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CENTRAL AMERICANS AT A CROSSROADS:

ASYLUM SEEKERS' TESTIMONIOS OF MENTAL HEALTH AFTER DETENTION AND
FAMILY SEPARATION

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER IN MIGRATION STUDIES

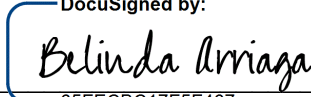
by **Corie Schwabenland García**

December 2022

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this thesis project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

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No podría hacer nada de esto sin usted.

Abstract

Though Central American asylum seekers are presently hypervisible in the U.S. consciousness, this population continues to be inadequately understood or cared for. Discussion of this population often presents them as a helpless and damaged population, in need of saving, fixing, or shelter -- beyond their trauma, they cease to exist. This qualitative study utilizes first-person testimonio methodology to understand the psychological experiences of Central American migrants seeking asylum in the United States, the stressors they face, and the mental health support that can and should be provided to them. Their stories speak to a space of sociopolitical precarity in the U.S., where their existence is regulated by an immigration system that greets them with a carceral reception. This reception complicates their ability to process their migration experiences, which they must do while also navigating the logistics of their fight to attain asylum and remain long-term in the U.S. Over the course of two years along the U.S./Mexico border, including five intensive days in a McAllen, Texas humanitarian center, this study explored the hopes, feelings, dreams, and needs of Central American migrants in vivid detail: their faith, family values, and desire to contribute equally to the transnational communities they are now a part of. Their testimonios can and should inform better practice in a new generation of psychology activist-practitioners engaged not only in their holistic wellness, but also constructing a new immigration policy landscape that recognizes and attends to their humanity.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In June 2018, U.S. immigration policy reached an ugly flashpoint, as images of “Kids in Cages” began to circulate throughout the media. At the center of it all was the “Ursula” Central Immigration Processing Center in McAllen, Texas: a 1500-capacity facility operated by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (Roldan, 2019; Schor, 2018). Migrant families would enter the facility together, then parents and children would be summarily separated from each other and held in different areas for the duration of their detention (Schor, 2018). Details about how families ended up there were for the most part immediately overshadowed by distressing photographs of the conditions within, which quickly consumed public attention. Broad swaths of the American public who had never seen (or perhaps even wondered about) the inside of detention centers suddenly had a view within them, and it was bleak: dozen-sized batches of children were being held in large chain-link enclosures— “like the type you’d see on a neighborhood batting cage or a dog kennel” (Soboroff & Ainsley, 2018, n.p.) —and provided only the spartan accommodations of some sleeping pads and mylar emergency blankets. These images, in turn, erupted a polarized ethical debate about what, if any, justification warranted the separation and detention of families in such conditions. However, though much attention was paid to what happened *in* detention, comparatively little attention was paid to what happened to migrants if and when they were released *from* detention. As a result, critical questions were left unexplored: at what point could/would that happen? Where would they go next? How would they cope with their detention experience while simultaneously tasked with building new lives in a foreign country?

I arrived in McAllen, Texas in November 2018, with the aforementioned questions at the front of my mind. Over the course of two years, I conducted fieldwork along the South Texas

region of the U.S./Mexico border, tracking how U.S. immigration policy developments impacted the mental health of arriving migrants. The present research study is a snapshot of this research, primarily focused on the experiences of Central American migrant families released into the U.S. in Fall 2018, post-detention in the McAllen Central Processing Center. Over the course of 1.5 weeks in a local humanitarian center housing migrants, who will be heretofore described as “asylum seekers,” four participants shared their testimonios of migration to the U.S. from their respective countries. Their stories reveal the emotional and psychological violence faced by asylum seekers upon arrival to the United States, as they are cast by dominant popular narratives as fraudsters or invaders, despite that they have fulfilled the most basic entry requirement to seek asylum in the U.S.: to simply show up and request it (Immigration and Nationality Act, 1952)¹.

This thesis explores the following two research questions:

Research Question 1: what aspects of migrants’ journeys (including their reception upon arrival to the U.S.), impact their self-conception and feelings about the decision they made to migrate?

Research Question 2: what, if any, mental health stressors do they describe currently facing, and how do these impact their mental health?

As debates rage nationally about who asylum seekers are, what they want, and what they might contribute to their host country, it is integral that scholars of all fields craft– and share –a holistic perspective of their humanity. It is our ethical responsibility as psychological professionals (researchers and practitioners alike) to advocate for social and political change that will protect

¹ Per the cited section of the INA (emphasis mine): “Any alien who is physically present in the United States or who arrives in the United States (**whether or not at a designated port of arrival and including an alien who is brought to the United States after having been interdicted in international or United States waters**), **irrespective of such alien's status**, may apply for asylum in accordance with this section.” It is, however, worth noting that the right to seek asylum does not guarantee the right to *receive* asylum, and asylum seekers face a lengthy process once they file a request.

the psychological health of this “already vulnerable population” (Hernandez-Arriaga & Domínguez, 2020).

Background and Need

It is critical to note that though terms like “surge” and “crisis” present the current spike in Central American migration as an unprecedented event, Central American migrants have been a part of the fabric of this country for decades -- and not always by their own design. Abrego (2017a) notes that while Central Americans, “particularly Guatemalans, Hondurans, Nicaraguans, and Salvadorans,” (p. 95) have been gradually migrating to the U.S. since at least the 1900s, it was US-funded civil wars during the 1980s that spurred the first waves of mass migration that today’s own echo. In fact, these waves never ceased nor ebbed. A 2017 report from the International Crisis Group found that many of the oft-cited push factors driving Central American migration to the U.S.– including “rapid urbanization, flawed democratic development, the transnational drug market, and state-led repression” (p. 3) –are ultimately lingering effects of the civil wars of the twentieth century. Fabregat et al. (2020) further argue that despite how “the U.S., as the dominating political power of the region, has established the political structures ... [that] explain the current migrations” (p. 205) from regions like Central America, it has simultaneously established negative narratives about this population and their migration. These narratives therefore divorce the nation’s “involvement in their exile” (Cordova, 2017, p. 42), and downplay the positive contributions that migrants make to the U.S. over time.

Modern asylum seekers face a policy landscape so increasingly fraught that reporters and scholars alike have pondered whether the U.S. is facing the “death of asylum” as we know it (Johanson, 2021; Schwartz, 2019). During then-President Trump’s tenure from 2017-2021, his administration implemented a dizzying array of immigration policy changes, arguably to deter

asylum claims by making them too difficult, costly, and emotionally painful to pursue (Harris, 2020). The introduction to “Kids in Cages” provided in the beginning of this chapter was intentionally left somewhat sparse, to reflect the lack of specific detail provided to the general public through media narratives. The practice of “Kids in Cages” was, in reality, the result of an April 2018 policy change called “zero-tolerance,” implemented by then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions (Katner, 2021). This approach required all U.S. Attorneys Offices along the Southwest Border to criminally prosecute migrants who attempted or committed “illegal entry” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018). This policy, in turn, resulted in what would colloquially be known as “family separation,” as 1) migrant parents/guardians were to be detained pending the outcome of these criminal proceedings, 2) any children traveling with them would be moved to purportedly more age-appropriate facilities overseen by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) (Edyburn & Meek, 2021; National Immigrant Justice Center, 2020). Trump administration officials freely admitted that this practice was intended to be punitive, and expressed little concern about where they ended up (Katner, 2021). Per then-chief of staff for President Trump, John Kelly: “The children will be taken care of – put into foster care or whatever” (Burnett, 2018).

In June 2018, President Trump signed an executive order ending the family separation policy. In its place, a new policy was implemented: one where parents and children were to be detained “together, during the pendency of immigration proceedings” (Rubin, 2018, n.p.). During this same period, concerns about what, exactly, was happening to families in detention prompted reporters to fight for access into detention centers. Reporters were eventually allowed into some—including the McAllen “Ursula” Central Processing Center—but were barred from speaking with detainees or bringing cameras to document what they saw (Merchant, 2018; Soboroff & Ainsley,

2018). What may have been an attempt at transparency and/or crisis PR on DHS/CBP's end—providing reporters “handout images” (Soboroff & Ainsley, 2018, n.p.) taken inside detention centers—backfired tremendously. This resulted in the aforementioned photos of “Kids in Cages” circulated widely across national U.S. media, and also internationally. The uproar over said photos reached so widely as to yield a critical statement from then-UN High Commissioner for Refugees Michelle Bachelet, who argued that “even for short periods under good conditions, [detention] can have a serious impact on [childrens’] health and development” (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019). Despite this criticism, the practice of family detention continued well into 2019 (Edyburn & Meek, 2021).

Worse, the intense media scrutiny (rightfully) devoted to detention center practices and conditions overshadowed yet another significant change to asylum policy that had taken place in Summer 2018. In June of that year, Attorney General Sessions overruled *Matter of A-B-*, an asylum law precedent that had afforded a degree of protection for individuals fleeing 1. Domestic violence, and/or 2. gang violence (National Immigrant Justice Center, 2020). Now, asylum seekers who had arrived in the U.S. with claims grounded in this type of persecution—like two participants in the present study, Camila and Yeni—arrived with them already somewhat undermined (Gerken, 2022; Holliday, 2019). Yet without lawyers, or court dates, they didn't know this fact.

Purpose of the Study

Asylum seekers' testimonios are not only part of historical record, but also a crucial and firsthand lens into the mental health impacts of the precarious policy landscape that recently arrived migrants must navigate, in addition to healing from the trauma that forced them to flee home to begin with.

Participants' testimonios reveal specifics about how the hostile reception they receive impacts their self-conception, parent/family dynamics, and ability to prepare to fight their asylum cases. Their testimonios also highlight how participants imagine and pursue futures beyond the borders placed upon them. Despite the barriers asylum seekers have already, and will likely continue to experience, it is important to balance narratives of their struggle with perspectives of how they find motivation to persist. Ultimately, this research will provide recommendations for psychology practitioners and scholars hoping to intervene in the lives of asylum seekers arriving to the U.S.

¿Quien Soy Yo? Researcher's Testimonio and Positionality

The present study is also informed by my own background as a first-generation U.S.-born Nicaragüense. It has been my experience that even well-intentioned popular narratives of migration center around migrants' resilience, ultimately reducing them to their trauma by highlighting it as a pivotal, life-changing moment from which to overcome and arise stronger. Arguably, this obscures what may be a reality of persistent structural violence and racial trauma weathered on a daily basis. I have experienced this personally within my own family. The shared family migration narrative passed down to my generation has always been framed by our ability to survive and persist no matter what life throws at us. Why? Because our parents, and their parents before them had always done so: through dictatorships, home-leveling earthquakes, a long undercurrent of civil unrest and repression at both ends of the political spectrum. This narrative afforded little space for the very natural human emotions of fear, stress, and guilt that weathering constant, compounded tension might naturally evoke. And as traumatic a history as my family had weathered, the present day yielded a new landscape of bad: armed civilian militias self-appointed to patrol borderlands for "invaders," increasingly perilous journeys to

maintain surreptitious crossings, automatic transference into jail-like detention centers upon arrival (Grant & Miroff, 2018; Hing, 2018; Johanson, 2021).

