

The University of San Francisco

USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center

Psychology

College of Arts and Sciences

2020

Cruzando fronteras: Liberation psychology in a counseling psychology immersion program

Daniela Domínguez

Belinda Marie Hernandez-Arriaga

K. P. Sharon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/psyc>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

© 2020, American Psychological Association. This paper is not the copy of record and may not exactly replicate the final, authoritative version of the article. The final article will be available, upon publication, via its DOI: 10.1037/lat0000148

Cruzando Fronteras: Liberation Psychology in a Counseling Psychology Immersion Course

Daniela G. Domínguez, Psy.D

Belinda Hernandez-Arriaga, Ed.D

Karen Sharon Paul, BA

University of San Francisco

Daniela G. Domínguez, Department of Counseling Psychology, University of San Francisco;
Belinda Hernandez-Arriaga, Department of Counseling Psychology, University of San
Francisco; Karen Sharon Paul, Department of Counseling Psychology, University of San
Francisco.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Daniela G. Domínguez,
Department of Counseling Psychology, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton St., San
Francisco, CA, 94117, USA. E-mail: dgdominguez@usfca.edu

Abstract

Using testimonio research, this study explores the immersion experiences of 15 counseling psychology students enrolled in an immersion program in Huejotal, Huaquechula. Based on core concepts of Liberation Psychology, this immersion program sought to increase students' critical consciousness through conscientization, deideologization, denaturalization, and problematization. A thematic analysis of written testimonios includes coding, checks for internal validity, and the generation of important themes across student participants. Results revealed six themes: reclaiming identity; journeying with “nuestros ancestros and familias [our ancestors and families]”; “los niños [the children] as teachers”; cultural wealth; “comunidad como familia [community as family]”; and “cruzando fronteras [crossing borders]” as a call to social action. Results confirmed past research findings that liberation-based immersion courses could be empowering pedagogical experiences for counseling psychology students. This study expands the body of knowledge on counseling psychology immersion programs and has implications for future Liberation-Psychology-based immersion courses with LatinX communities.

Public Significance Statement. This study underscores the important role that Liberation-Psychology-based immersion courses may play in counseling psychology students' personal and professional development. Findings have implications for future Liberation-Psychology-based immersion courses with LatinX communities.

Keywords: Liberation Psychology, testimonios, immersion programs

Cruzando Fronteras: Liberation Psychology in a Counseling Psychology Immersion Course

Considering the growing LatinX population in the US, clinical training programs need to prepare students to adequately discuss issues of race, ethnicity, and immigration status in the context of counseling (Cardemil & Battle, 2003). Researchers have proposed that effective outcomes in clinical work with LatinX communities are best accomplished when clinicians demonstrate knowledge of the cultural, political, and historical experiences that shape the lives and identities of LatinX individuals (Arredondo & Perez, 2003; Cardemil & Sarmiento, 2009). While clinical training on cultural responsiveness can be provided in traditional classroom settings, educators are looking for innovative training strategies, such as immersion courses, to bridge psychological theory and community-engagement (Platt, 2012). Immersion courses are defined in this manuscript as community-engaged curriculum that requires students and faculty to travel, visit, engage, and connect with marginalized communities.

Previous research proposes that immersion courses in the helping professions are associated with positive outcomes, including enhanced multicultural awareness, self-awareness, cultural empathy, social consciousness, and a commitment to social justice advocacy (Choi, VanVoorhis, & Ellenwood, 2015; Ishii, Gilbride, & Stensrud, 2009). Some counseling psychology immersion courses have used critical consciousness and liberation-based frameworks to help increase students' understanding about community, culture, poverty, and injustice (Platt, 2012). Research studies on liberation-based immersion courses have shown their effectiveness in

supporting students' personal and professional development (Choi, VanVoorhis, & Ellenwood, 2015; Goodman, & West-Olatunji, 2009; Platt, 2012).

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of literature on the experiences of counseling psychology students who undergo Liberation Psychology immersion courses with LatinX communities. Our manuscript aims to (a) expand counseling psychology, Liberation Psychology, and LatinX research on immersion courses, (b) share our students' experiences with "Cruzando Fronteras [crossing borders]," an immersion course in Mexico that is based on core concepts of Liberation Psychology, and (c) discuss the educational implications for the success of Liberation Psychology immersion courses in mental health programs.

This article begins with an overview of Liberation Psychology and a description of how the first two authors incorporated core concepts of Liberation Psychology in "Cruzando Fronteras." Then, based on the authors' analysis of written testimonios [testimonies] from 15 counseling psychology students, this article discusses the ways in which "Cruzando Fronteras" shaped students' personal and or professional development. Educational implications for future Liberation Psychology immersion courses within mental health programs are also discussed.

Liberation Psychology

Founded by Ignacio Martín-Baró, a Jesuit priest born in Spain in 1942, Liberation Psychology began its movement in Latin America in the 1980s (Tate, Rivera, Brown, & Skaistis, 2013). After obtaining his doctoral degree in Social Psychology at the University of Chicago, Martín-Baró returned to El Salvador where he immersed himself in the community of San Salvador; a city experiencing major political upheaval at the time. While working in San

Salvador, he observed the social conditions that contributed to the suffering, marginalization, and exclusion of impoverished communities (Lykes & Sibley, 2014). He advocated for marginalized communities, unveiled the human rights violations taking place in El Salvador, and encouraged psychologists to move away from their focus on examining an individual's psyche to study the suffering of individuals' experiences within the context of their environmental conditions.

Influenced by Martín-Baró's work, Liberation Psychology emerges as an intense reaction to the modern models that continue to exist in some psychological approaches and therapeutic systems and recognizes that a one-size-fits-all approach to psychology does not benefit impoverished or marginalized communities (Goodman et al., 2015). Rather, Liberation Psychology focuses on practicing critical consciousness to understand the language, knowledge, and multiple perspectives of oppressed communities (Montero, 2017). It is through critical consciousness that liberation from the hegemonic systems that oppress the powerless could be accomplished (Martín-Baró, 1991).

