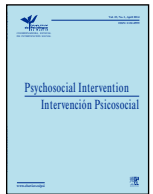




# Psychosocial Intervention

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## “The guys told us crying that they saw how they were killing her and they could not do anything”: Psychosocial explorations of migrant journeys to the U.S.<sup>+</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

In this article I examine undocumented migrant experiences on their journeys to the U.S. Tens of thousands of Honduran migrants leave their homes in hopes to provide better for their families from afar. In in-depth interviews, 21 migrants from Honduras share the events they endure as they cross Guatemala, Mexico and the borders that divide them. I conducted narrative analyses and specifically used the analytical tools of high points and poises to locate the most salient experiences the migrants narrated as well as identifying particular selves the migrants were presenting. The high points centered around the crossings of the Mexico–U.S. border, encounters with gangs and the police in Mexico, and travels on top of freight trains. Most of these events were highly charged with potential short and long-term effects on the migrants' health. In trying to make sense of their experiences, migrants presented themselves as heroes helping others, victims of the migration systems, good parents, or unaffected bystanders. This research provides insight into the rarely explored psychosocial aspects of undocumented migration, illuminates how Honduran migrants who attempt this journey make sense of their experiences, and proposes interventions to mitigate the potentially tragic consequences of this migration.

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## “Los chicos nos dijeron llorando que vieron cómo la mataban sin poder hacer nada”: Exploraciones psicosociales de viajes de emigrantes a los EE.UU.

### RESUMEN

En este artículo examino las experiencias que han tenido en sus viajes hacia los EE.UU. cientos de miles de emigrantes hondureños que dejan su hogar con la esperanza de poder ayudar mejor a su familia desde la lejanía. En las entrevistas en profundidad llevadas a cabo, 21 emigrantes de Honduras comparten los contratiempos que tienen que soportar cuando cruzan Guatemala, México y las fronteras que los separan. He llevado a cabo análisis narrativos, utilizando particularmente herramientas analíticas de “momentos culminantes” y “equilibrios” con el fin de detectar las experiencias más destacadas que relatan los emigrantes, así como detectar las distintas identidades que muestran. Los momentos culminantes se centraron en los cruces de frontera entre México y EE.UU., encuentros inesperados en México con bandas y con la policía y viajes subidos en el techo de trenes de mercancías. Muchas de estas peripecias tenían una gran carga de efectos potenciales a corto y largo plazo en la salud de los emigrantes. En un intento de dar sentido a sus experiencias se presentaban a sí mismos como héroes que ayudan a los demás, víctimas de los sistemas de inmigración, buenos padres o simples transeúntes. La investigación aporta luz sobre unos aspectos psicosociales poco explorados de la emigración de indocumentados, esclareciendo de qué modo los emigrantes hondureños que intentan hacer esta travesía dan sentido a su experiencia y propone intervenciones que mitiguen las consecuencias potencialmente trágicas de esta emigración.

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Migration studies have a long history in sociology and anthropology, while psychologists arrived somewhat late to this field. Fortunately, community and cultural psychologists have paid increased attention to migration issues over the past ten years. Three recent special journal issues (12/08 issue of the *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 20/11 issue of *Psychological Intervention*, and 34/10 issue of *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*) constitute tangible proof. Contributions to these issues enriched our understanding of migration by analyzing various contexts and levels of analysis, moving psychologists to a more global view, beyond the often individual-centered approach to migration studies (Birman, 2011; Perkins, Palmer, & Garcia-Ramirez, 2011; Sládková & Bond, 2011). In the recent past the entire field of acculturation studies has moved towards a perspective that understands acculturation as an empowering process, away from the more typical assessment that acculturation often produces negative outcomes for both the hosts and the immigrant (Ward & Kagicibasi, 2010; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboana, & Szapocznik, 2010).

