with interests in underserved and vulnerable populations and the role that qualitative research has in providing a voice to these individuals. The fourth author is a doctoral student of Latino background in an accredited MFT program, with research and clinical experiences with Latinos. Thus, it was important to be reflexive, critical, and keep memos during the process that documented our filters and understandings of this topic (Seale, 2004). The first two authors conducted the principal research analysis and the remaining authors functioned as internal auditors (Creswell, 2007), reviewing the data and analytic process, and participating in reflexive process of discussing and sharing meanings from the findings.

After the stories were collected, the first and second author brainstormed possible emergent themes from the data. This included being reflexive about the knowledge we brought to the topic and decisions that were being made about the analysis. Coding was conducted according to traditional phenomenological methods. Two of the researchers read and coded independently while focusing on meaning and significant statements related to DREAMers' experiences, unique characteristics, or motivations for sharing their stories. After the individual analysis, a collaborative process then occurred with the goal of creating larger meaning units or themes (Moustakas, 1994). During the collaboration process, we used our list of codes and themes to determine which codes and themes overlapped and if some codes were more fitting than others. We settled on the codes and themes after both researchers determined that all codes and themes selected were representative of the described DREAMers' experiences. This process was also helpful in ensuring rigor, because it provided an opportunity for reflection about the DREAMers' experiences, but also a chance to be reflexive as to how our understandings influenced this process. This was important as a check for trustworthiness, because this kind of data is not open to member checking in the way that a standard phenomenological interview is (Creswell, 2012). This was not a traditional interrater agreement process, but rather, a collaborative co-construction process consistent with the assumptions of phenomenological inquiry (Moustakas, 1994). For example, we strove to understand the insider's experience of being a DREAMer, and generated themes that were representative of all of the DREAMers' stories, based on their first-person narratives. As a conclusion to the themes, a summary "essence" of DREAMers' experiences was created.

Results

From the fifteen stories analyzed, we extracted statements that seemed rich with meaning. Clustering these statements according to the developing codes resulted in nine primary themes, including: Uncertainty about the Future, Resilience in Spite of Barriers, Education as a Form of Identity and Empowerment, The Influence of Time, Family Sacrifices for a Better Life, Disconnect from their Countries of Origin, The Meaning of "Undocumented," Emotions, and "Collective Survival." These themes were summarized into an essential essence of the phenomenon. During the coding and analysis there were many other themes that developed but did not make it into the final list, including: lack of choice in their arrival to the

US at young ages, views on the politics surrounding the passage of the DREAM Act, and losses experienced. However, these were not as consistent or prevalent as the nine primary themes.

Theme 1: Uncertainty about the future. This theme reflected the reality for many that an undocumented status in the US places people in a position of ambiguity and insecurity about the future. It included reflections about who trust with the knowledge of their undocumented position, as well as their legal situation. All of the narratives reflected uncertainty about the future as a pressing issue. For example, one said, “my citizenship status is holding me back enormously, all of my hopes and dreams have been put on hold indefinitely.”

There was also uncertainty reflected in what would happen if confronted with deportation. This single issue separated many of DREAMers from their peers. Although most DREAMers have lived their entire if not most of their life in the United States, and consider this country their home, they live with the unsettling reality of an uncertain situation, as one explained:

Being deported gives you the feeling that death would be a better substitute than living out life... People who are against immigration should put themselves in my shoes. Think about growing up your entire life in America, and then all of a sudden being deported to a land where you know no one and have no ties to.

The undocumented status can dramatically change DREAMers’ lives in an instant, as one individual described:

The company I worked for was raided by ICE [US Immigration and Customs Enforcement]... This is the second time reality struck me with a mighty force...the day I lost my job was the scariest day – those minutes when I thought everything I had worked for would be taken from me.

Other content related to this theme reflected uncertainty in who to trust, what information to disclose, as well as fear of losing accomplishments and loved ones. Many discussed being cautious and keeping their status private.

Themes 2: Resilience in spite of barriers and disappointments. DREAMers face many unique discouragements and barriers that do not exist for legal residents. Stressors for DREAMers can include, but are not limited to financial limitations, restrictions with access to healthcare, and family separation due to deportation. Through their narratives DREAMers conveyed resilience and hope in the face of these challenges. They discussed how they adapted to their obstacles and found ways to circumvent the challenges. One described an attitude of resilience, saying, “what I had to do wasn’t to give up on my dreams; it was simply to change them.”