Liberation Psychology argues in favor of engaging and understanding marginalized communities within the context of their social conditions to better understand their preferences, virtues, value systems, strengths, and local resources (Montero, 2007). It is through visiting, engaging, and connecting, that psychologists can facilitate the core concepts of conscientization, deideologization, denaturalization, and problematization. The first and second authors sought to incorporate these core concepts into "Cruzando Fronteras," as discussed next.

Integrating Liberation Psychology into "Cruzando Fronteras"

“Cruzando Fronteras,” a one-week immersion course for 15 Master’s level counseling psychology students from a University in Northern California, was designed to increase their critical consciousness and understanding of the oppressive forces experienced by rural communities in Mexico; oppressive forces that often lead to poverty, forced migration, and other concerns (First author, 2019). Previous research proposes that even if immersion courses are short term courses, they vastly increase students’ understanding of “the core values in humanity and become appreciative about what they have and who they are” (Choi, Ellenwood & Van Voorhis, 2014, p. 256). Counseling psychology students were not required to complete any prerequisite courses to be eligible for this one-week immersion course (i.e., a one-unit-credit course). While no funding was provided for this immersion opportunity, all students were awarded modest scholarships by their university.

To make this immersion course a reality, a partnership with La Universidad Iberoamericana, Puebla (IBERO) was established. Considering the curriculum objectives of our immersion course, faculty members from the IBERO recommended the immersion course take place in an elementary-school in Huejotal, Huaquechula, a rural community near the city of Puebla. “Cruzando Fronteras” consisted of visiting approximately 20 elementary-school children who were impacted by (a) persistent barriers to healthcare access given the region’s rural landscape, (b) higher rates of poverty that often resulted in family members migrating to the US, and (c) the detrimental effects of the 7.1 magnitude earthquake that occurred on September 19, 2017 in and near Puebla. These children were forced to study in improvised classrooms as a

result of the damage the earthquake inflicted on their school, and all of them had at least one family member who had migrated to the US.

The first and second author of this article designed this immersion course to include experiential activities that could initiate and amplify conscientization, deideologization, denaturalization, and problematization. Approximately two weeks before counseling psychology students arrived in Huejotal, they initiated the process of conscientization through readings and peer discussions. Readings included- *Dibujando el "otro lado": Mexican children's perceptions of migration to the United States* by Sertzen and Torres (2016), and Yosso's (2005) *Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth*.

Conscientization involves active emotional and cognitive processes that individuals undergo to learn more about the truth behind their oppression (Freire, 1973; Montero, 2007).

Conscientization-raising readings sought (a) to engage counseling psychology students in an examination of the many systems of oppression and exploitation experienced by impoverished and marginalized Mexican communities at the hands of dominant groups in society; (b) to help awaken counseling psychology students' critical awareness about their own sociopolitical, cultural, as well as historical experiences; and (c) to "move [counseling psychology] students beyond colonized ways of thinking and conceptualizing that have dominated counseling psychology and education scholarship" (Cervantes, Flores Carmona, & Torres Fernández, 2018, p. 6). In the following sections, we will refer to elementary-school students as "children" and Master's counseling psychology students as "students."

One week before the students arrived in Huejotal, the first and second author held an in-person meeting to review the syllabus and course requirements with students (e.g., “Mi árbol y yo” activity and the tree mural). Once students arrived in Puebla, and to amplify the process of conscientization, faculty members from the IBERO provided a workshop on the stressors and disparities that often force family members in Huejotal to migrate to the US, and the ways in which the 2017 earthquake increased this flow of migration.

Similar to previous Liberation Psychology inspired immersion courses, “we sought to avoid a colonial approach through experiential learning beyond university classrooms and tourist zones” (Platt, 2012, p. 357). Thus, we relied on experiential activities that sought to facilitate deideologization. Students were asked to reflect, as a whole group, on their beliefs around how US and Mexican dominant social structures use outlets such as school, church, media, and governmental bureaucracies to shape the everyday experiences of the elementary-school children in Huejotal. Deideologizing involves peeling off idealized layers to reveal how violence, poverty, and other social injustices are created by dominant outlets in society (Chavez, Fernandez, Hipolito-Delgado, Rivera, 2016). Montero (2007) explains that as a result of oppressive dominant outlets, “we accept explanations and modes of understanding life that reinforce existing social and political interests and naturalize social exclusion and inequality” (p. 524).

“Mi árbol y yo [My tree and I],” one of the art activities facilitated by the counseling psychology students in Huejotal, sought to initiate the process of denaturalization in the elementary-school children. Denaturalization involves using a strengths-based approach to create

connections between the reality presented to the oppressed by the oppressors and the truth behind a better life that could be achieved by active engagement and participation in the community (Chavez et al., 2016). This art activity required counseling psychology students to engage with the children in a way that elicited the recovery of historical memory and amplified children's individual, familial, community, and cultural strengths. The children of Huejotal were asked to: (a) plant a tree in a pot (the plant and pot were provided by IBERO faculty), (b) paint their anatomical heart on the pot, (c) and write the name of a family member who migrated to "El Norte [i.e., the North]." Using art and storytelling, the children shared their emotional journeys and re-connected with the stories of family members in the US. Rather than telling "migration stories" from the perspective of the oppressor, the children connected with the symbolism of the tree; a tree that represented the concept that while others may have to "travel" due to migration or death, family connection could remain rooted and strong [insert figure 1 here].

This photograph represents, in art form, the journey of the children's hearts crossing borders with seeds of community planted for strength and growth. At the completion of "Mi árbol y yo," students were asked to question and discuss with their peers how their long-held beliefs about migration contributed to existing power dynamics and circumstances of inequity and oppression that impacted migrants and their families. They were asked to consider how they could use their strengths and virtues to be agents of change for the common good of migrant and impoverished LatinX communities (Brown, Rivera, Skaistis, & Tate, 2013).