Away from academia, on the ground, increasing attention has been paid to undocumented migrants in the U.S. as the White House is getting ready to overhaul the current immigration law. While we hear discussions in support or against their presence, not much is known about the interpersonal, social, and political contexts migrants go through to get here. Hundreds of thousands of migrants attempt to enter the U.S. without required documents (Lacey, 2009), most with hopes of improving economic conditions of their families. Many undergo a long journey and are often exposed to various dangers both before and during the crossing of the U.S.-Mexico border. Hondurans represent a large portion of migrants trying to get to the U.S. through Guatemala, Mexico, and the borders that divide them. Even though research exists about the U.S. border crossing (Durand and Massey, 2004; Spener, 2001), mostly with a specific focus on Mexican migrants, the migration process of Central Americans has received less attention in social science literature (for exceptions see Jácome, 2008; Ruiz, 2003; Slack & Whiteford, 2011). Moreover, this research usually focuses on the mechanics of the journey and the forces that facilitate it, but it rarely juxtaposes migrant experiences with the contexts in which they occur. This study contributes to the literature by exploring the most salient events that migrants narrate and thus gaining insight into the psychosocial dimension of the journey and illuminates how Honduran migrants who attempt this journey make sense of their experiences. It proposes interventions to mitigate the potentially tragic consequences of this migration, as it bridges two domains - the narrative experiences of migration and the socio-historical and political contexts in which the migration takes place.

### Socio-Historical context of Honduran Migration

The necessity to migrate and the actual territories of movement are produced and driven by structural forces, such as international institutions, interventions, inequality, and global trade. They set into motion flows of vulnerable people with no option other than to leave their community in search for a new livelihood (Bruneau, 2010; Slack & Whiteford, 2011; Sládková, 2007). This includes Hondurans as they leave for the U.S. with hopes of improving their lives. Although one encounters much discourse about free movement between countries, it almost exclusively applies to goods, ideas, money, and to people with means, usually from "developed" countries. Poor migrants from Honduras run into secured borders guarding individual nation states. The U.S. is not alone in instituting deterring and prohibitive immigration policies; Mexico, for example, has been collaborating with the U.S. to detain and deport migrants on its own territory. Migrants and their smugglers try to defy the enforcements of immigration policies as well as transnational drug-cartels, which

have been gaining an upper hand in controlling both drug and migrant transnational transport (Goddard, 2012).

### Honduras

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the Americas. The majority of Hondurans migrate to the U.S. and not elsewhere because of the strong historical, political, military, and economic ties of the two countries and the growing social networks that partially facilitate the process (Sládková & Edwards, 2013). Migration to the U.S. started when U.S.-owned fruit companies began using Honduran workers to transport bananas to U.S. ports (McKenzie & Menjívar, 2011). Between 1998 and 2001, Honduras suffered several natural disasters including Hurricane Mitch, which killed 7,000 people and caused around \$3 billion in damage. Increased migration to the U.S. was an immediate consequence of these disasters (Sládková & Edwards, in press). The situation in Honduras worsened following a military *coup d'état* in June 2009 (McKenzie & Menjívar, 2011). Honduras has since become the most violent country in the world (excluding war zones), with 86 murders per 100,000 people, a rate five times higher than the currently tumultuous Mexico (Thayer, 2012). The first quarter of 2012 has already seen 1,709 killings in Honduras ("Violence", 2012; Ramsey, 2012), caused mostly by drug trafficking as Honduras has become the new corridor from South America to the U.S.

Remittances are another factor that pushes people on the dangerous journey (McKenzie & Menjívar, 2011; Schmalzbauer, 2008) to the U.S. Remittances reached 2.86 billion U.S. dollars in 2011 and during the first half of 2012 the flow increased by 2.2 per cent compared to the same period in 2011 (Salazar, 2012). These remittances are the main source of hard currency for Honduras and its citizens, accounting for nearly 25 per cent of Honduran gross domestic product (McKenzie & Menjívar, 2011).