Given such a landscape, I approached the present research with a hunch that when questioned about their mental health, asylum seekers might not want to talk about their feelings by explicitly stating things like “depression” or “anxiety,” but might instead speak more obliquely about the emotional toll their journeys had taken, demonstrating the stress and fear they faced by hyperfocusing on survival logistics. Instead of treating this focus as emotional avoidance, I argue that it’s a necessary window into the structural violence limiting their ability to process and heal from their migration journeys. However, though my personal experiences informed the hypothesis with which I approached the present study, I acknowledge my own positionality as a white-Latina U.S.-born citizen with the ability to travel freely and with limited scrutiny, across border zones and into immigration court rooms as an observer. As such, I chose a theoretical framework (liberation psychology and testimonio) that would center migrants’ own words as true expert testimony, speaking to the present day realities of migration from which I am ultimately far removed. My presence serves as an interlocutor in conversation with their testimonios, as well as the historical perspective of Central American collective struggle which liberation psychology affords.

Theoretical Framework

Liberation Psychology

This study is grounded in liberation psychology, a sub-field of community psychology popularized by Ignacio Martín-Baró— a Spanish-born, U.S.-educated Jesuit Priest and Social Psychologist –and informed by the context of 1980s wartime El Salvador where he lived and practiced. Martín-Baró held that mental health was not simply a matter of an individual’s

capacity (or lack thereof) to adjust to the volatile world around them, but a reflection of sickness at the societal level, poisoning community roots and relations *down* to the individual level, where marginalized communities were faced not only with questions of survival, but their own self-conception and distended emotional needs. Strikingly, the three factors Martín-Baró held critical for understanding mental health within a Central American context— systemic injustice, revolutionary struggle, and the “accelerating conversion of the nation-states into satellites of the U.S.” (1994, p. 33) —persist today, at the root of modern migration flows from the region. The quandary which said issues posed for psychologists then also rings true today: up against factors of such herculean magnitude, yet so far out of our control, how can we intervene to improve the lives of our Central American patients? Coping strategies are a start, but are they enough when we know individuals will be returning to situations that disregard their humanity at a basic level? If not, how can we feasibly support them? Martín-Baró acknowledged that these factors were far outside both the purview and skillset of psychologists to fix. However, he insisted that psychologists were well within their means to do several things:

1. **publicly name the structural injustices, and the subjective processes that sustain them, faced by Central American peoples:** with the capital and platform afforded to academics and/or practitioners, Martín-Baró demanded that psychologists intervene in these by explicitly naming them. As an example, he devoted a chapter in his “Writings for a Liberation Psychology” entirely to analyzing political psychological warfare, both at a conceptual level, and through examples of how governments had acted to repress uprisings in 1970s-80s Ecuador, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, using violence and disappearances to spread fear, and rob citizens of their autonomy and energy to dissent.

2. **upend the power hierarchies inherent in the production of knowledge and psychological practice**, by treating our clients/patients as partners in collaboration towards their best care, and using their concerns as expert knowledge on the structural violences and conditions they face

Testimonio

To this end, the present study also uses testimonio² as both theory and method, whereby asylum seekers' words are their own expert knowledge, informing present and future practice and research on the sociopolitical realities they face, from a perspective only they understand. Testimonio serves as not only a means by which to collect data (as will be discussed in Chapter III: Methodology), but also a lens through which to interpret it. In its basest form testimonio can be described as a qualitative data collection method, or a form of the timeless practice of oral history. However, Sternbach (1991) argues that the term testimonio refers to a specific context of sharing life narratives, one that arose as “a direct offshoot of and response to the military repression of the 1970s and 80s” in Latin America (p. 91).

Testimonio, in this sense, is the sharing of one's own life narrative, but with the solemnity of a testimony one might never have a formal opportunity to give. One's individual testimonio is subjective, but also a reflection of one's life placed within a broader social context, where it may serve any one (or multiple) of several purposes. First, testimonio may allow individuals to place their own trauma and struggle in relation to that of a collective history that might never be officially sanctioned by the same ruling parties that perpetrated violence, thus allowing “transgressors [to be] publicly accused, and ‘disappeared’ [to be] remembered” (Aron, 1992, p. 174). Second, testimonios may also serve as counter-narratives, challenging hierarchies of oppressor and oppressed, allowing those testifying to re-form their own identities as humans, not

² Literally translates from Spanish to English as “testimony”

simply as victims (Martín-Baró, 1994). Through the new self-conceptions with which people begin to construct and communicate, via their testimonios, we learn more about them and can encourage their healing and growth. Lastly, as a form of qualitative data, testimonios also simply serve as a historical record, through which individuals' narratives provide access to what might not otherwise be seen - i.e. what the U.S. immigration system looks like to those inside of it, rather than to lawmakers or members of the public unlikely to enter the real-life spaces (detention centers, courtrooms, the border zone itself) that comprise such (Hernandez-Arriaga, et al., 2022).

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The alienation faced by Central American asylum seekers upon arrival to the U.S. has long-lasting repercussions for their futures: legally, emotionally, and intergenerationally. However, these remain ill-quantified and understudied, as the best research applicable to this question is siloed and often split across academic disciplines. For example: there are sociological studies chronicling legal inequities faced by Central American asylum seekers; there is political science research hinting at the mental health challenges faced by refugees in refugee camps; and there is psychological research on both xenophobia faced by BIPOC migrant communities, and the culture of fear within which undocumented Latinx communities live. However, this broad knowledge base rarely overlaps to the specific level necessary to adequately understand, and attend to, the mental health challenges Central American asylum seekers face. Nonetheless, disparate parts present throughout this research may be pulled together to craft a more holistic understanding of the challenges faced by the modern Central American asylum seeker.

Portraits of Migration Within Psychology

When the Psychology field discusses migrants, it often turns to conventional knowledge about acculturation, attachment and trauma to understand them (Palmary, 2018). Since its release in 1997, John Berry's acculturation model has been the "dominant paradigm" (Birman, 2011, p. 339) for understanding how immigrants' encounters with their host societies leave both irrevocably changed. Berry's research popularized an understanding that immigrants' welfare in host societies was at least partially determined by the tone of the reception they received, with a negative reception causing what he called "acculturative stress" (Berry, 1997). This principle was not entirely new – it was grounded in Lazarus and Folkman's 1984 understanding of stress and

coping (as cited in Kuo, 2014), where one's social environment creates stressors, and individuals use whatever resources they can to tolerate, or minimize their stressors. Berry (1997) defined acculturative stress as what occurs when "individuals understand that they are facing problems resulting from intercultural contact," (p. 19) and they must negotiate their new and tenuous relationships with host/dominant groups in the society they enter into by adopting "acculturation strategies" (defined by Berry as assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization) to relieve said stress. In explaining and exploring acculturation, Berry hoped 1) to define the way that, for example, immigrants entered into a new society, and left both themselves and the society changed, and 2) inform policy through this greater understanding.

However, researchers have increasingly challenged Berry's framework, with some even calling to "discontinu[e] its use in health research" (Escobar & Vega; Hunt, Schneier & Comer; as cited in Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012, p. 2100). A key point of contention is the framework's narrow focus on individual-level cultural changes impacting migrants' integration into host societies, ignoring how structural factors like "immigration policies, labor practices, neighborhood characteristics, and racialization processes intersect and affect the economic and social integration of immigrants" (p. 2100). Similarly, the authors argue that such a focus on individuals' responses to their reception obscures "the role that institutional actors and policies play in (re)producing poverty, racial discrimination, and nativist reactions to immigrants" (Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012, p. 2100). Bhatia and Ram (2009) also argue the idea of a "fixed, invariant, and apolitical notion of acculturation dominat[ing] much of Psychology" (p.140) directly contradicts the lived experiences of many migrants from Global South countries. Not only is their existence in host countries "racialized and politicized" (p. 141), but their acculturation also must be "explicitly or implicitly sanctioned by the majority members" (p. 148)

of their new host countries. Though none of the aforementioned researchers explicitly mentioned Central American asylum seekers in their studies, their critiques of acculturation square with Abrego's (2017b) explanation of the U.S.'s reception of Central American migrants in general: "without sufficient political, economic, or social analysis to contextualize the proliferation of violence, and in the absence of balanced representations, [U.S. Americans] are likely to misunderstand Central Americans as inherently violent and dangerous" (p. 77) and a threat incompatible with the safety and security of U.S. society. As such, their exclusion (socially, and legally) from it is understood to be not only rational, but necessary (Menjivar & Abrego, 2012).

Outlining and Analyzing Post-Migration Trauma

Perez Foster (2001) argued that in addition to the trauma that migrants may experience 1) pre-migration and 2) while in transit, they often also face traumatic experiences 3) during the process of asylum and resettlement, and 4) during settlement in their new host countries. While visiting detainees in a detention center in the Northeastern U.S., she noted that migrants within said center faced "conditions of quasi-imprisonment," which proved especially triggering for migrants who'd been "imprisoned and abused in their own countries ... [and who now faced] disturbing memories of their earlier trauma" (Perez Foster, 2001, p. 156). Worse, she noted that "the acute symptoms of PTSD [they exhibit] may be interpreted by correctional guards as 'uncooperative behavior,'" (p. 156) who would then punish detainees. Since the publication of Perez Foster's study, the carceral framework with which asylum seekers are welcomed has only continued to expand, with over 400,000 people each year "automatically detained in deplorable conditions" (Johanson, 2021, p.884). Even family detention centers have been reported to lack "adequate food, heating, sanitation, or medical care." (Johanson, 2021, p.884).