These individuals shared complex challenges, such as withdrawal of their college acceptance because of their undocumented status. Some who were able to attend college, encountered financial barriers including disqualification for financial aid. Social barriers also emerged in their peer-to-peer interactions; such as lying to their friends or keeping their status private out of fear of deportation. However, many described their status as an opportunity to find alternatives, work harder and remain dedicated to their future goals because “social [security number] or not, no one can take this [college education] away from me.”

Themes 3: Education as a form of identity and empowerment. Education was an integral part of how DREAMers described themselves in their narratives. It was discussed as a value in their lives and way to acknowledge and honor their families’ sacrifices. In spite of the financial concerns and nonexistent social security number, many writers identified a “thirst for knowledge” and desire for education in their lives. One person introduced herself with her

educational status as the primary identifier: “I am a college student, a sister, a daughter, a friend, and an activist, and for the first time in my life, I am standing before you as a proud dreamer.” Other DREAMers described their education as a means to take advantage of the opportunities their families sacrificed to make available to them, as one said: “I would forgo any desire for material possessions because the desire to have a degree from a university was more important to me.”

DREAMers’ also expressed how their education empowered them because it would remain with them, even if deported. “I am proud of it [education]” one said, “because social or not, no one can take this away from me.” Another person described that she chose to get a quick degree in case she gets deported, even if it was not the degree she ultimately wanted. “I would rather leave with one degree than nothing. My passion is to find cure for AIDS, cancer, and other diseases. I have been going to college every semester, including summer semesters, because I feel rushed against ICE’s unexpected ambushes.” Education also offered undocumented students access to resources, a community of supporters, and a feeling of empowerment to challenge or silence the fear associated with the undocumented status. As one woman described, “Education is the light that I shine down the dark tunnel, to urge, challenge, and undermine the fear of not knowing my obscure future.”

Theme 4: The influence of time. The concept of time came up in different but significant ways in the posts. Time was as a marker in when people experienced awareness of their undocumented status, and a component of why they described the United States as their only home. For many DREAMers, arrival in the US occurred during early childhood, so they identified as American and called this country home. Time also was a factor related to when legislation would be passed that could bring relief. Waiting for the passage of the proposed DREAM Act loomed large, as one student described: “We can’t afford to put my future on hold any longer.” Another described plans for the actions to take to ensure access to scholarships and financial aid in order to finish their college degree:

I need the DREAM Act to pass so I can apply for more scholarships, complete my degree, and get a good job coming out of college. It’s the same story for my sister; she is stuck in dead end jobs with no hopes for future study.

Developmental milestones were also connected to time. For example, during high school, anxiety and awareness of their different status was heightened:

I never really knew the implications of being undocumented until I reached my high school years when all of my friends and fellow classmates began to get their driving permits and apply for jobs.

Others confronted awareness of their limitations when faced with medical issues and the inability to access the same medical supports as others.

Theme 5: Family sacrifices for a better life. The sacrifices mentioned in the stories of DREAMers conveyed not only determination for a better life, but the hope for all the possibilities the US promises. These often began when parents made the decision to immigrate to a different country where they confronted different cultures, languages, discrimination, financial hardships, difficult conditions, and separation from extended families. In spite of these challenges, the sacrifices were described as worth it. One recalled in her story: “My mother carried me in her arms for a great part of the walk across the border - such was her relentless effort...to make it a better world for me.” Others recalled work sacrifices of family members, with one woman’s description of her mother’s giving up her spare time to work two full time jobs during the week and another job during the weekend and how they still came up

short each semester paying the \$10,000 in tuition fees.

Theme 6: Disconnect from their countries of origin. Many DREAMers arrived in the US at a young age and their earliest memories often occurred in the United States. Therefore, they described their native countries as a foreign, unfamiliar place and they viewed the United States as home. The disconnect was evident in a woman's description of a forced return to India as a "nightmare" that turned into a reality:

I could not be sent to a country I no longer know, ripped away from my family, my friends, and the beautiful place that I had called home from almost as long as I could remember.

Another DREAMer awaiting deportation to Russia described his loss about leaving his friends and family and leaving the only country he knows. He described the difficulties he would face if he got deported: "In Russia, it would be difficult for me to survive. I barely speak the language and I have very little family there." Deportation to an unknown place results in a complete physical and emotional displacement. For example, a DREAMer deported to Bangladesh summarized the pain and challenges of this:

Obviously I feel American. I am a foreigner to Bangladesh. Everything I know, do, and say is American in every way. America is the only home that I know. Now I am forced to live in an alien land where I do not know the language or culture. I am disappointed that the country that I love could have done this to me and my family.