Hoping to initiate the process of problematization, students invited the children's elementary-school teachers and parents to share, only voluntarily, their family's migration

stories. According to Montero (2009) problematization could be initiated through (a) listening, (b) dialogue, (c) participation, (d) communication, (e) humility and respect, (f) critique, and (g) reflection. Students listened to the family's stories and engaged in dialogue with humility and respect. When the story-telling ended and the children and families had left the area in which the conversation had taken place, the first and second author instructed students to reflect on how hegemonic systems are present within the field of counseling psychology and how they could engage in the field's social transformation to better support migrant and marginalized communities in Mexico and the US. The scope of problematization is to break down the process through which individuals have accepted and adapted to the circumstances of inequity and injustice.

Throughout the week-long immersion course, opportunities for guided reflection, art activities, and debriefing exercises further allowed counseling psychology students to analyze the pervasive oppressive issues that impacted the children in Huejotal. However, rather than acting as scientific observers and through awareness-raising experiential activities, they also examined how oppressive forces had shaped their personal values and commitments as future mental health professionals.

As a result of the consciousness-raising activities that were facilitated by our team, the children in Huejotal appeared to increase their attention and focus on the cultural wealth, strengths, and dignity that already exist in their community. Thus, "Cruzando Fronteras" was designed to be a liberatory experience for the communities visited, rather than a neo-colonial experience based on educational tourism that could perpetuate inequitable relationships and

power differentials between students and Huejotal community members. When the experiential activities had concluded, the children took their painted pots home (i.e., “Mi árbol y yo” activity). They also expressed excitement that their school now had a tree mural, which was created with permission from school administrators and in collaboration with the children [insert figure 2 here]. The mural included every child’s painted handprints in the shape of a community tree, which symbolized the Huejotal community’s connection and togetherness. Throughout these experiential activities, the first and second author created conditions to ensure the safety and protection of the elementary-school children and their families, as discussed next.

The Safety and Protection of the Children and Their Families

Prior to students’ arrival in Huejotal, two faculty members from the IBERO reached out to the children, their parent(s), and guardians to explain the purpose of “Cruzando Fronteras” and the activities that would be facilitated during the immersion course. The parents and elementary-school teachers understood the curriculum objectives and all consented to the experiential activities by the time students arrived. To ensure additional protection, faculty from [blind for peer review] reviewed the purpose and goals of each activity with the children and they were asked to only participate if they felt comfortable. The children and their families understood that participation was voluntary and that they could discontinue participation at any time. They were asked to approach any of the faculty members if they experienced discomfort, or had questions or concerns about the activities.

While developing the “Cruzando Fronteras” curriculum, the first and second author reviewed the ethics code for psychologists in Mexico, a product of the Mexican Society of

Psychology (i.e., SMP). Faculty members from the psychology department at IBERO, a program accredited by the National Council of Evaluation and Research in Psychology (CNEIP), were available for consultation during the design phase of our curriculum and during our community engagement in Huejotal. To ensure that our collaboration with the children was not influenced by a colonial approach, Dr. Marcela Ibarra Mateos, a full-time professor at IBERO traveled to Huejotal with us to offer live supervision. Dr. Ibarra, a familiar person to the children in Huejotal, has practiced and conducted research with rural youth, and has written extensively on resistance, migrant identity, and the configuration of migratory circuits.

Mindful of the children's safety, the first and second author led the experiential activities and were in constant communication with Dr. Ibarra. The children's elementary-school teachers acted as observers to help the children feel more comfortable and were asked to inform Dr. Ibarra if they had any concerns. To ensure adequate supervision, the children were divided into four groups; therefore, at least one faculty member was available to provide adequate consultation and support. Two of the faculty members were social workers and two were psychologists. All faculty members were fluent Spanish speakers. It is important to note that individual and group counseling services were not conducted by students or faculty members from our university.

Method

Testimonio research was used as a methodological approach by all three authors to capture the experiences of the students who completed the immersion course. Testimonio research is the use of stories as data, and more specifically, first-person accounts of lived

experiences (second author, 2017). These stories can appear in the form of autobiography, life history, interviews, journal entries, letters, or other materials collected, and are analyzed for the meaning it has for its author (second author, 2017). Some researchers propose that there is a “symbiotic relationship” between the guiding principles of Liberation Psychology and testimonios as a methodology because both involve the Freiran process of conscientization (Cervantes, Flores Carmona, & Torres Fernández, 2018, p. 6; Huber & Cueva, 2012). This is because “unlike the more common training of researchers to produce unbiased knowledge, testimonio, like Liberation Psychology, challenges objectivity by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance (Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012, p. 363). Within the field of counseling psychology, scholars are increasingly using testimonios as a methodological and social-justice approach in reaction to one-size-fits-all traditional paradigms (Cervantes, Flores Carmona, & Torres Fernández, 2018; Cervantes & Torres Fernández, 2016).

Participants

Fifteen Master’s level counseling psychology students from a University in Northern California [blind for peer review] were recruited. Participants included 11 LatinX students (9 identified as “second-generation Mexican-American” and 2 identified as “Mexican-born”), 1 White/Caucasian student, 1 Armenian student, 1 Black student, and 1 “PhilipinX” student; 14 students identified as “cisgender woman,” and 1 student identified as “cisgender man.” Ages ranged from 25 to 35 years old. Four students were first-year counseling psychology students and 11 were second-year counseling psychology students. All students were given pseudonyms,

and all identifying markers were removed from the study. All students resided in Northern California and were American citizens or Lawful Permanent Residents. None had received Liberation Psychology training prior to their enrollment in “Cruzando Fronteras.”

Procedure

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at a University in Northern California (IRB Protocol #1098). Following receipt of IRB approval, the third author emailed students who completed the “Cruzando Fronteras” course in 2018, and corresponded with those interested in participating in this study. Students were recruited using the criterion method of sampling (Creswell, 2007), which involves “selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 2002, p. 238). The requirements were the following: (a) students who identified as Master’s level counseling psychology students at a university in Northern California; (b) ages 25-60; (c) and students who completed the “Cruzando Fronteras” immersion course in 2018.

Students were asked by the third author, via email correspondence, to reflect and respond in writing using testimonio, to the following prompt- *How did the immersion experience, “Cruzando Fronteras,” shape your personal and or professional development?* The prompt was broad and had no page length requirement to allow students to explore their thoughts and feelings freely. All written testimonios were collected one month after students returned from Huejotlal from June 1, 2018 to August 1, 2018.