### The Journey of Honduran Migrants

While some Hondurans set on their journeys alone, many employ coyotes (smugglers). In either scenario, they typically need to borrow money from family, local lenders, or banks. Although Honduras is on the Caribbean Sea and borders Belize, there is little evidence that those routes are used for the migration north. Instead, Hondurans first cross Guatemala, the only country on their way where they do not need any special entry documents. To cross into Mexico, people go through the jungle in the North or across a river in the South. Much violence is encountered on this border, which is increasingly controlled by gangs and drug cartels (Stephen, 2008). When migrants cross into Mexico they are already undocumented and hunted by various actors in the migration system and many label Mexico the most dangerous part of the journey. In Mexico, migrants travel on buses, on freight trains, hidden in enclosed vehicles, and on foot. Those who travel on their own often try to cross the whole country on top of freight trains, nicknamed 'The Beast' or the 'Train of Death.' This mode of transportation is very dangerous and many people fall, have their bodies mutilated, and some die. Gangs and thieves often climb the trains and rob, abuse, or kill the migrants. Almost all migrants encounter the Mexican police or immigration officers, who are either paid off by the coyote, steal from migrants and let them pass, or detain them. Recently, drug cartels have gotten involved in migrant trafficking because the routes often overlap and because it brings them additional income (Goddard, 2012). Generally, very little help is available for the migrants, other than shelters, Mexicans willing to provide them food and drink, and BETA, an immigration organization whose job is to provide help to migrants in need in Mexico.

In 2010, more than 11,000 immigrants were kidnapped in Mexico and "authorities found the bodies of 72 slain immigrants from

Central and South America in an abandoned ranch near the Mexico–U.S. border...” (Shoichet, 2012). From January to August 2012, 62,117 migrants were detained in Mexico and deported, of which Hondurans constituted 32.6 per cent (20,357) (UPM, 2012). These numbers do not include Honduran migrants who returned voluntarily because they ran out of psychological, physical, or financial resources. There are also those who do reach the U.S. border, but only after being abused, robbed, or beaten by the Mexican police, thieves, or gangs and are then apprehended by U.S. border patrol. In 2011, the number of Hondurans apprehended after crossing the U.S. border was 29,122 making Hondurans the 3<sup>rd</sup> most deported nationality after Mexicans and Guatemalans (Simanski & Sapp, 2012). This shows that immigrants do not endure “oppressive conditions and asymmetric power relationships only as they settle in their new countries” (Balcazar et al., 2011) but also on their way there.

## Method

### Setting

Building on previous research in the area, which suggested that the journey was an important issue there, I conducted this research in the community of Copán Ruinas, Honduras. Moreover, I collected data in Honduras, not in the U.S., because I wanted to interview people who made it to the U.S. as well as those who did not. To my knowledge, experiences of people who are turned back have not been researched at all.

Copán Ruinas is a community of about 3,000 people located in the western-most part of Honduras, twelve miles from the border with Guatemala. Many migrate from this community to the U.S., and because of its near-border location, other migrants pass through on their way (Sládková, 2007). Copán Ruinas is similar to many other migrant sending communities in Honduras, yet unique due to the presence of and exposure to foreign tourists. Mayan ruins are the main attraction for tourists, but the tourist industry is not able to support the entire community (earnings from the Mayan Ruins go to the federal government and don't stay in Copán Ruinas) (Mayor of Copán Ruinas, 2006). Copán has high levels of unemployment and prices are high due to tourism and often unaffordable for local residents, many of whom live in abject poverty just outside the small tourist center. Remittances from the U.S. are the second most important sources of income in the community. Thus, many Copán Ruinas households are divided between two nations as the productive labor takes place in the U.S. and the reproductive labor in Honduras (Schmalzbauer, 2004; Schmalzbauer, 2005).