Further, detention is not the only challenge that migrants face upon arrival to the U.S. Yakushko (2008) explains that immigrants in the U.S. often arrive to a “xenophobic cultural environment” (p. 36). This environment can be characterized by “work in dehumanizing conditions [and] current news media filled with stories in which recent immigrants are denigrated, belittled, and discriminated against” (p. 37). However, the broad prevalence of anti-immigrant prejudice that migrants commonly experience is rarely recognized by parts of the U.S. populace who are not themselves immigrants, nor personally connected to them (Bhatia & Ram, 2009; Yakushko, 2008). Yakushko (2008) argues that the “atmosphere of hostility” (p. 50)-- in which they end up unwittingly migrating into --sets migrants up to fail by trapping them in impossible crossroads of expectations held by domestic-born individuals (where may be considered a threat to society by taking jobs, but also a burden for needing government support), and in a space of increased cultural confusion and isolation (as they are expected to assimilate to U.S. national identity and culture, but deemed incapable of doing so properly). Simply put, there is a unique trauma born out of entering into a space where you are decidedly not wanted that only compounds the difficulties one has already faced during and leading up to migration. Perez-Foster (2001) explains that migrants often face “compounding effects” (p. 157) of traumatic stressors, whereby *post*-migration stressors-- i.e. the structural violence migrants face upon arrival to host countries --often exacerbate the severity of negative mental health outcomes they may already be susceptible to, if not already experiencing, due to their past trauma. These may include depression, PTSD, and other psychiatric symptoms.

Sociologists and legal scholars have also noted the mental health ramifications faced by migrants upon interaction with the very laws purportedly meant to protect them. Menjivar and Abrego’s (2012) longitudinal study of Central American immigrants living in the U.S. with

tenuous legal statuses lead them to describe an atmosphere of “legal violence,” whereby the exclusion, mistreatment, and exploitation of migrants is normalized as part of law and order. Immigrants in tenuous legal statuses (ranging from undocumented, to more precarious statuses such as seeking-but-yet-to-receive asylum) may be made to believe that they lack legal protection, in terms of their jobs, housing, or from physical abuse and crime within their communities. Over time, Menjivar and Abrego note that immigrants may “internalize this devaluation” (p. 1404) as something they deserve, rather than the product of structural violence designed to wear them down. This internalized belief has serious ramifications upon immigrants in liminal legal statuses, where fear of their eligibility to seek help (medical, legal, otherwise) both severely limits their daily functioning and makes them feel trapped in lives they’ve fought to be able to begin (Moya Salas et al., 2013). However, much psychological literature continues to reinforce a belief that migration trauma is something that happens to migrants in their *home* countries. Palmary (2018) argues that this belief obscures how commonly migrants face trauma as a result of “administrative and structural forms of violence (including brutal practices of border control)” (p. 10). This calls to mind the reception modern asylum seekers face upon arrival to a U.S. purportedly open for humanitarian claims, but in practice unwelcoming.

Lastly, it must be noted that in the process of arguing their asylum claims, asylum seeking migrants face a court system that is arguably antagonistic towards them, if not simply poorly equipped to contend with the impacts of trauma upon recall and specificity. In 2005, Congress granted immigration judges increased discretion with which to judge asylum applicants’ credibility – itself a critical factor in determining the veracity of their claims (Cummins, 2013). In doing so, judges were given leeway with which to assess and rule upon said credibility using the “totality” and “consistency” of their statements (across time, between written and oral

versions of statements, while outlining the timelines and specific details of their persecution), as well as their “demeanor, candor, and responsiveness” while testifying to the details of their persecution (Cummins, 2013, p. 286). Psychologists practicing with refugee and asylum-seeking populations understand that their perceived demeanor may be negatively impacted by their lack of comfort communicating in a foreign linguistic/cultural context, and/or by in conveying the details of recently-experienced trauma that may still be too triggering to face head-on – immigration judges may not (Perez Foster, 2001). Further, psychologists practicing with refugee and asylum-seeking populations understand that traumatic events, especially after repeated exposure, may also yield “hopelessness, trouble concentrating, and memory problems” (Cummins, 2013, p. 290) that limit their ability to successfully and cohesively articulate their claims – these limitations may be interpreted by immigration judges as a lack of credibility. Despite the fact that successfully arguing asylum claims is key to being able to remain in the U.S., and in some cases staying *alive*, migrants’ trauma may render them unable to do so adequately. The very normal impacts that migration trauma may have on their lives are interpreted as evidence of their own untrustworthiness, only adding to the stress that they face upon arrival to the U.S.

Treating Migration Trauma

We must now return to the challenge posed by Martín-Baró: how psychological professionals can feasibly intervene in the systemic injustices threatening the welfare of Central American migrant populations. It is difficult to square a need to identify, expose, and mitigate the factors mostly eminently threatening migrant mental health (such as the aforementioned trauma, criminalization and subjugation) with a need to avoid reifying images of migrants as damaged, impotent, and in need of saving or fixing. However, research has illuminated several pathways for practitioners to intervene at individual, community, and broader political levels.

An attention to political context within the therapeutic setting is one way to intervene. Blackwell (2005) notes that though “the political dimension [of migrants’ lives] is in many ways the most significant determining factor in their current situation, it is the area most often neglected by psychotherapists and counsellors” (p. 30). A client’s wish to discuss the political history of his or her country, and their opinions of/details of engagement with said political landscape may be regarded as an avoidance measure, a distraction on the part of someone unable or unwilling to begin discussing their trauma. Instead, Blackwell (2005) argues, such is not only an expression of trust, but an invitation to engage: in discussing the political and cultural context they’ve experienced, migrants are providing vital context as to 1. Their identity and place in the world, 2. The reasons that they fled, 3. The guilt and grief they may be experiencing, having sacrificed their homes and families in pursuit of a cause they ultimately could not see through. Obtaining political and cultural context helps clinicians better understand clients in terms of the worlds—past and present—overlapping to intervene in their mental state. Further, it helps combat ethnocentric bias that may limit a practitioner’s ability to support them as they navigate their own trauma, and the re-traumatization they are likely to experience in pursuit of asylum claims (Perez Foster, 2001).

The reception with which immigrants are received into host countries mediates their ability to adjust, adapt, and ideally thrive in their new communities. Brenman (2020) urges psychologists to remember that inclusion is not simply a matter of “legal or administrative status ... [but] also an experience” (p. 35): Even if migrants are able to obtain status, how long will they bear the scars of the hostile reception they were initially welcomed with? Even if one is safe physically, how long will it take to feel so *mentally*? There is no easy answer to either of these questions. However, if this reception is influenced by public reaction— which it is —psychological

researchers and practitioners alike can leverage our field knowledge to combat misconceptions about migrants, the struggles they face, and why they respond to trauma the way they do – for example, in court (Chung, et al., 2008; Stringer, 2019).

Lastly, psychologists can positively intervene in migrants' lives by reconceptualizing the way they consider treating migration trauma. Palmary (2010) notes that far too often, “practices of healing, restitution, and meaning-making that exist outside the frame of psychotherapy are seldom acknowledged as effective forms of resolving trauma in the way that psychological interventions are” (p. 5). There is often little room afforded to “alternative interventions, such as public truth telling or arts-based voice projects” (p. 6) though these exist, and could merge collective cultural practices with traditional psychotherapeutic practices targeted at individual level functioning (Lykes, Terre Blanche, Hamber, 2003, as cited in Palmary, 2010). Such practices, facilitating the recovery of personal identity within that of a broader collective/cultural content, may instead empower participants and return to them agency and connection denied by the isolating experience of migrating to a country where they are not sure they are wanted (Aron, 1992; Warner, 1998). Further, it may empower them in a political context, by which they can hear– and conceive responses to –arguments made against them, and their place in host countries (Yosso, 2005).

Gaps in the Literature

The consistent focus on identifying and treating migration trauma within psychological literature has arguably held disproportionate research space to date. Arguably, this area of focus fails migrants in two ways. First, by casting migrants as victims who need the help of trained professionals to repair psychological functioning damaged by their journeys, this perpetuates the notion that without professional help (inaccessible to many of them) they will otherwise never be

whole. Second, it presumes that migration journeys are inherently traumatic, without explicitly specifying the political machinations behind when and how they become such, including via hostile receptions in host countries, and a lack of access to social support and basic needs they require to survive. Interdisciplinary research agendas have helped to combat the latter, by contributing details and insight about the specific ways that legal policies impact migrant communities' lives. However, these research pathways remain limited.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study utilized testimonio methodology to center the voices of asylum seekers often excluded from discussions of their own needs and welfare. Migrants' testimonios return context to narratives about their lives and journeys— in popular media and research alike—that often lack such. Over the course of 1.5 weeks in a humanitarian center in McAllen, Texas, four separate asylum seeker participants contributed testimonios to the present study. The present study was conducted by a research team of three individuals:

- **Researcher A (the principal investigator)**: a counseling psychology professor and Licensed Clinical Social Worker with experience in trauma-informed therapy for undocumented and mixed-status families. She identifies as a third-generation Mexican-American from rural South Texas
- **Asst. Researcher B (the present author)**: a migration studies student with a BA in psychology. She identifies as a Nicaraguan-American born and raised in a working class immigrant neighborhood in Central California
- **Asst. Researcher C**: a Mexican-born media studies professor specializing in human rights communication and film. This researcher assisted solely with data collection, and did not participate in other aspects of the study (initial research design, thematic analysis, etc.)

Research Design: Why Testimonio?

The philosophical underpinnings of testimonio were previously discussed in Chapter I. In this chapter, it is discussed from a methodological standpoint. Hernandez-Arriaga (2017) notes that when conducting research with a vulnerable population, it is important from an ethical

standpoint to utilize methodology that “does not exacerbate the fear or anxiety the community already feels, or that serves to disenfranchise them” (p. 73) further than they already have been. However, it is equally critical to afford vulnerable populations a chance to contribute— or *decline* to contribute—their insights to research as an exercise of agency (Yosso, 2005). Testimonio research offers a methodology that can balance these needs.

Testimonio is a common indigenous research methodology native to Latin American contexts (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Due to its subject-proximity, testimonio has historically not been a popularly endorsed method in western social sciences research, whose training typically emphasizes the value of objective distance in the production of unbiased knowledge (Bernal et al., 2012). However, scholars have argued that even purportedly objective research is ultimately still underpinned by one’s cultural views, values, and norms (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Conversely, testimonio accepts itself as subjective, and faces subjectivity head-on. In doing so, it provides an opportunity to reflect upon and examine how an individual’s shared story may be placed within a broader collective experience and context.