Epistemology

Contrasting positivist and postpositivist paradigms, the authors read and analyzed the students' testimonios with the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped through lived experiences, language, human reflection, and interaction with hegemonic systems that often perpetuate injustice (Delgado-Romero, Singh, & De Los Santos, 2018). The authors were cognizant of the sociocultural and political realities and struggles within which students and their testimonios existed. Students' testimonios were understood as being written in relation to how students socially constructed their immersion experiences, how their immersion experiences transformed and evolved over time, and how students positioned themselves in relation to the children of Huejotal.

Analysis

The authors used thematic analysis as an analytic method. Thematic analysis "is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braune & Clark, 2006, p. 79). To conduct the analysis in a deliberate and rigorous way, the authors: (a) became familiar with students' testimonios by reading them multiple times, (b) generated initial codes, (c) searched for themes using an inductive approach, (d) reviewed the themes as a team, (e) defined and named the themes, (f) and produced a report with a list of final themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). During the coding process, each researcher recorded her own impressions as well as reactions, thoughts, and insights into a memo file attached to the participant's testimonio. Subsequently, the individually identified themes were brought to the rest of the team for reflection and discussion about whether the themes represented some level of patterned response or meaning within the students' testimonios.

Reflexivity was present through a reflection of assumptions, biases, and their possible effect on the data. It is important to note that as the curriculum designers of “Cruzando Fronteras,” the positionality of the first and second authors could have influenced the interpretation of students’ testimonios or the information that students disclosed. To increase rigor, the third author was responsible for collecting the testimonios from students and de-identifying them prior to sharing them with the first and second authors. To ensure consistency, peer debriefing between the three authors explored whether divergent understandings, possible distortions, or blind spots appeared in the interpretation of the data.

Findings

Written testimonios present students’ experience with “Cruzando Fronteras” and how this immersion course impacted their personal and or professional development. The common themes found were: reclaiming identity; journeying with “nuestros ancestros and familias”; “los niños as teachers”; cultural wealth; “comunidad como familia”; and “cruzando fronteras” as a call to social action.

Reclaiming Identity

Martín-Baró addressed the necessity of recovering historical memory. He explains that historical memory is vital in recalling how oppression begins so as to be able to understand the oppressed (Martín-Baró, 1994). The testimonios analyzed demonstrate that students reclaimed historical memory while and after engaging with the children in Huejotal. For students of Mexican descent, visiting their ancestors’ “tierra [land]” facilitated their return to their Mexican roots. In the case of Adriana, this was the first time she had visited Mexico and traveling to her

ancestors' land provided the "missing-link" she needed to more profoundly understand her identity as "Mexican." She explained:

It was my first trip to Mexico ever, and I am glad that this was the way I was exposed to my home land. Growing up I have always felt that I was missing something in my life and this was the missing link that I was searching for. (Female, LatinX)

Students of Mexican descent experienced "Cruzando Fronteras" as an opportunity to embrace their parents' ties to Mexico, which they had not fully explored until this immersion experience. Esmeralda said she gained a more profound understanding of her roots and family's struggles by immersing herself in the Huejotal community. She explained, "Being a first-generation college student of an immigrant family from Mexico, this trip allowed me to gain an *incomparable* comprehension of my roots and my parents' similar struggles and journeys [similar struggles to the children in Huejotal] (Female, LatinX)." While students experienced positive emotions re-connecting to their roots, they also encountered mixed-feelings, including emotional pain. This was particularly true for students who had rejected the land and cultural traditions of their ancestors due to forced assimilation in the US. This was the case for Paulina. She described:

I remember being ashamed of who I was and wanting to hide my culture as much as I could. I stayed away from speaking Spanish; I stayed away from doing anything that pertained to my culture including the things dear to my heart like ballet folklórico. I made sure to acculturate as much as I could growing up, but now I am reconnecting with my heart and the love it has for my culture. (Female, LatinX)

Analyzed testimonios suggest that for students who had experienced family loss as a result of forced migration, “Cruzando Fronteras” offered an opportunity for them to connect with the children of Huejotal through transformative memories that reminded them of their own parents’ absence due to migration. Alessandra for example, wrote about her experience with family separation as a result of forced migration. She explained, “The transformative experience began within immersing my personal story into a community with children whose parents are absent. I was one of those children the first three years of my life. (Female, LatinX)”

Journeying with “Nuestros Ancestros and Familias”

Testimonios demonstrated students’ desire to reconnect with their ancestors and families. Alexis for example, wrote about the power and privilege she felt when she crossed borders that her parents were unable to cross given their undocumented immigration status. She said, “I feel as though I took this journey for them and carried them in my mind and heart” (Female, LatinX). Historical memories and stories of ancestors buried in the land, conjured up similar experiences for non-LatinX students. Tony for instance, drew similarities between Aleppo, Beirut, and Huejotal. She wrote:

Right away, upon entering Huejotal, I was brought to reality. While taking the bus into the village, my senses were brought to an eerily familiar place that has up until then, only lived in my mind and imagination—that of where and how my parents grew up in the middle east. My dad mentions growing up with 6 siblings under a tin roof in a shared room both in Aleppo and Beirut, with dirt roads, stray dogs everywhere, and a deeply shared experience of community...I don’t think I was the only one who was stunned into

silence upon driving to Huejotal. A stark reminder of one's privilege. And for me at least, a stark reminder of where my parents came from. (Female, Armenian)

Questions and themes of colonization and White privilege appeared in students' testimonios. Lisa for example, shared that she gained awareness of the many privileges she currently enjoys given her ancestors' light skin and wealth. Her testimonio demonstrates that the trip to Huejotal helped her reflect on the possible difficulties she would encounter if she were denied those privileges as a foreigner entering an outside land. She explained:

Upon arrival they [her ancestors] were afforded the privileges granted to whites: access and acceptance. With my white skin and English skills I have reaped the many privileges afforded the fabrication of whiteness in this country for many generations. As I traveled to Mexico for the first time, I wondered if *I* would be accepted. (Female, White)