### Data Collection/Procedures

Data gathering consisted of collecting relevant newspaper articles from three national newspapers available in the community, field notes and observations, and individual interviews with 21 locals who have attempted to reach the U.S. Though for the purpose of this paper, I will use only data from the interviews, the combination of sources and techniques serve as triangulation: “cross-checking of data and interpretation through the use of multiple data sources and/or data collection techniques” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 109). My research took eight weeks over three summers of immersion in Copan Ruinas and thus constituted “prolonged engagement and persistent observation” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 109) to provide some checks and balances on the research process and results and thus contribute to the so-called trustworthiness (internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity) of the research process that is typically used by quantitative researchers, who sometimes question the validity of qualitative research. In addition, as I explain later, the analysis of interviews is completely transparent, done systematically using narrative tools of script/high point, and thus can be replicated (for detailed description of

method and analysis, please see Sládková, 2010). Nevertheless, because of the sensitive nature of the topic, research participants were recruited with the help of a well-respected member of the community (with whom I had pre-existing relationship developed during my previous work in the community) as well as the snowballing technique. Consent forms were presented to participants in Spanish and their consent was obtained by their writing of the current date on the form. A couple of participants were not able to read the consent form, so I read it to them and asked them to make a mark on the form if they agreed to participate. I usually did not know the participants' names; thus, complete confidentiality was maintained and no name was traceable to a particular interview.

The interviews were in Spanish, semi-structured in order to obtain answers to similar questions from all participants and to allow for individual development depending on the participant's experiences, my reactions to them, and our general rapport. Interviews took place at a location of the participants' choice and lasted approximately 40–120 minutes and were later transcribed.

### Participants

I interviewed a) ten participants who had attempted to reach the U.S. but did not succeed, b) eight who made it to and returned from the U.S., and c) three who had both experiences. There were six female and fifteen male adult participants, who at the time represented the ration of male and female migrants. All participants came from the lower socio-economic strata of Copán Ruinas who has no chances of obtaining passports or visas. Research participants had attained on average six or eight years of schooling and none were indigenous Mayans who also live in the community. Table 1 below summarizes the participants' characteristics.

### Analysis

Since personal stories “are negotiated in the context of narratives told by the communities in which we live” and the “community narratives provide a way to understand culture and context and its profound effects on individual lives” (Rappaport, 2000, p. 6), community psychologists have used community narratives, especially those that have the potential to empower, in their work. That was also the reason I collected and analyzed both community and individual narratives. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this paper, I will delve closely only to the narrative analysis of the individual interviews. Narrating is a process in which individuals make sense of previous experiences, identify those that are worth telling about, reflect on the significance, and in the process create a particular self (Daiute & Nelson, 1997; Freeman, 2004). At the same time, narrating is a socio-relational process in which the narrators communicate in a certain way and pick certain events depending on the audiences and circumstances of the narrating (Bakhtin, 1986). The narrators thus select what to include, how to organize the events and how to connect them to their perceived expectations of the audience present (the interviewer) and imagined (other migrants) (Bamberg, 2007; Bamberg, 2010). Moreover, personal narratives are heavily influenced by “dominant cultural narratives”, which Rappaport (2000, p. 4) defines as “overlearned stories communicated through mass media or other large social and cultural institutions and social networks” and are known to most people in a culture.

In order to complete a systematic analysis of the narratives, I used the tools of script/high point. The individual story or high point narrated by the migrants is where we find details about their experiences as well as their relevance/importance to the migrants. While scripts express shared experiences, high points interpret events from a unique point of view. “The high point phase of the analysis focused on the communicative and evaluative function of the narrative rather than the referential function in script analysis.