Though testimonio’s subjectivity can be considered an inherent limitation, testimonio as a research praxis does not promise broad applicability. Rather, testimonios promise context and rich detail: as Nicaraguan critic Ileana Rodriguez (as cited in Beverley & Zimmerman, 1990) further explains, testimonio “reveals the hidden secrets of popular tradition ... providing access to situations and forms of thought unknown or poorly understood by officially sanctioned culture” (p. 172). While popular U.S. understandings of Central American migrants decontextualize their journeys and motivations, testimonios return nuance and historical context via lived experiences: Central American migrants can attest to the decades of U.S. imperialism and intervention that destabilized their countries because they were there. Central American

migrants are living, breathing, witnesses to the root factors that catalyze migration. Perhaps most importantly, because the only limits of testimonio are those placed by subjects themselves, their testimony contains what Hernandez-Arriaga calls *corazon*, or “heart”: “their *historias*, *emociones*, and *pensamientos* in raw form” (p. 71). This raw emotion, coupled with personal historical insight, means that migrant testimonios share narratives of human survival and resistance, in context of the struggles and obstacles that each individual faces at each point in their journey. This also squares with Martín-Baró’s practice of liberation psychology, which held that clinicians should locate people’s experiences within their contexts— such as that of state-sponsored violence, civil war, and cultural intricacies like religion and fatalism –treating clients as primary sources best suited to educate their practitioners (as opposed to the other way around).

Research Setting: *El Centro*

El Centro is a humanitarian center in McAllen, Texas that is funded by a local religious nonprofit, open to any and all migrants as long as there is capacity.³ It is especially integral for post-detention asylum seekers, most of whom report having no family in the immediate McAllen area, nor in Texas at all. At any given time, *El Centro* houses close to a thousand migrants at any given time, with some 400-600 daily arriving *to* the center, and 100-300 leaving *from* the Center to embark upon new lives in the United States.⁴ At the time of this study, *El Centro* was converted into a makeshift housing facility out of a former nursing home, with spartan, but safe accommodations in a quiet, suburban neighborhood. Daily, *El Centro* staff handed out twin-sized mat-style beds and donated fleece blankets, and migrants slept on these directly on the facility’s

³ Migrants do not need to self identify as “asylum seekers” or provide any paperwork/ID to receive shelter at El Centro. El Centro staff did not self report any past capacity issues that had required migrants to be turned away.

⁴ Migrants do not need permission to leave El Centro, nor did staff self-report a limit of days which migrants could stay.

floors, where space was claimed on a first-come, first served basis. *El Centro* had some spaces that were used as bedrooms in the facility's previous incarnation as a nursing home, but these no longer had locking doors for additional privacy. Several were also out of service for sleeping, used instead for necessary facility supply storage. Three meals of donated food were provided for free each day, which could be anything from delivered pizza to meals cooked by local volunteers. At its basest function, *El Centro* exists as a safe location where asylum seekers can stay for several days while they coordinate with any family they have in the U.S. about how to get to where they are. Depending on the resource level of family members expecting asylum seekers and their distance from Texas, this may mean either a multi-day/multi-state bus journey, or a flight out of the local airport.

El Centro is staffed by local volunteers— not all of whom are religiously affiliated —who donate their time to help asylum seekers navigate a variety of logistical barriers. On any given day, volunteers may be 1. loaning out phones that asylum seekers can use to call family members and coordinate next steps, 2. escorting asylum seekers to local currency exchange stations or money transfer locations, where they can safely obtain cash they'll need to proceed with their journeys, 3. provide rides to the local airport and/or bus station and explain relevant travel protocols (i.e. how to proceed through TSA for first time flyers, where buses to various locales depart from within the local bus terminal). Not all asylum seekers in *El Centro* need or utilize these services, some merely use the locale to mentally recharge, rest. The average stay reported by both *El Centro* volunteers and migrants informally surveyed was between 2-4 days.

Community Partnership

The present study was facilitated by a year-long relationship that the lead researcher, Dr. Belinda Hernandez-Arriaga, had cultivated with *El Centro*'s leadership team in her capacity as a

Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Counseling Psychology instructor. Before the present study was imagined, Dr. Hernandez-Arriaga had visited *El Centro* several times with student counselor trainees and other Psychology faculty from the University of San Francisco to volunteer at the facility and provide emotional support to asylum seekers housed there. When later approached with the prospect of conducting a study on their grounds, *El Centro's* leadership staff approved the idea. It is worth noting that *El Centro's* leadership team has encouraged research in the past from other universities local to Texas, as part of their own mission to promote positive, counternarratives about migrants at the local, state, and national levels. Their chief stipulation for research to be allowed at *El Centro* was that participation in the study (or lack thereof) would have to be voluntary, and that it be made clear to asylum seekers that participation would not positively or negatively influence their access to *El Centro's* resources.

The present research team also participated as volunteer staff at *El Centro*, for several reasons: 1. to build rapport with asylum seekers, 2. to understand the immediate logistical barriers they faced in real time (i.e. obtaining support for basic needs like medical care and nutritional food, converting Central American currency to be used in the U.S., coordinating with family members to leave McAllen, etc.) and 3. out of personal solidarity with *El Centro's* mission to welcome asylum seekers with enthusiasm and dignity.

Participant Selection

Participants were not pre-selected. Rather, as relationships of trust and understanding were built through sustained interaction and conversation with individuals throughout their time in *El Centro*, participant candidates emerged. We also used snowball sampling, by which *El Centro* residents could refer us to friends there that might be interested in participating in the study. Of the several hundred adult (18+) Central American migrants encountered by three

members of the research team (the principal investigator faculty from the University of San Francisco, the present student researcher, and a faculty member/documentarian from San Francisco State University), five were invited and agreed to share their testimonios. Each researcher built unique connections with 1-2 migrants, and interviewed them separately: this was important to provide a personal and comfortable one-on-one space within which to share their stories. Of these, four successfully shared testimonios. The fifth participant withdrew after their first day of testimonio due to an unexpected illness of their child, and requested that the incomplete recording be deleted and unused in the study. Researcher B complied with her wish and deleted the audio recording in front of said participant for her comfort.

All participants that contributed testimonios were above the age of 18. However, several participants wished to conduct their testimonios with children under the age of 18 present. In the two instances where children were present at parent's request:

1. "Rosa" wanted her daughter near her at all times in El Centro, including during her testimonio. Rosa did not object to the child listening in, but did not offer or invite the child's participation in the testimonio, so Researcher B solely engaged the parent.
2. "Jose" invited his daughter to contribute to his testimonio and granted explicit parental consent to the researcher for the child to participate, in addition to his own personal consent. In this instance, testimonio was shared with Researcher A, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (with experience in dealing with children, trauma, and aftercare in the event of a distressing or triggering event), and both parent/child shared without incident.

Limitations of the Study

A key limitation of this study is the low number of participants (n=4), and the short amount of time the research team was able to spend with each. Though all four participants

contributed intimate perspectives of their migration journeys, their feelings were still extremely fresh, and as such provide a limited, static perspective of their emotional state. A long term study would have allowed the research team to follow participants throughout various stages of their migration journeys and compare how their feelings about life post-migration changed and evolved, if they did at all. This would also provide a more thorough perspective of any additional stressors they faced during 1. acclimation 2. their journey through the immigration court system. A second limitation is somewhat inherent to the practice of testimonio itself, but also somewhat attributable to the hectic environment of *El Centro* and migrants' short-term stays there. It was important for the research team to afford asylum seekers the agency to rigidly determine the boundaries of what they did and did not share about their journeys, and in what detail. In some cases, participants would bring up an aspect of their journey— for example, their feelings about detention; or details about their emotional state in the initial moment they decided to flee –and then pull back from sharing more detail when conversationally prompted to. A longer term study, or at least more time in *El Centro*, would have afforded time to deepen relationships, and perhaps split the testimonio process into portions across days to allow participants more time to reflect on their feelings, what they had or had not already shared, and whether they wished to revisit certain topics if questioned about them later. However, given the short-term nature of stays in *El Centro* (between two to four days), and the logistical burdens migrants had to navigate while there (travel away from McAllen, speaking with their families), budgeting extended time for testimonios was understandably not feasible for our participants. The research team did provide our contact information to participants in case they wished to contact us after leaving *El Centro*, for emotional support, or to share any feelings/observations they might have later wished to contribute, but none took us up on this offer. Future research endeavors with similar migrant

populations should be prepared to budget significant time to build rapport with, collect data from, and (in return) provide emotional support, accompaniment, and solidarity to participants.

Introduction of Participants

All participants were given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes. Their testimonios reflect the diverse array of circumstances that force asylum seekers to flee their countries in search of safety: from persecution due to political opinion, to domestic or gang violence. Despite their varied reasons for migrating, all four testimonios share a striking similarity: each participant at some point describes how long they tried to withstand their increasingly perilous environments, before they erupted into imminent danger that ultimately forced them to flee.

A description of each participant, their country (and where provided, city) of origin, and other relevant information as follows, in both a table and brief paragraph summaries. Where specific information (i.e. participant's age, children's ages, specific hometown within country of origin, cities visited while in transit, etc.) does not appear, such is at the participant's request, for privacy purposes.

Table 1

Research Study Participants

Participant Name	Age	Traveling From	Secondary Participants (if any)	Testimonio conducted by	Notes
Rosa	30	Matagalpa, Nicaragua	none	Researcher B	
Jose	N/A	<i>El Progreso, Honduras</i>	Daughter, "Cindi," age not specified beyond "just finished sixth grade"	Researcher A	

Table 1 Continued

Participant Name	Age	Traveling From	Secondary Participants (if any)	Testimonio conducted by	Notes
Camila	N/A	Honduras (exact city not shared)	none	Researcher C	
Yeni	N/A	Guatemala (exact city not shared)	none	Researcher A	Observational data from Yeni's family (daughter Marisol's drawing) appears in discussion
Catalina (withdrew)	22	Nacaome, Honduras	none	Researcher B	Participant withdrew after agreeing to participate, owing to son's illness

Rosa is a single 30-year-old mother of two from Matagalpa, Nicaragua. She left Nicaragua after her political opinion exposed her to violence. Rosa became caught up in student protests against the incumbent Ortega/Murillo government somewhat by accident. She hadn't previously been extensively politically active in public, but when friends of hers from the local university (UNAN Matagalpa) began disappearing after protests, she mobilized their families to demand answers about their whereabouts and conditions. In response, she faced escalating harassment by the police, until she feared for her life enough to flee the country with her 12 year old daughter **Deisy**. She was forced to leave behind a younger daughter who was recovering from a surgery, and as such was too weak to travel: instead, she is staying with Rosa's father in an unspecified location in Nicaragua. Post-*El Centro*, she is heading to Indiana to live with her ex-partner's family in Indiana, who she isn't very close to, but who are sponsoring her and waiting for her and her daughter to arrive.

Jose is a married father from El Progreso, Yoro, Honduras. He fled his country with his daughter **Cindi** (who had barely finished sixth grade earlier in the year) to keep her safe after

local gang members tried to recruit her for drug trafficking. After his attempts to keep her safe by escorting her to and from school failed, culminating in said gang members attacking him, it became clear that the only way to ensure her safety would be to leave their home. Jose was forced to leave behind his wife and two younger children (one son, and one daughter) as he could not obtain enough money to leave with the whole family on short notice. In the U.S., Jose is migrating to meet his Aunt, who he describes as like an adopted mother.