The notion of the "American dream" appeared in students' testimonios. For students, the children's expressed desire to one day pursue the "American dream," reminded them of their ancestors' and families' decision to also pursue safety and economic opportunities in the US. Maria del Carmen for instance, reflected on the grief experienced and the sacrifices made by her family members after they migrated and settled in the US. She shared:

Then, I began to compare that "dream" [the "American dream" described by the children in Huejotal] to the stories that I have heard from my aunt, my cousins, and the families that I work with. They all came to the United States in search of that "dream," to escape poverty or violence. However, no one ever told them how much harder they would need to work for it and how long it will be until they get to see their families again. They all

share a similar hope of one day returning to their country to see their relatives, the home they left behind, and any other memories of what their lives once were. (Female, LatinX)

Hearing from the children and their family members about their desire to migrate to “El Norte,” provided students with additional insight that allowed them to better understand that the migration journey often begins with thoughts and dreams of a better future.

“Los Niños” as Teachers

Students wrote about the multiple strengths they discovered in the children of Huejotal. Paulina wrote about how she had initially assumed, prior to her arrival in Huejotal, that she would be teaching the children new information through the facilitation of experiential exercises (e.g., “Mi árbol y yo” and the tree mural). She was pleasantly surprised to see herself in the role of both learner and facilitator. Highlighting the teaching role that the “niños” adopted and the resilience they had within, Paulina explained:

I believed I was going to make the biggest impact with those children in teaching them anything I could, providing a fun time and being there for them; all of which I did but in the end those children taught me about resiliency, power of the heart, and the truth that is a community. (Female, LatinX)

The analyzed testimonios were also evidence of the grief and trauma the children experienced. Maria del Carmen, for example, wrote about becoming aware of the complex and emotional journeys the children endured as a result of death(s) and loss related to violence and the 2017 Puebla earthquake. She explained:

Each day was a new learning experience about how one relative went to the US, their own desire of one day going to the US, the death of a relative, or their experience with the earthquake...the majority of them are experiencing some kind of grief, loss or trauma within their families. (Female, LatinX)

The children's openness and vulnerability in sharing their stories taught students about humility, strength, perseverance and the ability to connect across languages. Monolingual English-speaking students were also learning from the children. Patricia for example, wrote about what it was like for her to learn from the children about their hardships through photography, visual art, and Spanish words. She stated:

The first day with the children we had a simple art project that matched my language abilities and so in that way, I was able to share the picture of my family and ask about the kids' families..In that manner I learned of their hardships; hambre (hunger), sediento (thirsty) y violencia (violence). (Female, African-American)

Students learned from the children about the significant meaning of interconnectedness. Claire indicated that she learned about the power of human connection and the commonalities that humans share regardless of nationality or cultural background, which made her feel "joyful" and "grounded." She indicated:

I can't believe how open they were to just be with us and form connections...I look back on pictures, even from the first couple days, and immediately notice how massive and genuine my smile is in all of them. Those kids gave me life and grounded me at the same

time.....This reaffirmed an integral lesson of the experience, one I will imbue into everything I do in life—the interconnectedness of human beings. (Female, PhilipinX)

Students also learned about the ways in which “love and support” strengthened children’s capacity to endure and overcome struggles. Admiring the children’s kindness and generosity and reflecting on how this kindness directly contrasts anti-immigrant rhetoric that depicts Mexicans as “bad people,” Jose stated:

I was reminded of the immense capacity to adapt that children possess. They taught me that despite lack of economic resources, children become attached to those that show love and enthusiasm as it was with our class...They were the exact opposite of what the biased media in “the states” portrayed them as- criminals, rapists and bad people. They in fact were ready to work hard, to show love to one another, while being human and so mature for their age. (Male, LatinX)

Cultural Wealth

Themes of Liberation Psychology unfolded as students began to experience a shift from seeing the children of Huejotal as powerless victims of natural and social disasters (i.e., through a deficit lens) to witnessing their cultural wealth and inner strength. Alessandra wrote about the children’s connection to the Popocatepetl, an active volcano near Huejotal that has been recognized as a symbol of strength and community pride across generations. She described:

I collaborated with a young boy who drew the Popocatepetl during a project, because he admires it and sees it as a part of his life. This reminds me of the cultural wealth and pride empowerment that transcends from generation to generation. (Female, LatinX)

The meaning of roots, community, and corazón [heart] were described as sources of cultural wealth in students' testimonios. Referencing the activity- "Mi árbol y yo," Maria del Carmen wrote about feeling moved by the power of symbolism that existed in the tree and its roots. She wrote, "The tree was the reflection of their roots, who they are, where they come from and those that guide them throughout their journey as children. Their resiliency and ability to adjust at such a young age was inspiring (Female, LatinX)."

Testimonios also represented the ways in which students were inspired by the rich traditions of Mexican culture and how they felt privileged to witness and learn more about Mexico. Describing Mexico as a living entity, Lisa wrote, "Mexico itself is almost a living entity because it is comprised of such strong heart and soul. Mexico is rich with tradition, culture and roots and we were fortunate to witness this firsthand (Female, White)."

"Comunidad como Familia"

In their testimonios, students described how compassionate conversation, fun play (e.g., soccer and basketball), and art activities, generated moments cemented by "cariño" [affection]. According to Alessandra, cariño and kindness were visible in the interactions between the children in Huejotal. She shared that whenever a child experienced physical pain when playing sports, other children would provide care and nurture. She wrote:

Despite the circumstances, the community of children in Huejotal also demonstrated the strength they all form as a community. Where if a little girl is crying a bunch others come up to ask if she's ok. These children rely on each other to tell their stories, and build community to counterattack trauma. (Female, LatinX)

Comparing their own community experiences in the US to their perceptions of the community interactions taking place in Huejotal between the children and their parents, students described community interactions in Huejotal as more cohesive, stronger, and affectionate. Paulina wrote about desiring that cohesion and love for herself and the LatinX communities that she works with in the US. She explained:

That sense of community is something that made a large impact in my heart. I left wanting that for myself and the Latino community I work with [in the US]. I want them to feel the community around them and support each other with their kids. (Female, Latinx)

Testimonios depicted how during times of learning, playing, eating and or talking, students connected with the children in a rich spirit of friendship. Referencing the tree mural that was painted as part of a second art experiential activity, Leyla interpreted the tree as a symbol of “togetherness.” She stated, “Every child marked their handprints in a community tree, which represented strength, resiliency, and togetherness (Female, LatinX).”