**Table 1.** Participants' characteristics

Participants (total 21)	Gender	Age	Current Employment	Family Status	Suc/Uns	Time of Journey	# of tries	Time in U.S.
Hugo	M	23	Media Worker	Married, 1 child	U	1998, 1999	2	N/A
Javier	M	22	Construction worker	Single	U	2004	1	N/A
Paolo	M	38	Farmer	Married, 8 children	U	2002, 2005	2	N/A
Juan	M	21	Farmer	Single	U	2005	1	N/A
Nelson	M	27	Media Worker	Separated, 2 children	U	1995, 1997	2	N/A
Kendri	M	38	Unemployed	Married, 3 children	U	2002	1	N/A
Marvin	M	18	Taxi driver	Single	U	2006	1	N/A
Pedro	M	33	Farmer	?	U	2006	1	N/A
Marcela	F	25	Unemployed	Single	U	2005	1	N/A
Maria	F	33	Waitress	Married, 5 children	U	2006	1	N/A
Selena	F	37	Sells basic groceries from her pulperia (store)	Single, 2 children	S; U	1998, 2004	2	5 years
German	M	36	Physically disabled, unemployed	Married, 2 children	U, S	1999, 2000, 2001	3	4 years
Henri	M	22	Construction worker	Single	U, S	2001, 2002	2	4 years
Ferdi	M	25	Construction worker	Married, 1 child	S	2004	1	1.5 years
Luis	M	28	House painter	Married, ? children	S	1998	1	4 years
Daniel	M	29	Construction worker	Married, 3 children	S	2000	1	3 years
Conchetta	F	35	Helps mother with simple restaurant	Married, 2 children	S	2003	1	2.5 years
Elena	F	33	Homemaker	Single, 2 children	S	Late 90s	1	6 months
David	M	55	Home stay provider for students of Spanish	Married, 2 children	S	2004	1	3 months
Paula	F	38	Sells basic food from her small pulperia	Married, 3 children	S	1999	1	2 years
Carlos	M	43	Construction worker	Married, ?	S	1999	2	5 years

According to Daiute and Nelson (1997), high points “individuate the general script by way of specific noncanonical unexpected happenings and evaluate happenings within the narrative from the point of view of the narrator” (pp. 208-209). There, “the narrator tells us whether what happened was triumphant or tragic, surprising, normal/regular, gratifying, or disappointing. According to narrative researchers (i.e., Labov & Waletzky, 1997), the evaluation is indicated by various linguistic markers, such as intensifiers, negatives, qualifying adverbs, adjectives, psychological states, causal connectors, and increased amount of uninterrupted narration by the participants. Identifying these evaluative devices focuses on the communicative function of the interviews, the stories within the script” (Sládková, 2010, p. 49).

I identified high points by locating breaks in the flow of the interview with increased and more intense narrative and clusters of evaluative markers such as repetitions, changes in tense, negatives, qualifying adverbs and adjectives, causal connectors, comparisons, and psychological states of feelings, cognition, and reported speech (Daiute & Nelson, 1997; Sládková, 2010). After identifying high points for each interview, I compared them to see whether they centered around similar experiences.

While high points helped me identify the most salient events for the migrants, I also utilized Freeman's (2004) theory of “poiesis”. Freeman (2004) claims that “narratives deal with subjective meanings, they are individuals' perceptions of their past, their interpretive renditions of the past from the standpoint of the present” (p. 69). In his theory, recounting real-life experiences is not about telling it as it was, but about poiesis, “a process of articulating meanings that could not possibly emerge except in retrospect, through narration” (Freeman, 2004, p. 74). Thus, the way we tell a story is influenced by how the story ended. Specifically, I wanted to see if the stories of migrants who reached their destinations were told differently than those of migrants who did not, since the end result was so different. This concept, similar to Rappaport's theory that people experience/tell their lives as storied in part because that

helps them locate the meaning in their lives (Rappaport, 2000), helped me understand how migrants made sense of the journey and how they portrayed themselves in retrospect.

## Results

The results are based on the analysis of all interviews and will be illustrated with examples from several of the experiences. This is due to space limitations but also because the selected examples center around the most common and intensely narrated experiences (see Table 2).

### 1) High Points

High point analysis revealed events and experiences that were particularly salient to the participants. I was able to find at least one high point in each interview. Overall, they included several categories of experiences summarized in table 2 below.

In this section, I will present several high points to illustrate the findings summarized above.