Camila is a single mother of two from Honduras, and her migration journey is rooted in domestic violence that steadily escalated until it forced her to flee the country -- not once, but twice. Her testimonio shares both of these attempts, including how her family (both in Honduras, and who had migrated to the U.S. several years prior) mobilized to ensure her escape would ultimately be successful. During her second, present attempt to flee, she migrated with her **older son** (of unspecified age), and left her younger son in hiding with her adult siblings in Honduras. In the U.S., she is migrating to meet her mother, who has lived in the country for six years.

Yeni is a single 25-year-old mother from a location in rural Guatemala she did not wish to share, out of fear for her own safety. In Guatemala, she lived with an abusive partner, who “beat me and my children,” and ultimately threatened to kill her to raise their children on his own – this was the catalyst for her to flee. Yeni left the country with her **adult sister** (age unspecified), her **niece**, and **four of her own children** (between the ages of 8 and 12). She left Guatemala due to domestic violence, where her partner regularly “beat me and my kids.” The family walked for 38 days before arriving to the U.S./Mexico-border. Yeni and her children do not currently have a sponsor awaiting them in the U.S., as their former one (her sister’s boyfriend) reneged on his offer to house both sisters and their kids after they had already arrived.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Analysis of the testimonios yielded three key themes, each revealing a different stressor faced by asylum seekers:

- 1) Their detention experience
- 2) The need to obtain legal status
- 3) Parenting pressures (both in terms of children they migrated, and those left behind)

All quotes appearing below have been translated into English from their original Spanish, with translations cross-checked between members of the research team.

Theme 1: The Detention Experience

Two participants spoke at length about their experiences of detention and family separation within their testimonios: Rosa and Jose. Yeni was also detained, but did not wish to share her experiences on the record as part of her testimonio. Though neither provides a name for the facility where they were taken—beyond “ICE” (Jose) or “inmigracion” (Rosa)—given that they both crossed into the U.S. near McAllen, Texas, they were likely held in the McAllen Central Processing center. Both participants were held at separate times in late November 2018 and likely never crossed paths in the 1500-capacity center, yet the details in both testimonios describe a similar environment and processes within.

Arriving to Detention, and Being Separated From Children

Both Jose and Rosa explain how they and their children respectively came to arrive at the center where they were held, and were temporarily separated from their children. We will begin with Jose’s experience:

[Border patrol] encountered us walking, passing through a ranch. We weren’t the only ones [in the area], there were several others. We turned ourselves in, and from there, they

took us to the ICE office. They took everyone there, then separated the two of us. I didn't want to be separated from my daughter, but I couldn't [stay with her] in ICE. They separated us from one another. They separated us on Sunday, and we didn't see each other again until... [*thinking*] Wednesday, when they returned her to me again. 3 days we were separated. Did that make sense?

The separation policy was not explained to parents. When asked if officials gave parents any reasoning as to why they couldn't be held together with their parents, Jose says they were not. However, through his own observation while detained, he came to understand the separation policy as follows: "they let kids under 10 stay with their parents, but kids 10 and up, they separate." Because Cindi was older than 10, they were separated, during which they were not allowed to see each other. At this point in her father's testimonio, Cindi interrupts him to share her perspective of the experience:

Jose: They didn't let us speak to each other, even if [our kids] passed in front of us as closely as—

Cindi, interjecting: —and in the like, jails, they scolded us if we tried to peek out of the— through the port [of the door], they would scold us and tell us to move back.

Researcher A: If you tried to look out at your Dad?

Cindi: Yep.

Not only were the two held separately, they could be chastised for simply trying to catch glimpses of each other throughout the facility, with no explanation from officials as to why that would be inappropriate.

Rosa shares a similar experience with detention, both in terms of how she came to encounter Border Patrol (who then took her to the processing center), and how she was held separately from her daughter. Her testimonio is as follows:

We had to cross a river to get here. And without knowing how to swim or anything like that! But that's when one focuses on God. We got to the United States around midnight, and encountered immigration. They took us on a bus, to [their] station, and we

waited to be interviewed. I could not tell you what time it was when that happened, whether it was the day or night— to be locked up, one loses their sense of time.

Rosa mentions being interviewed, though she does not specify by whom or what questions were asked, beyond that whoever conducted the interview “confirmed that we had people here [in the U.S. waiting for us].” After their interview, Rosa says she and her daughter were “returned to another station, which they called *la guarderia*” (nursery, or daycare), where she was initially placed “in a cold room for two days, without being able to bathe.” Rosa does not immediately mention that she was separated from her daughter, a detail which instead comes up midway through the following conversation:

Rosa: After [the cold room], they took us to *la guarderia*. Thank God where we slept there had *colchonetas* (sleeping pads)-- the cold room only had the floor. And in *la guarderia* we had blankets of... some kind of aluminum. They gave us good attention there. Food three times a day, they gave the children snacks... apart from us, but—

Researcher B: Apart from you? Were you with your daughter before that?

Rosa: We were kept apart.

Rosa does not immediately offer any further detail, including how it felt to be kept from her daughter, or how long she was away from her daughter. Instead, she continues to share her experience of conditions where she was held:

Rosa: We didn’t get to bathe on a daily basis. If you wanted to bathe, there were few options to do so. But well, I didn’t have that many complaints, really. I’m just grateful that they brought us here [to the U.S.] at all.

Researcher B: And did you get to see your daughter at all?

When prompted to reflect on her separation from Deisy, frustration audibly overtakes her measured tone for the first time throughout her testimonio.

Rosa: They didn’t let me see her. And we were— our places weren’t that far away from each other! We [parents] were in the same section [of the facility], but they wouldn’t let us see our kids. When they brought us back [from eating], only then we could catch a glimpse of our kids. Then after that [the guards] took the kids out so they could eat.

The topic of detention ends abruptly, with Rosa instead pivoting to discuss how “the situation in Nicaragua has changed so much this year.” Out of respect for her desired topic change, Researcher B dropped the previous line of questioning.

Detention Center Conditions

Jose says that though the journey to reach the border was hard, “being in ICE is hard too.” When asked what it was like within the processing center⁵ where he was held, he shares that he is struggling to understand the reasoning behind the frigid temperatures within detention, which are so cold that immigrants colloquially refer to them as “*hieleras*” (ice boxes):

It’s hard in there. On the one hand I guess they have their reasons, but on the other I don’t think so. Because [in Central America] we are accustomed to a tropical style of temperature. Then [in detention] they give us blankets of what they call ‘mylar’-- they’re sheets of like, nylon or aluminum --to endure the cold. But one’s throat... Well, we all got very sick.

He also shares that his daughter Cindi has asthma, and continues to suffer lingering health impacts from a cold or flu that she caught while detained.

She got sick [in there] too. I fear that now she’s having a relapse [of asthma symptoms]. Like what you would need a nebulizer for. Unfortunately we haven’t been able to see a Doctor yet, so I’m worried, because she also doesn’t want to eat. I don’t know if I should be worried or not.

Though Rosa initially began her recollection of detention by stating that “they gave us good attention there,” and “with immigration and everything, I didn’t have any complaints or anything like that,” she does also refer to the cold conditions several times, including that the initial room where she was held was “so, so cold, like freezing, that it made us a little sick, the change in temperature.”

⁵ To avoid biasing the conversation, Researcher A did not explicitly refer to the processing center as “detention.” Her question, verbatim, was “can I ask about... being inside the center? Were you in--” to which Jose replied “in ICE? Yes,” before continuing to explain his experience

Both Jose and Rosa mention the lack of ability to bathe where they were held. Rosa succinctly states, “if you wanted to bathe, there were few opportunities to do so.” Jose explains the procedure as: “It’s only once a week. They announce the day and time in advance, and when it is that time, that’s when you get to bathe. You can’t arrange to go when you want to.” He also notes that bathroom access in general could be limited, and sometimes depended on the attitude of the guards in charge:

We had a few different guards. There was one officer woman who was very calm and very helpful. She treated us with much respect. If we needed something we could ask her. But there were other male officers, and most of them were too harsh with us. Sometimes they didn’t even let us go to the bathroom. And the bathrooms are also unhealthy because they are those bathrooms that are made of plastic. They only changed them once every two days. Every two days!

It is worth noting that the limited access to bathing comes after many families have completed migration journeys close to a month long. In Rosa’s case, she traveled “mostly by bus, from Nicaragua to Honduras, from Honduras to El Salvador, then to Guatemala, and through Mexico,” then finally on foot for “three days” for her final leg of the journey across the border. All told, the journey took her “several weeks,” after which she arrived “so, so tired.” From both an ethical standpoint, as well as a logistical hygienic standpoint given the close quarters of detention, it is difficult to understand why migrants would be permitted as few opportunities to bathe as both participants shared. Though Rosa did not specify how long in total she was detained, Jose was held for a week, which (given the limited bathing schedule) meant he was only able to bathe “one time. One time in seven days.”

A Child’s Perspective of Detention

As Jose encourages Cindi to join his testimonio and share her own perspective, we are afforded a rare view of how children experience detention. The perspective of conditions that she shares is rigid, but in some ways less so than what is described by adult participants. Cindi is

eager to share: once she begins to talk, she doesn't stop speaking for 4 total minutes, during which her father allows her to share uninterrupted.

Researcher A: And what's it like in there⁶, where you were?

Cindi: Ehm... it's like a *carcel* (jail). They give you a sleeping pad and a blanket— always a Mylar one —and at breakfast they give us granola, milk, some Life [cereal], an apple and a bottle of water. But everything [I ate] made me sick. Everything except the Life.

Cindi struggled with stomach problems for the three days she was detained, and the center's infirmary could not determine their cause: “they took me there crying, because I couldn't stand the stomachache, the headache, and the urge to vomit.” To Cindi's dismay, even normal things that she would have eaten at home, and had previously enjoyed, made her sick: “even the burritos!”

Despite the gastrointestinal struggles Cindi faced, she reports that she felt mostly fine emotionally, partly due to the support of other children present that she could play with. However, she explains that children were not allowed to go outside of the facility to play:

“They didn't let us go out to... like, see this, where we are right now?—”

She pauses, gesturing to the grassy front yard of *El Centro* where her testimonio is being conducted, before continuing.

“—they only let us play in *la jaula* (cage) and in the corridors around *la jaula*. That was it.”