Theme 7: The meaning of "undocumented." The DREAMers made interpretations of a label that influenced their whole lives, which was the term "undocumented." This designation held tremendous significance for these individuals it often connected with immobilization and uncertainty of what their future held, as one wrote:

I never really knew the implications of being undocumented until I reached my high school years when all of my friends and fellow classmates began to get their driving permits and apply for jobs. Even then, I let none of that bring me down and I made my education top priority. When I began applying for college, however, I was put on the wait lists due to my legal status – even when my grades could have earned me a scholarship to an Ivy League college.

Holding the undocumented status placed DREAMers in a position of otherness and reduced access to resources. For some the meaning of the undocumented label evolved through transitions from initially not understanding, to fear and shame, and then to determination, pride, and goal setting.

Ethnically Indian, I was born in Fiji and I came to the United States when I was two-years old. Six months later, I became undocumented. At the age of 23, I became undocumented and unafraid.

The sense of pride that emerged from the label was sometimes a means to action and to join others in their struggle to resist the silence and lack of opportunities.

As an undocumented youth, I join the fight for the collective survival of a generation of immigrant youth; silence will no longer be the standard for those

of us who risk our survival in this country. We, as US-raised immigrant youth, are no longer willing to stand by as our dreams are denied time despite having earned the opportunity to be here.

Theme 8: Emotions. DREAMers expressed a range of sentiments as they described their circumstances, including fear, hope, pride, confusion, anger, embarrassment, pain, and disappointment. One woman described the fear of “going public” about her status: “The fear of being discovered is one that’s constantly on our minds. You learn to avoid bringing attention to yourself, to live below the radar of authority at all times, to stay hidden in the shadows.”

Another woman identified embarrassment and shame, in addition to fear:

If someone asked me why I didn’t drive I would say I had [a] nervous disorder and “it’s better for the world that I’m off the road,” or that I was colorblind and “you’re looking a bit gray today.” People knew I was joking but as long as you gave them an answer, they didn’t insist. Sometimes I would tell them the reason was because I was here illegally, but they thought that too was a joke. I didn’t want to be different, or inspire pity, or meet someone that would be so mean and report me to the authorities.

Intertwined with the painful emotions and difficult experiences, were also emotions of resilience, such as, hope, acceptance, and confidence about what a DREAMer can accomplish.

It’s really hard to realize that you could never go to your dream school because you can’t get financial aid or grants. I know for a fact that I can get in, but I just can’t pay for it. Sadly my story ends with a sad ending; though it’s not just a story, but a reality.

Theme 9: “Collective survival.” In publishing their stories on public platforms, almost all DREAMers expressed their knowledge about the existence of others in similar undocumented circumstances. Collective survival meant a sense of unity, solidarity, empowerment, resources, and strength to thrive despite the circumstances. The collective survival occurred for DREAMers despite geographic distances, and spanned thousands of miles and transcended ages, cultures, geographic locations, and genders. Awareness about community helped to bring some out of isolation, and use their undocumented experiences as a means to gain more courage.

This connection was described by one woman who found frustration in the shared waste of talent and contribution: “There are so many young and talented people living with the same limitations as me, and these lives are being wasted because of their citizenship.” The sense of empowerment that came from being connected sometimes led to organization and call for change:

I’ve decided to come out as an undocumented student in order to say that we’re tired of living of living in fear and, more importantly, to urge the passage of the DREAM Act. We need this bill in order to empower students across the country to stop living in fear, and to reach their potential by being integrated into the American society.

Another made an appeal to the president of the United States on behalf of all of this person’s fellow DREAMers:

Mr. President, it is clearly wrong that there continue to be so many promising young adults who are prevented from achieving their full potential simply because they don't have the right papers, trumping a bright, ambitious mind. To correct this wrong we need to pass the DREAM Act.

To “come out” as an undocumented person is part of the formal and informal advocacy work not only to speak for themselves, but for the thousands of DREAMers in the same struggle. Connecting with others helped DREAMers take courage and make connections that helped them speak out against injustices in person and online.

Even though DREAMers did not want to be recognized for their differences, it is these differences that set them apart from their counterparts and led to a sense of collective survival, which facilitated their growth and identification of key values forming their identities.

Discussion

DREAMers shared many values including an appreciation for family sacrifice, adaptation, education, and hope for the future. This belief in self and future helped in dealing with the many difficult emotions (such as pain, anger, frustration and disappointment) that constituted a part of the undocumented experience. But even with the intensity of these emotions they generally expressed courage and confidence to use their talents, live up to their potential, and advocate for action and change.