Regardless of students’ cultural background, their testimonios reported that they felt a sense of belonging during “Cruzando Fronteras.” Even when considering cultural differences, students felt welcomed and embraced by the community in Huejotal, which helped students feel at home. Tony stated:

This journey allowed me to be so deeply authentic...The warmth and openness with which we were welcomed and treated by everyone on the trip was breathtaking. I fit right in due to my super familial and Armenian background, rich with a love of food, music,

and people. I didn't for a second feel out of place, and I feel so honored that I can see Mexico as a home. (Female, Armenian)

“Cruzando Fronteras” as a Call to Social Action

In students' testimonios, we encountered a theme of opposition to the harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric and “America first” politics that students felt dominated U.S. headlines. Students experienced “Cruzando Fronteras” as a call to action and felt they could no longer wait on the sidelines for politicians to be more humanitarian in their treatment of marginalized communities and migrants. Students described “Cruzando Fronteras” as a course that challenged traditional classroom lecture, allowing them to directly engage with communities on the margins. Alessandra spoke about how leaving the traditional classroom broadened her understanding of social justice. She stated, “Cruzando Fronteras was an opportunity to broaden our exposure to the impacts of immigration, ‘del otro lado’ [on the other side]. It was a call for consciousness rooted from what our Master's program stands for, Social Justice (Female, Latinx).” Valeria, wrote about the anger she experiences when reflecting on the pain inflicted on the oppressed by those in power on both sides of the border. She shared:

On the one hand, the Mexican government closes its eyes to the reality of its people, making communities like Huejotal invisible and forcing its citizens to migrate and leave their family behind because of the extreme living conditions. The US then criminalizes fathers, mothers, daughters, sons, and families who have been forced out of their country to seek a better future...It [Cruzando Fronteras] inspired me to want to continue to broaden my perspective to hold those that are suffering and advocate for these

families....As a daughter of undocumented parents, I was aware of some of the struggles that those in the United States have to endure. Huejotal gave me the opportunity to see the reality on the Mexican side of the border. (Female, Latinx)

According to participants, “Cruzando Fronteras” left them eager to advocate for immigrant families in the US. Claire explained, “The only thing I know is that we must keep our voices strong, be a united front, and fight for justice together. [Female, FilipinX].” Similarly, Adriana wrote about “the fire” within her to fight for children impacted by forced migration, she said, “I have a fire inside of me to fight for these children and the children at our borders (Female, LatinX).” Esmeralda also wrote about her desire to implement the experiential exercises she learned during the immersion course in her work with immigrant communities in the US. She explained:

I could not wait to return to the US in order to continue to do the work that I do. I have been working with Latino immigrant families for the past few years, so I could not help but to connect both experiences. I felt a sense of eagerness to bring back and incorporate my learned and lived experiences to the work that I do. (Female, Latinx)

Students wrote about feeling empowered to take action rather than contribute to further social injustices by remaining a bystander. Esperanza shared about the important shifts that she experienced in her identity as “Mexican.” Her testimonios share that she had internalized racism through exposure to hate and exclusion, but found through immersion in this trip, a new vision of herself. She stated:

Like many Mexicans whether legal or not in this country, I lived in fear. My fear lied in speaking my mind expecting the criticism of others. I realized that I too began to believe the message the Trump administration was promoting: I, being Mexican, was inferior. This trip brought me that awareness and it helped me recognize that I contributed to the problem by remaining a bystander...This trip served as a reminder of the resiliency and drive that I possess as a Mexican immigrant. (Esperanza, Female, Latinx)

Testimonios illustrated students' ability to practice critical consciousness, which helped them to better understand themselves and the language, knowledge, and multiple perspectives of the children in Huejotal.

Discussion

Fifteen counseling psychology students actively engaged in a Liberation Psychology inspired immersion course in Huejotal, Huaquechula with elementary-school children. During this one-week long immersion course, they: (a) read articles on forced migration and Liberation Psychology, (b) attended a workshop offered by faculty members at the IBERO, (c) facilitated a variety of experiential activities, (d) learned from the children and their families about their experiences with migration and the 2017 earthquakes, (d) and left behind, with permission from the Huejotal community, the art pieces that were created in collaboration with the children (e.g., "Mi arbol y yo" and the tree mural). "Cruzando Fronteras" was designed by the first and second authors to initiate and amplify conscientization, deideologization, denaturalization, and problematization in students.

Students' written testimonios reflect increased critical consciousness. Although students had short-term exposure to the core concepts of Liberation Psychology, they reported increased self-awareness, increased cultural knowledge, and a commitment to social justice. Their increased critical consciousness was particularly evident in their understanding of the Huejotal community's struggles with poverty, migration, and the damages inflicted by the 2017 Puebla earthquake. This study is consistent with previous research that shows that critical consciousness and "cultural knowledge is created and passed through human connection in immersion programs (Platt, 2012, p. 353)."

Conscientization-based readings and experiential activities sought to deideologize the reality of the oppressed by engaging students in an examination of the many systems of oppression and exploitation experienced by marginalized communities in Mexico. This resulted in students reflecting and writing about feeling more grounded in their own cultural roots and more connected to their ancestral land, their ancestors, and families. Students of color reflected on their experiences as marginalized members of society and our White-identified student reflected on the privileges she has benefited from due to her "whiteness." Through conscientization, students developed a new awareness of themselves and the children of Huejotal as strong and resilient. Conscientization allowed students to observe themselves and the children from a social and political standpoint, which in turn opened their eyes to the strengths, resources, and skills that oppressed communities possess. The children's stories provided an opportunity for counseling psychology students to make these connections in decolonized ways. For example, rather than labeling the challenges that these children experienced as "internal problems,"

students became increasingly aware of the structural barriers and sociopolitical factors that created these challenges and adversities. They also became more attentive to the values, strengths, and local resources that facilitated the survival of these children.