Cindi describes the rest of an average day for her in detention as follows:

Cindi: Every morning at 4, the [guards] came around and did roll call. They did that until 6. They went around collecting kids, to take them to their parents, and there were kids who stayed there 8 or 13 days.

Researcher A: 8 or 13 days? Without their parents?

Jose and Cindi, simultaneously: Yes.

⁶ Once again, Researcher A was careful not to prompt an answer by referring to her location as “detention,” “holding,” or the colloquial “perrera (dog pound)”/“hielera (icebox). Instead, she used nonspecific language.

Researcher A: And what did you all do during that time?

Cindi: Some kids cried, others didn't. Me? I didn't cry, not usually. Because when I felt lonely... sometimes I cried. But I was in there with a girl who didn't cry. We passed the time playing and all that. But sometimes... there were bad policemen there, who scolded us and all that. They wouldn't let us eat in the jail cells and they kept us on the floor. And at night, yes, they put movies on the televisions, but I didn't pay much attention to those because I went to bed early, because in the morning they took our sleeping mats away and we didn't get them back until nighttime.

Researcher A: So, you get to sleep on a mat at night time, with blankets and all, but in the morning they take them away? You're just on the plain, cold floor?

Cindi: Yep. And there was always air conditioning from the pipes [inside].

Researcher A: And they don't take you outside?

Cindi: No. Only when we go to bathe, or to have breakfast. For that, they take us out into the corridors to bring the food.

The last part of Cindi's detention testimonio revisits a point that her father shared earlier, that one's treatment in detention ultimately depends on the attitude of the officials around them:

Researcher A: How did they treat you in there?

Cindi: It depends on the officer. Some played with us, told us jokes and talked to us. Others treated us badly. Sometimes they scolded us. Like, if we tried to keep our sleeping mats in the morning? They'd take it back from us and we'd get in trouble. There were some [officers] who said that if we had food in the cell, they were going to take it away, *and* they were going to leave us without water. Because they gave us bottles of water, but kids who got punished? They had to drink from the faucet. They didn't get left bottles of water. And every night, they shined light at us to see if we were hiding food.

Researcher A: What? Why? So what if you hide food? It's the food they gave you.

Cindi: Yep. But they take it away. Yeah, it depended on the officer. Every 6 hours they changed the officers. Most were good, it was just like two, two officers who did that to us.

Theme 2: Need to Obtain Legal Status

Though the exact term "status" is not used, several testimonios share hope and/or anxieties related to their ability to remain in the U.S. – an ability that will be determined by how

(and for how long) their asylum claims proceed through immigration court. All four participants fled danger to themselves or their families at home, and each shared that they would encounter renewed were they to be returned to their respective countries.

Continuing Danger Faced by Participants

Both **Yeni** and **Camila** fled domestic violence, and it is worth noting that Camila's ex-partner had previously foiled one escape several months prior:

He treated me so badly, he kept me *secuestrada* (held hostage, or kidnapped), because I had already escaped once. I made it as far as Veracruz, but... he has lots of influence, so he found me. He followed me, he grabbed my oldest son and put a gun to his head to force me to return to Honduras with him. I stayed for a month after that, and then, well, I had another opportunity to escape because he went out to a party.

Given that her well-connected ex-partner already followed her once before, Camila remains "in danger" if she returns to Honduras. She is so terrified of her ex-partner's ability to locate her, that when she had to leave her youngest son (too young to migrate) in the country, she asked her siblings to take him and hide somewhere without even telling her where he is.

Yeni shares that she also fears her ex-partner, who remains in Guatemala, and had already threatened to "kill me and take our children [away]" during previous bouts of rage. However, her ex is not the only party in Guatemala that she fears. She also fears the coyotes who arranged her journey to the U.S., and who she has only partially been able to pay back:

I'm scared to go back, because we already paid them everything we had, all the money my mom had saved. If we go back, we can get killed, because we still owe them money.

Both **Rosa** and **Jose** face a lack of personal safety for different reasons. Rosa has actively been abused by the police in her hometown of Matagalpa, and fears that she cannot safely return to reside in the country even in another city. In response to the protests that ultimately forced Rosa to flee, she shares that "so many police arrived, and not just from my [region], but from others

[around the country]. They came all the way from the capital!”⁷ As such, she doesn’t know who knows her, or what would happen if she were to be recognized for her role as a protestor. She can, however, imagine that it would not be good given what she previously witnessed:

That’s why so many people have been migrating this year. Nothing’s changed. Paramilitaries continue to threaten families who supported the marches, roadblocks, things like that. They’re still kidnapping people. They’re mad that people are still out in the streets protesting.

Since arriving to *El Centro*, she has been able to call her home to Matagalpa, and received a bleak prognosis of the mood back home: “I talked to my father recently and he told me that he was afraid.”

In his testimonio, Jose does not explicitly express the same degree of fear, or threat of being chased and/or hunted the way that other participants do. However, he is conscious that were he to return and encounter the same gangs that he fled, he would have no pathway to seek protection:

I had to flee because I can’t mess with the *maras* (gangsters), and also I couldn’t report what was happening, because the same police [I would report to] are also filled with *Maras*. Putting in a report would be like suicide, because after one makes a report, they’re going to kill your family. They don’t respect kids, either. So I had to flee.

Impressions of the Legal System

Amidst this stress to remain safely in the U.S., two participants (Camila and Rosa) view their impending court appearances positively: both women have family ready to receive them in the United States, and the social support of their respective families seems to increase each’s confidence in navigating the legal system, albeit to varying degrees. Camila’s faith in the law is expressed explicitly, and mentioned twice in the following anecdote about why she chose to come to the U.S:

⁷ Nicaragua’s capital, Managua, is only two hours away from Matagalpa.

The violence I suffered, that's at the root of why I decided to head for this country. I know I have support here, and the laws are enforced. Here I know I don't run the risk of [my abusive ex-partner] coming to find me, and in the case that he does? Well, I have the protection of the law.

The support Camila mentions— a mother who has lived in the U.S. for “six or seven years” —is key to her hopefulness in the future. Her family in Honduras was also a key source of support that continues to benefit her case from afar, given how her brother over time helped her collect evidence of the abuse her partner inflicted upon her, and that may be used in her court case: “We kept evidence, my brother and I. He helped me [document] where [my partner] hit me in the face and left me all purple, my whole right eye and everything.” In continuing her testimonio, Camila lists off other injuries that have been inflicted upon her and her children, of which she also maintains evidence.

For Rosa, being able to argue her asylum case in court is also front of mind. When asked what her first plans are upon reaching her new home in North Carolina, says it is to “prepare to present myself to the law.” When asked how she feels about the prospect of being in court, she says she is choosing to “have faith that the [government] will let us stay here, that they are not going to deport us.” Compared to Camila, she is somewhat apprehensive about seeing her family, who she “isn't very close to,” seeing as they are her ex-partner's family and not hers – however, they have been critical to her migration journey to the U.S., wanting to ensure safety for their sobrina, her daughter Deisy. (Rosa also notes that they are citizens, a fact which may help her navigate acclimation to the U.S., as well as the legal system). If all goes well in court, her next plan is to “*arreglar mis papeles*⁸: and return to Nicaragua for the seven-year-old daughter she was forced to leave behind. Then, someday she hopes to return to Nicaragua permanently “when the country is finally free.”

⁸ Literally: “get my papers in order,” but can be loosely translated to “obtain migration status”

If Rosa and Camila derive hope from the social support they feel that they have in the U.S., it is important to note that migrants who lack this support can be left feeling adrift and anxious about their precarious condition. Yeni's testimonio describes the palpable fear and stress of having nowhere to go, and no one to count on. She arrived to the U.S. with the promise of a sponsor in New York— a contact of her sister's —but upon release from detention Yeni learned that said sponsor was no longer willing to house anyone beyond her sister and her sister's child. Without a backup line of support, Yeni and her own four children now hang in limbo, and she doesn't know what to do:

We got here and there is no one to accept us. If we don't find someone to take us into their home, everything we did will be lost. But going back to Guatemala, we are in danger.

As seen above, Yeni has no lawyer to explain to her if the lack of a sponsor will jeopardize her case or not, so her default presumption is that it *will* – which is something she cannot risk, as returning to Guatemala would mean facing 1. the violent partner she left, and 2. the coyotes she remains indebted to. Her testimonio is a critical reminder that legal status is not only key to a stable future for her and her family, but also to their ability to stay alive.

Theme 3: Parenting Pressures

The most emotional moments in anyone's testimonios occur when parents reflect on their children. All four testimonios share parents' stories of guilt and concern about how the migration journey has impacted their children, both: 1. those who made the journey *with* their parents, and 2. those who they had to leave behind with extended family in countries of origin.

Parents Who Migrated With Children

As previous studies have noted, policies aimed at stemming the flow of migration from Central America and the Caribbean have had negligible impact to this end, and have instead

forced migrants to take increasingly dangerous routes to the U.S. (Hing, 2019; Moya Salas et al., 2013). Several testimonios recounted the dangers each family faced during their journeys to the U.S.: Rosa and Camila both mention perilous river crossings, with the latter specifically expressing surprise that she was able to safely cross despite not knowing how to swim. Says Camila:

I arrived to where the river is, expecting to see a huge river. So I said if it's huge, well obviously I'm not going to be able to cross it. When I got there, I saw that it was kind of narrow, so I told myself I'm going to risk it. I'm going to cross it, my son and I. Thank God I encountered an inflatable raft at the bank of the river, so I started to give it air with my mouth, and I was able to inflate it up to a certain part, and then I managed to cross with my son. And really, I am so impressed with myself. I can't believe I did that.

Yeni encountered dangerous conditions in a very different type of landscape: the borderlands mountains. As the only parent who migrated with all of her children (four total), mostly on foot, she shares that her journey was especially taxing. Her youngest children tired easily and "couldn't make it" on their own, so they often had to be carried. Her second oldest, Freddy, "cried the whole way," as most travel was conducted at night and he was scared that animals would "get" them. To emphasize this danger, Yeni shares one specific anecdote of terror that has stuck with her:

One day, we almost got trampled by bulls. My sister got lost from the group with her daughter, who is six. We could hear her screaming, screaming, and [when we caught up], we had walked into a field of bulls. We hid behind some thorny bushes, and the bulls could not get to us. But we could have died.

Due to the perils they faced, Yeni feels particular regret about the journey, though she also notes that she had no other chance but to migrate, given the violence she faced at home:

I wish I would have known how this was going to be. No one told us, the coyote lied to us. he said we were going to be able to eat, that my kids would be taken care of and we would be okay. They didn't say how we would be walking in danger at night, taken in packed cars. We almost died. We saw dead bodies on the road ... But we are also in danger at home. We came here because we had to.