#### a) Crossing the Mexico-U.S. border

This is an account of a male migrant's crossing to the U.S. who reached his destination:

G1: Look, like one has already gotten there [to the U.S. – Mexico border], right? Already passing through sometimes things more difficult. So one says, here I have to make it. Well one is fearful because one can see a lot of crocodiles and lizards ... and you know they are dangerous. That is how we crossed, all of the people...from there to there is horrible because it is known that the U.S. immigration is on the other side of the river, like the river divides, right? So we were lying there on the ground like this about half an hour and nobody could lift even a head because the immigration lights can see you. 20 ran to a car, other 20, four cars were supposed to come, so

**Table 2.** Summary of high points

High Points	Number of Occurrences
Events related to U.S.-Mexico border crossing	10
Experiences on trains in Mexico	5
Encounters with Mexican police or immigration officers	5
Encounters with gangs	4
Experiences of being imprisoned	3
Events related to Guatemala-Mexico border	2
Experiences traveling hidden in a vehicle	2
Betrayal by train engineer	1
Exhaustion on the way in Mexico	1
Working in Mexico while waiting for a coyote	1
Disappointment with family in the U.S. who did not help	1

look, there one hears where the coyote gives a signal, right? and 20 ran, first 10 got in, like this, look together piled up, lying down.

I: Hmmm

G: The first group lying down like this and on top the other group, on top of one goes another group and there if a leg is bent or if an arm is underneath and one cannot breathe, people die there because if someone on top lifts a leg or hand the police sees him because police pass in front but because we were leveled the police cannot see us. And it is horrible there, there one screams, one cries, there are some that go badly positioned and there was a guy who went there and entangled his ankle, the bone broke here but there you cannot move because if you move the police will see you –German.

This crossing took place in the late nineties when many people swam across the Rio Grande. This route is not used much now as it is too heavily policed. Most migrants now go through the Arizona desert, which is much deadlier. German's narration talks about the hazards of crossing the river with dangerous animals and the chaotic piling of people in trucks without the ability to say anything or adjust one's limbs when needed. His quote speaks to the exhaustive preparation or coaching by the coyote and the migrants' unquestionable obedience. In this case, the coyote "delivered" what he promised but the power s/he has over the migrants who are often not given any information about their whereabouts and are thus completely dependent on their guides is obvious. The coyotes sometimes abuse their power and demand money from migrants and/or abuse them.

While this encounter at the border shows the desperation and hardships migrants go through, encountering or witnessing a gang assault is also very traumatic.

#### b) Gangs

Many migrants talked about gangs, either dealing with them personally or witnessing their assaults on others. Migrants travelling on their own are an easy prey for gangs who are often armed and are ignored by Mexican police. In fact, some migrants said they saw gangs likely bribing the police. The following quote is from a man who travelled on his own and did succeed:

N: The train was moving. On this train, three guys got on, those who were assailants, got on with sticks.

N: And they beat the Guatemalan who went here [on adjacent car], they beat him completely, they raped the wife and the train is moving. They raped the wife, then it was not enough for them and one of them grabbed the girl of nine years and on top of the train he raped her. And we were watching.

I: But you couldn't do anything, right?

N: No, we could not do anything, true? We were watching, so, so when the delinquents ..... because the truth is if a woman that

decides to go for adventure this way, either they kill her or she is meat for dogs, and the whole world abuses her ..... so what I want to tell you is that after they beat him and raped the wife and the daughter, they decided to get on our car, the bandits. Yes, they wanted to attack us, so one of those who went with me. He was tall and said to one of the bandits: "Listen to me," he said. "After what you did there, now you come here and want us to give you money." You know what he said to him? "If you want us to give you our money, you will have to take it. If you can take, take it." And he without thinking much, the bandit, hit him with the stick. I mean, how he [the co-migrant] was tall and athletic, he managed to grab the stick from one of them. We also acted because there you either act or they kill you. And we, then took the sticks from them, we trumped all the bandits.

I: Is that right?

N: Yes, the bandits who were there. We trumped them all. It's that the bandits were spreading terror in the whole train. Let me tell you that they had been spreading, they had been already assaulting the whole train and they carried a lot of money, and we prevailed. The people who were on the other cars came where we were, and ... how would you say that Nelson grabbed a bandit and this and that? And the people, so we started to be friends with almost all the people who went and the people started to ask us questions – Nelson.

Nelson expresses the joy of defeating the gang and helping many people around him despite his slight build. The brutality of the gangs is also clearly communicated in this excerpt. When compared with other violence in Mexico, these gangs likely have the freedom to do as they wish, without much attention from Mexican authorities. Migrants pay for this unspoken "arrangement" with their bodies, psyches, even their lives.