Students' testimonios provided a glimpse into their understanding of how violence, poverty, and other social injustices were created by dominant outlets in society (Chavez et al., 2016). Martín-Baró (1994) believed that through the process of peeling off idealized layers and through the process of writing one's own history, deideologization could be accomplished. The process of deideologization was indeed seen in these testimonios. Deideologizing allowed students of color, including those from LatinX backgrounds, to draw connections between the reality presented to them by dominant groups in US society, and their previous desire to assimilate. Bridging parallels from their life to that of the children in Huejotal, students wrote about reclaiming their identity; an identity that had been colonized through assimilation. It is in the deideologizing that beginnings of the "breaking out of oppression" happened for our students, "which can transform the psychological patterns associated with oppression, and facilitate taking action to bring about changes in social conditions (Moane, 1999, p. 180)."

Evidence of denaturalization was present in students' understanding that the truth behind a better life could be more positively achieved through valuing cultural wealth, community support, and cultural roots (Chavez et al., 2016). Students described learning valuable lessons from the children in Huejotal, who adopted the role of "teachers" and taught them about the power of cultural capital and inner strength. Through witnessing children's strength, leadership, and cultural wealth, students experienced a renewed call to social action and had a deeper sense

of their own strengths, virtues, capabilities, and resources. The scope of problematization was evident in students' desire to take action that would dismantle hegemonic systems that elicit circumstances of inequity and injustice. Conscientization, deideologization, denaturalization, and problematization in "Cruzando Fronteras," elicited a broad array of emotions including joy, pain, and anger.

Consistent with previous research on immersion courses in counseling psychology, this study proposes that immersion programs can create suitable conditions for students to learn about oppressive societal structures, cultural responsiveness, and critical consciousness (Choi, VanVoorhis, & Ellenwood, 2015; Goodman, & West-Olatunji, 2009). Similar to previous studies, this study emphasizes that critical consciousness and multicultural learning can take place as a result of experiential learning through community-engagement (Platt, 2012).

Limitations

The results of this study should be understood within the context of certain limitations. Students in this study's sample were drawn from one counseling psychology program. In addition, written testimonios were collected only at one point in the research process; therefore, this study does not report on how students' personal and professional development may have transformed over time. Future studies may benefit from: (a) exploring how core concepts of Liberation Psychology continue to develop and shape students' personal and professional experiences months or even years after their return to the US; (b) including students from a variety of counseling psychology programs across the US to explore how a more diverse sample might change the results in this study, (c) examining how longer immersion programs could

potentially shape students' personal and or professional development differently; (d) and investigating how these immersion experiences may be different for students in other locations in Mexico, such as border cities where there is a strong presence of asylum-seeking communities and migrants from different countries. These limitations notwithstanding, the current study provides initial information that can help counseling psychology programs better understand and evaluate the potential benefits of Liberation Psychology-inspired immersion programs as effective pedagogical tools.

Training Implications

Results from this study provide insight into the unique benefits of teaching about systemic oppression, social injustice, and forced migration through Liberation-Psychology-based immersion courses. Liberation Psychology-inspired immersion courses have the potential to support the personal and professional development of students and trainees in mental health and the helping professions, including students in social work, clinical, counseling, and community psychology programs. By exposing students and trainees to Liberation Psychology's core concepts, academic programs could help build stronger *multicultural training environments* (Pope-Davis, Liu, Nevitt, & Toporek, 2000) that increase students' understanding of the sociopolitical, psychological, environmental, and legal forces impacting underserved and marginalized communities. Immersion courses that are based on conscientization, deideologization, denaturalization, and problematization have the potential to increase students' awareness of their personal assumptions, biases, power, and privilege and help students to reflect

on appropriate intervention strategies and techniques to be used with marginalized communities in de-colonized ways (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992).

Although “Cruzando Fronteras” is designed for Master’s level counseling psychology students, doctoral programs in mental health could adapt this one-unit course into a three-unit course, expanding on the experiential exercises and providing additional instruction on the clinical application of Liberation Psychology principles with marginalized communities.

Doctoral students could benefit from collaborating and learning from mental health clinicians living and working in Mexico. Given that “Cruzando Fronteras” requires community engagement with marginalized communities battling multiple oppressive forces, we do not recommend this curriculum for undergraduate psychology students.

Counseling psychology programs with LatinX Psychology emphasis areas could benefit from teaching in Latin America about the dynamics of power and pervasive social inequities that influence the psychological health of LatinX communities. Immersion courses could also engage LatinX students in a process of self-examination to increase their understanding of how their own sociocultural identities, including their racial/ethnic background and current immigration status, shape their position in society, their privileges, and areas of marginalization.

Abstracto

Utilizando testimonios escritos, este estudio explora las experiencias de inmersión de 15 estudiantes de psicología a nivel maestría, los cuales estuvieron inscritos en un curso de inmersión en Huejotal, Huaquechula. Basado en los conceptos centrales de la psicología de la liberación, esta experiencia de inmersión se enfocó en aumentar la conciencia crítica de los

estudiantes a través de la concientización, la desideologización, la desnaturalización y la problematización. El análisis de los testimonios escritos incluyó métodos cualitativos como la codificación, verificaciones de validez interna, y la generación de temas centrales entre los estudiantes que participaron en el curso. Los resultados revelaron seis temas: recuperando la identidad; viajando con nuestros ancestros y familias; los niños como maestros; la riqueza cultural; la comunidad como familia; y cruzando fronteras como un llamado a la justicia social. Los resultados confirmaron hallazgos de investigaciones anteriores de que los programas de inmersión basados en conceptos de la psicología de la liberación, pueden ofrecer experiencias pedagógicas importantes para los estudiantes de psicología. Este estudio intenta ampliar el conocimiento sobre los programas de inmersión en psicología y tiene implicaciones para futuros cursos de inmersión basados en la psicología de la liberación con comunidades LatinX.