Yeni is also conscious of the emotional and physical toll the journey has taken on her children, and is at a loss for how to begin to heal from it moving forward:

Look, the kids are not well. They are not doing good. We are exhausted, hungry. We barely ate on the road. I don't know what to do.

Feelings About Families and Children Left Behind

A majority of participants migrated with one child, but were forced to leave one or more behind for various reasons. These parents report feelings like sadness and guilt at having had to leave children behind, and tend to devote significant space in their testimonios to sharing these feelings.

Camila describes being separated from her younger son as “heartwrenching.” Because she had to send her son into hiding, she says “I don't know how he is, or with who.” Even if she consciously knows that he is safe with one of her siblings, and she doesn't know where he is only because she explicitly asked them not to tell her, she worries about him constantly. The scars of the traumatic abuse she and her sons experienced still linger in her mind, and cause constant nightmares about what could happen to her son if he were to be found:

I recently dreamed that [my ex] found my eldest son, and he was shooting him, and I woke up screaming. Every day I have nightmares about him, and I know that these nightmares are a result of what we have already lived through.

Camila tries to comfort herself by imagining the future she can provide for her sons in the U.S., one “I know would be better here” than back home. However, Camila shares that still struggles with guilt when she thinks about how long that might take, and how much of his life she might miss in the meantime: “I feel... really sad. I don't know how he's doing. I don't know how he *will* be doing... I wish he was here with me.”

In several cases, parents' feelings of sadness and guilt are worsened because they had never intended to leave their countries at all. Rosa shares this sentiment explicitly:

I love everything about Nicaragua. I *miss* everything. My youth, my childhood, my family, my life was good. I didn't want to leave.

When asked what the hardest part of migrating was, Rosa says it was “having to leave my little one, my daughter, in Nicaragua. She's only seven.” Rosa discussed the prospect of bringing her other daughter to the U.S., but says that her ex-partner was not ok with that idea: “he was worried about her traveling, that she'd get sick, or tired, and not be able to walk.” She feels guilty about not being present with her daughter as she recovers, but also worried that the longer she stayed in Nicaragua, the likelier it would have been that she could be jailed, killed, or disappeared: “there was no one to protect me, nothing I could do [to stay].” In the meantime, she tries to ground herself by praying, specifically that “God will provide me a way to return for her and bring her here” as soon as possible.

In Jose's case, he shares that he is especially struggling because before migrating he had “never been apart from my family for so long, or so far.” He once even quit a well paying job as a long-haul truck driver because it kept him away from home too long: “I preferred to find another one where I could be beside my family night after night, because the love of your children– your wife too –it is incomparable.” When he eventually left Honduras, he did so “with great pain in my soul, because I couldn't scrape together enough to be able to bring the rest of my family.” Even with money borrowed from family friends, he could only obtain \$3000 USD for the journey: by itself this seems like a substantial sum, but divided by five family members it totals only \$600 each – not enough for a journey across four countries. Without his family, Jose continues to struggle emotionally:

My soul was crushed. I cried so many times, because my son is so young– only two years old –and I had to leave him. But I have faith in the Lord Jesus that I will be able to overcome, to return to my family, and get to know them all over again. That's what strengthens me. And at least I can call them. But really, there were so many times when I

didn't believe I could [make the journey]. I wanted to throw in the towel, and go back home, but I knew that I couldn't. I *couldn't!* No. This is for my daughter.

Ultimately, Jose shares that though he will keep praying and fighting to build a better, safer life for his family, he won't feel really, truly comfortable until they are reunited: "I can't rest while my family is apart."

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The present study sought to explore two research questions:

1. What aspects of migrants' journeys (including their reception upon arrival to the U.S.) impact their self-conceptions and feelings about the decisions they made to migrate?
2. What, if any, stressors do they describe facing, and how do these impact their mental health?

Regarding question one, participant testimonios highlight how the fraught legal landscape they enter is itself a stressor negatively impacting their mental health. This is most explicitly highlighted in the experience of detention (and separation within) that Jose and Rosa shared. However, it can also be seen in how all four participants view their court cases: some with hope, and others with dismay. For all four, the ability to obtain legal status is key to not only their safety, but also the prospect of reunion with their families. Whether or not they feel like they have the support and resources they need to fight their respective asylum claims directly affects their self-conception, their feelings about their decision to migrate, and also their present mental health.

In terms of question two, migrants' mental health is directly tied to two factors. First, it is tied to their ability to navigate the logistical barriers they face. This includes figuring out how to fight their cases, yes, but also ascertaining whether or not they have social support awaiting them, and to what degree they can count on it. Participants with family members in the U.S. reported more hope and comfort when discussing their futures, though this was impacted by the degree of closeness they felt with said family members. Conversely, those without social support awaiting them— from family, friends, or sponsoring acquaintances —reported more stress and anxiety about their futures. Second, their mental health is also tied to the welfare of family

members impacted by migration, both in terms of family that asylum seekers were forced to leave behind, and those who migrated with them.

Processing Mistreatment

In sharing their detention experiences, both Jose and Rosa highlight mixed feelings about the reception that they received. Jose's is somewhat more explicitly critical, as he wonders (validly) about why Central Americans are detained in such frigid temperatures, and why parents are detained separately from their children. Conversely, Rosa's testimonio takes a more confusing tone. She begins by explicitly stating that she had "no complaints" with detention, yet her words conflicted with this sentiment as her testimonio progressed, as she on several occasions the cold temperatures within, and also the lack of ability to do things like 1. consistently bathe, 2. see her child. The things that she cites as "good attention" within detention—pads to sleep on, blankets, snacks—read mostly as bare minimum treatment. As a researcher, I wondered to what degree Rosa's description of detention might have been diplomatically phrased, or something that she genuinely did not mind relative to what she experienced on her migration journey. Without a way to follow up with her long-term, it's difficult to analyze what, if any, factors helped her to view detention somewhat more positively than Jose; and if her feelings remained the same once she had moved far away from McAllen.

It is worth noting that Rosa, Jose, and Cindi all referred to their experience in detention using carceral language:

Rosa: ... estar **encerrado**, uno pierda el tiempo...
...to be **locked up**, one loses their sense of time...

Cindi: ...Y como esos, como **carceles**, nos regañan si nos asomamos **a la carcel**...
...and in the like, **jails**, they scolded us if we tried to peek out of the **jail[cells]**...

Cindi: ...No nos dejaban salir [afuera], nos dejaban salir solo **en la jaula** y en los corredores **de la jaula**...
...They wouldn't let us go outside, they only let us out **within the cage**, and in the corridors **of the cage**...

Jose: ...[los niños aguantan] dias **encerrados de** sus papas...
...[kids withstood] days **locked up [away from]** their parents...

Cindi: ...y ahí habían veces, que habían **policías** malos ahí...
...and there were times where there were bad **cops** in there...

Additionally, a painting done by Yeni's daughter **Marisol** (in the presence of Researcher B) shows a visual perspective of how children perceive their holding experience. Prompted only to "paint what is on your corazón (heart) today," she shared the following painting, captioned "la perrera" (the kennel, or dog cage).

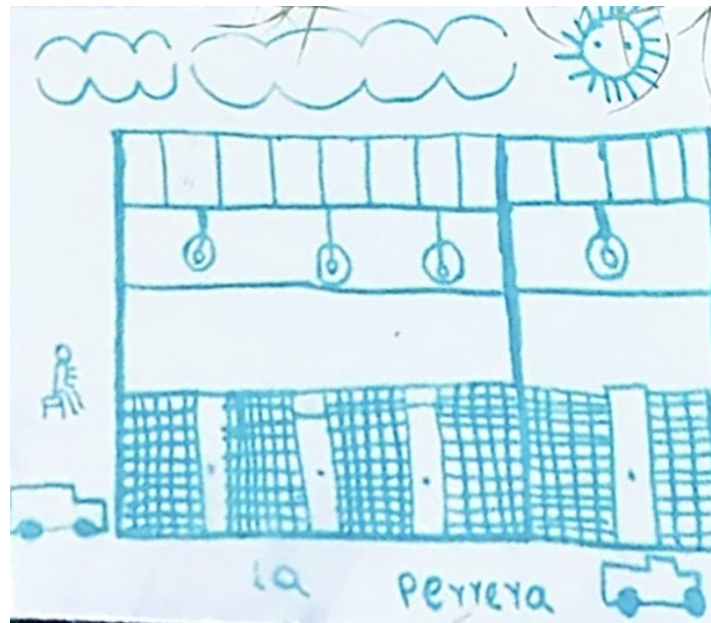


Photo taken by Researcher B at El Centro - November 30, 2018

This language exemplifies how migrants may begin to question why they're receiving the treatment that they are, and ultimately internalize their mistreatment as somehow deserved (Menjivar & Abrego, 2012). The McAllen Central Processing Center where asylum seekers were held is technically not the kind of immigration detention the public might think of in terms of

ICE detention, where migrants are held until they can be deported back to their countries. Functionally, it is supposed to serve as an administrative processing center, where migrants are brought after initial encounters by Border Patrol, and *temporarily* held while the basics of their claims are processed with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). However, one must wonder if the difference between temporary “processing” and explicitly punitive “detention” is evident to migrants – the language they use seems to employ that it is not. Arguably, the functional distinction between “processing” and “detention” does not matter if the perception of punitive treatment is the same. Further, at least Jose and Cindi do describe a degree of punitive treatment even if they are not explicitly critical of it: the frigid temperatures, cold enough to cause illness; the way that children are held separately from their parents, and scolded if they try to sneak glances at each other in passing. Even if the logistical limitations of the detention space itself are believed to not be *intended* to be punitive (i.e. that kids have no outdoor space within which to play, the daytime collection of blankets to maintain an orderly space), they do not make for an ideal environment for children who may be kept up to 13 days.

Lastly, there is the matter of the stomach pain that Cindi experienced during, upon her release from detention, and through to the time of testimonio. It must be noted that her stomach pain cannot be directly attributed to anything that happened within detention, nor do either Jose or Cindi suggest such. Neither Jose nor Cindi opine on the cause of the stomach pain at all: as they had not yet seen a Doctor, they are unclear as to whether it is caused by a food sensitivity, a bug obtained from other children inside detention, or other causes. However, it should also be noted that psychological symptoms (such as stress and anxiety) have the potential to be somatized, or manifested in body ailments (Zvolensky et al., 2020). Psychological symptoms of somatized stress may include such as headaches or stomach pains, these symptoms may present

even when individuals do not self-report feeling conscious of high levels of stress (Shapiro & Nguyen, 2010). Research has suggested that Latinx populations tend to somaticize psychological stress more than other ethnic groups, but this research has not been explicitly conducted with migrant populations (Zvolensky et al., 2020).