#### c) Trains

Nelson's experience took place on a train. The Train of Death plays an important role in the journey and the following quote shows what else it can happen.

K: The train sometimes travels four, three, five days and these days you don't sleep or eat. I was standing well adjusted and well awake. My friends were sleeping and I was guarding them so that they don't fall and so I told the Salvadoran, "Look, go where my friends are," I told him "because you are going to fall from there." He told me he would not fall. So I watched him nodding off. ... So I hit him in the face and told him: "Look, wake up or get over there." Then I saw a light that came from behind a hill. Because the gangs they bring lights and illuminate the train. So I saw a light. I looked at the light and then returned to look again where he was. He wasn't there.

I: Wasn't there

K: I only heard his screams. The train grinded him. Imagine to fall there in the middle, under the wheels – Kendri.

Unfortunately, this experience is not uncommon. It is estimated that for every 100 migrants who board the train, only three or four make it to the U.S.-Mexican border (Sládková, 2010). Many migrants are killed or get their limbs caught under the train. Yet, even though most people know about the dangers of the train before they board it, they believe that God will protect them, that they will be the lucky ones. They keep getting on.

#### d) Prison

Selena, who was ultimately captured on the Mexico-U.S. border with false documents her coyote had assured her would work, ended up in a U.S. prison and shared her experience there:

S: I was imprisoned for two months. There are things one sees that sometimes ... That we are like rare animals, I mean that they treat you badly.

I: Mmmm

S: They tortured me psychologically. I mean I heard my name spoken Selena Gonzales and already when I came there, there was a man like this in the prison. He told me, "If you don't tell me the truth, you will go to another worse prison." ... this man tortured me psychologically. Better that they hit one ... "And you have to tell me the truth, who brought you." And he told me a lot of things, and this was ... It happened after my ear burst I think when I arrived there one ear burst, blood burst, I had a nervous attack from many things. So, this was, every time I heard my name. My God, this man. I thought, he will torture me. They had him there for this, to torture one psychologically, so every time, he spoke to me badly, because the one from immigration recommended me badly for lying, so every time he told me, "We are going to take you there. Already you are going there where you will only be on bread and water" and it gives one panic because in these prisons frighten...

S: And in the middle of the night one hears noise because like there are people who kill themselves. So this Honduran woman that I told you about ... they locked her up alone and she killed herself. They had to go rescue her because she hung herself with her bra, because they made her feel really bad and closed her alone – Selena.

When caught on the U.S. side of the border undocumented migrants are either held in a detention center built specifically for this purpose or kept in regular prisons mixed with people imprisoned for violent crimes and treated as such by the guards. Recent reports indicate that over 100 migrants have died in detention centers since 2003 (Sládková, Mangado, & Quinteros, 2011). The causes include suicide brought on by the psychological pressure and mistreatment of migrants by guards who probably want to scare migrants from ever attempting to come back.

The dangers of the journey are innumerable and could easily constitute an entire article but I will now turn to the narratives where migrants reflected upon their experiences and in doing so expressed parts of their identities related to the journey.

## 2) Poiesis – making of the self

During the interviews, participants presented particular selves they wanted me or other imagined audiences to get to know. I encountered distinct identities/psychosocial profiles across the narratives including heroes/heroines, good parents, victims, bystanders, etc. I will illustrate how these constructed selves came through in the narratives. The first excerpt from interview with Nelson can be found on page 11-12.

### a) Hero/Heroine

In the quote Nelson tells us how they defeated the bandits and in so doing helped not only themselves but also everyone else on the train. I imagine that Nelson's short and slight stature is a reason he asked me if I could imagine him grabbing a bandit. He actually showed me physically how he did it. I also believe that this portion of the interview shows my active participation in co-creating the narrative. After telling me that they watched other migrants being abused by a gang I asked: "But you could not do anything, right?", unwittingly putting him in a position of having to defend himself. He did that by partially blaming women for participating in this process and thus "asking" for abuse, but his narration of the heroic act redeems (in his mind) his inability to help the Guatemalan family. His depiction of himself as a hero may have been prompted by my question but because he does it in the interview, I assume that heroism is his way of making sense of this seemingly senseless experience.