References

- Arredondo, P., & Perez, P. (2003). Counseling paradigms and Latina/o Americans: Contemporary considerations. In F. D. Harper & J. McFadden (Eds.), *Culture and counseling: New approaches* (pp. 115–132). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Delgado Bernal, D., Burciaga, R., & Flores Carmona, J. (2012). Chicana/Latina testimonios: Mapping the methodological, pedagogical, and political. *Equity & excellence in education, 45*(3), 363-372. doi:10.4324/9781315659053
- Delgado-Romero, E. A., Singh, A. A., & De Los Santos, J. (2018). Cuéntame: The promise of qualitative research with Latinx populations. *Journal of Latina/o Psychology, 6*(4), 318. doi:10.1037/lat0000123
- Domínguez, D. G. (2019). Ignatian banners of hope and support for recently detained immigrant families. In F. Bravo & E. Brigham (Eds.) *Beyond borders: Reflections on the resistance & resilience among immigrant youth and families* (pp. 51-70) San Francisco, CA: University of San Francisco Press.
- Cardemil, E. V., & Battle, C. L. (2003). Guess who's coming to therapy? Getting comfortable with conversations about race and ethnicity in psychotherapy. *Professional Psychology Research and Practice, 34*, 278-286. doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.34.3.278
- Cardemil, E. V., & Sarmiento, I. A. (2009). Clinical approaches to working with Latino adults. In F. A. Villarruel, G. Carlo, J. M. Grau, M. Azmitia, N. J. Cabrera, & T. J. Chahin

- (Eds.), *Handbook of U.S. Latino psychology: Developmental and community-based perspectives* (pp. 329-345). Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc.
doi.org/10.5860/choice.47-2875
- Cervantes, A., Flores Carmona, J., & Torres Fernández, I. (2018). Testimonios and liberation psychology as praxis: Informing educators in the borderlands. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 1-12. doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2018.1534692
- Cervantes, A., & Torres Fernández, I. (2016). The use of testimonios as a tool to promote liberation and social justice advocacy with Latin@s in counseling. *Latina/O Psychology Today*, 3(1), 25–29. Retrieved from
https://www.nlpa.ws/assets/docs/newsletters/final%20lpt%20volume_3_no_1_2016.pdf
- Chávez, T. A., Fernandez, I. T., Hipolito-Delgado, C. P., & Rivera, E. T. (2016). Unifying liberation psychology and humanistic values to promote social justice in counseling. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling*, 55, 166–182. doi:10.1002/johc.12032
- Choi, K. M., VanVoorhis, R. W. , & Ellenwood, A. E. (2015). Enhancing critical consciousness through a cross-cultural immersion experience in South Africa. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development*, 43(4), 244–261. doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12019
- Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York, NY: Seabury Press.

- Goodman, R. D., & West-Olatunji, C. A. (2009). Applying critical consciousness: Culturally competent disaster response outcomes. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 87*, 458–465. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6678.2009.tb00130.x
- Goodman, R. D., Williams, J. M., Chung, R. C. Y., Talleyrand, R. M., Douglass, A. M., McMahon, H. G., & Bemak, F. (2015). Decolonizing traditional pedagogies and practices in counseling and psychology education: A move towards social justice and action. In R. Goodman & P. C. Gorski (Eds.), *Decolonizing “multicultural” counselling through social justice* (pp. 147–164). New York, NY: Springer.
- Huber, L. P., & Cueva, B. M. (2012). Chicana/Latina testimonios on effects and responses to microaggressions. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 45*(3), 392-410. doi:10.1080/10665684.2012.698193
- Ishii, H., Gilbride, D. D., & Stensrud, R. (2009). Students’ internal reactions to a one-week cultural immersion trip: A qualitative analysis of student journals. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 37*, 15–27. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1912.2009.tb00088.x
- Lykes, M. B., & Sibley, E. (2014). Liberation psychology and pragmatic solidarity: North–South collaborations through the Ignacio Martín-Baró fund. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 20*(3), 209–226. doi:10.1037/pac0000045
- Martín-Baró, I. (1991). Developing a critical consciousness through the university curriculum. in J. Hasset & H. Lacey (Eds.), *Towards a society that serves its people: The intellectual*

- contributions of El Salvador's murdered Jesuits* (pp. 220–244). Washington, Dc: Georgetown University Press.
- Martín-Baró, I. (1994). *Writings for a liberation psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Moane, G. (1999). *Gender and colonialism: The psychological analysis of oppression and liberation*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Montero, M. (2007). The Political Psychology of Liberation: From Politics to Ethics and Back. *Political Psychology*, (5), 517-533.
- Montero, M. (2009). Methods for liberation: Critical consciousness in action. In M.Montero & C. Soon (Eds.), *Psychology of liberation: Theory and application* (pp. 73–91). New York, NY: Springer.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Platt, J. J. (2012). A Mexico city-based immersion education program: Training mental health clinicians for practice with Latino communities. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 38, 352-364. doi: 10.1111/j.1752-0606.2010.00208.x
- Pope-Davis, D. B., Liu, W. M., Nevitt, J., & Toporek, R. L. (2000). The development and initial validation of the multicultural environmental inventory: A preliminary investigation. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 6, 57–64.

- Sertzen, P. K., & Torres, R. M. (2016). Dibujando el “Otro Lado”: Mexican children’s perceptions of migration to the United States. *Journal of Latin American Geography*, *15*(2), 55–77. doi:10.1353/lag.2016.0017
- Sue, D. W., Arredondo, P., & McDavis, R. J. (1992). Multicultural counseling competencies and standards: A call to the profession. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *70*, 477–486. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6676.1992.tb01642.x
- Tate, K. A., Torres-Rivera, E. Brown, E., & Skaistis, L. (2013). Foundations for liberation: Social justice, liberation psychology, and counseling. *Interamerican Journal of Psychology*, *47*, 3, 373-382.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *8*(1), 69–91. doi:10.1080/1361332052000341006



Figure 1. Child paints his anatomical heart for activity titled “Mi árbol yo” in Huejotal, Huaquechula. May 13, 2018.



Figure 2. Child paints “tree mural” in Huejotal, Huaquechula. May 14, 2018.