Beyond Basic Needs: Social and Legal Support

Conventional psychological literature about basic needs tends to emphasize migrants' needs to obtain things like food and housing. However, less research space within the field of psychology has been devoted to how uncertain legal status can facilitate (or inhibit) one's access to basic needs. Social support can help mitigate the effects of this uncertainty, but it is not a guarantee for migrants arriving to the U.S. There is a marked difference between the confidence expressed by asylum seekers (Jose, Rosa, and Camila) who have family awaiting them in the U.S., vs. Yeni, who currently has none. In Camila's case, for example, the support she received from family members both in the U.S. and Honduras to help her navigate the basis of her asylum claim has benefited her in both logistical and emotional ways. Logistically, the assistance they provide her in collecting corroborative evidence of the abuse she suffered will be an advantage when having to recount her story from memory in a courtroom. She has confidence telling her story, and also evidence to support her claims, potentially aiding her credibility in the face of judges who will determine her fate (Cummins, 2013). Emotionally, knowing that she has a social network familiar with and sensitive to her claims (including witnesses back home who could write affidavits attesting to her mistreatment) may prove an insulating factor against what Perez Foster (2001) calls a "paralyzing" (p. 166) fear of not being understood that migrants often experience, given the high stakes they face to recount the trauma they've endured.

Conversely, not only does Yeni no longer have a sponsor at the time of her testimonio, she is conscious of the fact that her sister still does, and will be on her way to meet him. Upon release from detention, their sponsor (her sister's boyfriend), informed the women that he would only be able to house Yeni's sister and her one child. As cruel as this may sound, Menjivar (2006) explains that U.S.-based relatives of immigrants may themselves be in tenuous economic situations that ultimately render them unable to provide the support they'd initially hoped to. Now, though the fear and imminent physical danger of her migration journey has ended, being in the U.S. has yet to provide Yeni any relief, as she cannot immediately envision how to obtain the safe future she desires for her children without the logistical and emotional support she had expected to receive.

Family Reunification as a Source of Stress, and Also Hope

The prospect of families indefinitely split across borders can, and does, prove a tremendous source of pressure for parents. Menjivar (2006) notes that such a dilemma is common for migrants in tenuous legal statuses, noting that though "family separations are originally meant to be temporary, they often extend for indefinite periods due to the immigrants' uncertain situation" (p. 1020). Further, not only does a lack of legal status preclude im/migrants from being able to return to their countries for visits (unless they are able to obtain said status), should family members wish to undertake the journey themselves, the economic impact can be astronomical: from Central America, journeys to the U.S. "can easily cost at least three times as much as travel for Mexicans, due to the greater geographical distance" (Menjivar, 2006, p. 1023) – piled atop whatever pending debts remain from the initial journey (as in Yeni's case). Jose is living out this dilemma at the time of his testimonio: he badly misses his family, and wishes they could join him. However, having experienced the danger of the journey firsthand, he doesn't feel

confident that his wife or son could safely make the same voyage themselves, and hopes that they do not choose to until he can arrange a safer passage for them, both legally and financially:

I don't want them to suffer the way I suffered, and for a woman it's more difficult. And my son is so little right now... So I want to see what I can achieve here, to find them a better future.

Still, the prospect of reunification— however distant —can and does provide a source of motivation. For Jose, the idea of being able to “return to my family, well, that’s what strengthens me.” Jose’s outlook has perhaps influenced that of his daughter Cindi, who shares that when things get hard, “I just think about what I’m going to do here. That it will be better [than back home]. And also— also, I think about how I’m going to see my Mom again [someday].”

Exemplifying the mixed-feelings this uncertain timeline yields, however, the thought of her mother does reduce Cindi to tears, necessitating a break from the testimonio to receive comfort from her father and Researcher A. This moment is the only place in any testimonio where the impact of migration and separation across borders is seen from a child’s perspective, but research has suggested that migration trauma (from pre-, during, and post-migration) is shared throughout families, and manifested “in youth, mothers, and husbands alike” (Moya Salas et al., 2013, p. 1012). Children internalize their parents’ stress, parents worry about what their children are internalizing, and both parties may find it difficult to share or process their feelings together amidst the speed with which they must acclimate to their new lives in the U.S. However, the strong shared emotional bond within migrating families may also provide an entry point through which practitioners can discuss mental health care for various family members. For example, mental health practitioners treating children in asylum seeker families have noted that their parents have sometimes been motivated to seek treatment for themselves after having witnessed the benefits of mental health care experienced by their children (Stringer, 2019).

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

The testimonios in the present research study catalog a specific, historical moment in the evolution of U.S. immigration policy. In their 2018 testimonios, Camila, Yeni, Jose and Rosa all articulated a climate of uncertainty and stress complicating their efforts to both seek asylum, as well as heal from the factors that had initially forced them to flee. However, their testimonios all also reflected a tenacious grip on hope, by which each of them continued to envision and fight for futures far beyond the barriers they faced. Though I did not hear from any participants after our study concluded, I did continue to visit South Texas for two further years of fieldwork along the U.S./Mexico border and learn from new asylum seeking families arriving at the border.

Over time, I observed how policies and regulations changed, erecting new barriers for asylum seekers that further complicated the already opaque legal landscape they were expected to navigate and understand. By late 2019, 1.5 years after the testimonios shared in this thesis, McAllen was no longer the central hub for asylum seeker arrivals, because few— if *any*—migrants were now allowed to enter the United States. The implementation of DHS' Migrant Protection Protocols, officially announced in January 2019, now relegated would-be asylum seekers to Mexico to wait out their cases. Had Rosa, Jose, Yeni, or Camila arrived one year later than they did, instead of being released into the U.S. with ankle monitors and notices to appear at later court dates, they would have been sent back to the nearest Mexican city (either Reynosa, south of McAllen; or Matamoros, south of Brownsville) and forced to wait there indefinitely. Instead of preparing for court hearings with their families and sponsors within the U.S., they would await them in makeshift tent camps erected just outside the port of entry. Instead of being detained in frigid processing facilities, they would face the elements along the riverbank of the Rio Grande—

without clean running water, consistent meals, and only a river to bathe in. Simply put, the landscape changed (and worsened) but the spirit of the policies didn't: the barriers erected in front of asylum seekers were designed to deter them from pursuing their claims (Harris, 2020). As asylum seekers persisted despite logistical and emotional strain, the barriers evolved to meet them.

However, the mutability of the immigration policy landscape provides an opportunity for psychology professionals to intervene, leveraging our field knowledge and academic capital to demand the construction of policies that support, rather than stifle, the welfare of migrant populations. Psychologists can—and have begun to be—at the frontlines of immigration policy development. There is already exciting precedent for this: In 2017, Florida-based psychologists practitioners partnered with legal, medical and policy experts in an endeavor to extend the Board of Immigration Appeals' deadline for minor immigrants to be able to file for asylum (Stringer, 2019). To do so, psychologists contributed an argument that because many applicants “ha[d] experienced trauma, and neuropsychological research indicates that trauma can delay brain development,” extended filing deadlines would more justly allow them an opportunity to prepare and file claims, which would in turn be more thoroughly argued (Stringer, 2019, n.p.). Their endeavor was ultimately successful, marking a significant departure from the strict 1-year deadline previously imposed. With the arrival of a new administration, one purportedly more friendly to migrants, psychologists may have the opportunity to argue for further policy changes that ensure migrants' welfare. Given this opportunity, it is integral to center asylum seekers' wishes and recommendations for future policies that will impact their lives.

Recommendations

Taken together, the literature and testimonios yield the following recommendations to better support asylum seekers.

- 1. Support for basic needs cannot only mean short-term resources (i.e. food, money, clothes). Asylum seekers need wraparound community accompaniment and support** – Not all migrants arriving to the U.S. have people here to emotionally and logistically support them. Migrants want and need help navigating the logistical aspects of their acclimation to the U.S., including information on how to fight their court cases, as well as how to obtain jobs and understand what support and resources they are and aren't eligible (i.e. in terms of education for their children, or mental health care for themselves/their families). They are more than capable of becoming self-sufficient, engaged members of their communities and should be afforded agency to do so.
- 2. Psychology practitioners hoping to engage with and support migrant populations must become familiar with both the social *and* legal factors of reception they face**– it is not sufficient to simply approach their mental health care with conventional field knowledge, without an understanding of and attention to the complex network of stressors that migrants face. This does not only include xenophobia and prejudice, but also the structural violence they face from the American legal system. Researchers and practitioners alike need not become legal experts, but should at least acquire and maintain a basic competence of the specific policies constraining their clients' lives (i.e. DACA, asylum, Temporary Protected Status) so as to best support their health and wellness.
- 3. Psychology practitioners committed to serve and/or support migrant populations must be prepared to advocate against the structural violence that they face (i.e. detention practices and prejudice in courtrooms)**-- the academic and social capital

afforded to us as researchers, scholars, and scientists can and must be leveraged to advocate for equity, and the protection of basic human rights for migrants regardless of their immigration status.

To close this thesis, I return to a passage from Martín-Baró's "Writings for a Liberation Psychology." Writing from a devolving situation of violence and repression in El Salvador that would eventually claim his own life,⁹ Martín-Baró mused about what could feasibly be done to restore justice to the Salvadoran people. Through his own years of research and practice, he arrived at the following conclusion (as cited in Lean, 2003, p. 169):

"It is clear that no one is going to return to the imprisoned dissident his youth; to the young woman who has been raped her innocence; to the person who has been tortured his or her integrity. Nobody is going to return the dead and the disappeared to their families. What can and must be publicly restored [are] the victims' names and their dignity, through a formal recognition of the injustice of what has occurred, and, wherever possible, material reparation."

Though there is no practice, nor tangible recourse that can undo the harm already experienced by asylum seekers throughout their journeys, activist-practitioners are well equipped to publicly pursue migration justice. To truly support the mental health and overall welfare of migrant populations, psychological professionals will need to step outside of their comfort zones and engage at a deeper political level than they may be used to. At minimum, conducting research and practice that unapologetically center migrants' lived experiences is a critical (and achievable) first step to ensure that asylum seekers not only survive, but thrive.

⁹ Martín-Baró was assassinated in 1989 on the campus of the Universidad Centroamericana in San Salvador, El Salvador where he lived and worked, along with five of his Jesuit brothers, their housekeeper, and her daughter. His death has since been linked to the Atlacatl battalion, a U.S.-trained counterinsurgency "death squad" on behalf of El Salvador's then-military regime (Jones, 2020).

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