The results of this study highlight several themes that describe the experiences of DREAMers. These results build upon other scholarship that describe the complex identity development of undocumented students and how their circumstances influenced their experience (Ellis & Chen, 2013; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012; Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguineti, 2013; King & Puntí, 2012). However, one finding in this study was the importance of education as a means to empowerment and voice, as well as how difficult it was to be educationally qualified for university studies and learning opportunities, only to be denied because of undocumented status. Another area of emphasis that emerged in these themes was the role of resilience, courage, pride, and efforts for change. This resilience likely was related to the “collective survival” theme, because the strength to speak up seemed to serve as a rallying call to unite with others with similar stories, and stoke courage to fight for the passage of the DREAM Act. These findings relate to the idea that Gonzales (2008) pointed out that new generations of activist that are coming into the spotlight in their effort to “become American,” and in this engagement they are active participants in rewriting their own narratives (p. 239).

Implications

Clinical implications. It is critical for therapists and other mental health professionals to educate themselves on the sociopolitical needs, mental health worries, and interventions relevant for this population. This requires clinicians to become educated on the stressors and unique identity concerns associated with the undocumented experience.

Clinicians could examine how being a DREAMer affects the family system as immigration and undocumented status affects all members in various ways. The sacrifices and adjustments likely play out differently for each member, and this is relevant for therapists who work with families affected by the undocumented experience. To be culturally competent includes an awareness that each immigration story is unique and therapists will need to get to know their specific family members, while also being sensitive to the kinds of issues illustrated by the themes found in these voices. This requires that information be obtained about their

migration narrative, support system, policies and opportunities available for undocumented people. Also, it will be important for clinicians to assess for resilience, and how it developed and can be reinforced.

The undocumented experience often includes stress, embarrassment, depression and other harmful psychological outcomes, and clinicians can help address these with skills or targeted treatments (Ellis & Chen, 2013). Clinicians can also support families by making mental health services more readily available and welcoming of undocumented individuals. Many times, the fear about their status being disclosed deters people from seeking the support they need. This can be done by advertising therapeutic services to diverse populations, ensuring waiting room area and materials are inclusive of all families, and providing informed consent and confidentiality in the family's native language if requested.

Research implications. Future research could examine how the experience of being halted because of the undocumented status affects the emotional well-being of DREAMers. In these stories DREAMers did not overtly discuss their emotions, but many emotions emerged as part of their unique stressors. This could be further explored through interviews or surveys. Additional scholarship could look at stressors around acculturation, and their relationship with things like depression, anxiety, feelings of being marginalized, and being alienated. The emotional stress or acculturative stress may be related to immigrants' experiences regardless of their documentation status. For example, others have found that these individuals experience increased psychosomatic symptoms, identity confusion, and poor health outcomes (Ellis & Chen, 2013). Researchers could ask further questions about the interplay between concerns for security in the US and wanting to excel academically or provide a future for themselves and family members.

Policy implications. Immigration reform is a complex and fraught issue that continues to be debated in political and social arenas. Information from this study can inform this discussion by highlighting the issues that are at stake for those most affected. For instance, these DREAMers emphasized unique values and desires to contribute to the country they live in. It is likely that they could contribute to society through their diverse experiences and often bilingual and bicultural skills, and future work could help to make the case how, through legalization, these individuals benefit tax payers and the United States economy (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010).

Limitations and Conclusion

This study used public domain, online data, which prevents researchers from asking direct questions and follow-up questions that would be typical in face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The stories were self-reported and included only what DREAMers wanted to share. However, one advantage to this method that is congruent with our epistemological approach of social construction is that these stories were not influenced by researcher questions or bias, but instead were generated by what these individuals felt most strongly about. It is true, however, that the stories were found on websites that would have influenced their content. For instance, the site WeAreAmerica.org, has an activist focus with a goal of raising the "voices of immigrants in the national dialogue around our country's broken immigration system. ("WeAreAmerica.org,")" The website is a platform to discuss the issues with the broken immigration system and to connect real people's stories and faces to the issue. On the other hand, tumblr.com is a microblogging platform and social networking website for people to share whatever they want. In our analysis we noticed that the activist content was more prominent on the WeAreAmerica website, whereas the stories from tumblr website were more introspective and more likely to express content describing negative emotions.

Finally, as researchers we played a role in the generation of knowledge and

representation of these individuals, and this is particularly important to acknowledge when the research is of an action nature that could be used for systemic change (Goodman, Liang, Helms, Latta, Sparks, & Weintraub, 2004). Although all research is affected by those who carry it out, it is worth noting that other projects on this topic would find varying results. Nevertheless, we believe that these voices are valuable and that it is beneficial to raise awareness about the unique experiences and challenges of this community.

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