### b) Bystander

The following example from Conchetta's interview shows how some migrants, mostly those who made it to the U.S., seemingly

acted as bystanders to suffering, distanced and personally unaffected by difficulties that seemed to impact others on the journey.

C: Because we only crossed the river and it started to rain ... and the whole path was filled with water, mud. And every one ... we were walking but they suffered much, their skin raw and peeling, with many sores like this, their clothes scratching them. And the shoes hurt them, so they were very bad.

I: And you?

C: It was very strange because I did not have anything, not on my feet, not on my body, nothing.

She recounted a similar situation when she spoke about crossing the Guatemala-Mexico border in a gas cistern with her friend and other migrants:

C. Yes, it only had a small door in the part above and through there we all went in. There it was ... for me not because I did not suffer there because I am small. Perhaps it helped me. There in the front was a small window, which is the one we were opening so that air can come in ... So, we did not suffer much but those who were in the back did, went suffocating. For the majority it was very hard because they were suffocating, they did not have oxygen.

In both examples, Conchetta talked about the difficulties of other migrants and did not admit to anything bad happening to her. She did not appear to see her lack of suffering as an act of providence, as some others did. If anything, she claimed her physical attributes (because I am small) to be her good fortune. Conchetta spent several years in the U.S. with her husband but then came home to be with her two sons. She, like many other migrants, felt that the separation was too difficult and unhealthy for both sides.

### c) Good parent

Other migrants, like Paolo, found a meaning in their failure to reach the U.S. in being able to be together with his family.

P: There [in the U.S. jail] I was laughing because I knew that it was only to return us. There some cried but I said: "There isn't why to cry. I am happy because already I will return to my country. I am poor but I have there my little bed, my food, and my family. The love of my family is the most important, because us poor, we have this big happiness that we share the love with the family.

Paolo's redemption of his unsuccessful attempt was in affirming his role as a loving father and husband. Even though he originally wanted to provide for his family by migrating to the U.S., through his narration he realized that it was better to be close to them even if they are poor. Later on in the interview he resolved the contradiction between the need to provide for his family (the reason for his leaving in the first place) and his happiness for being deported in his recommendations to others.

P: Well, how I told you, I am happy now. What I recommend to other people is that they don't do it because ... it's not correct. Sometimes there is someone who has the luck that helps him and he arrives and makes dollars and makes good money but sometimes loses the love of his wife, puts his marriage in risk, and his children do not have anyone to educate them, don't have the love of their father and sometimes when the father comes back from there, they don't know how to work, they don't know how to earn a living, they only know to collect money and spend it.

P: In this community are enough people there [in the US], many children the same age as mine don't know what to do, only walk around, look, wander from one place to another, sometimes thinking nonsense, grabbing other people's things, with vices of smoking. Many here have lost their wives. They have gone with other men. Their children have taken other paths, vices, the girls of small age walk around there to other houses, and the men when they come back from there sometimes come with bad vices – Paolo.

Here, Paolo actually assessed going to the U.S. as a negative behavior because it could put his family at risk. He did not mention

anything negative about ultimately failing to reach his goal after the long and arduous journey. It seems that Paulo was navigating between two powerful community narratives my research uncovered. One narrative is that of a good father going to the U.S. to provide for his family, while the other is of broken families who suffer more than benefit from migration. To make his experience meaningful, Paolo, like many in the community who were not choosing to migrate, sided with the second narrative (Sládková, 2007). Throughout the process of articulating meanings that emerge in retrospect narrative, Freeman's poesis (2004), Paolo was consistently presenting himself as a caring father and husband even though the means of fulfilling these roles changed from providing from the U.S. to providing, guiding, and loving at home.

#### e) Good Mother/Lucky Victim

Maria, who was detained and incarcerated in various jails in Mexico before returning to her five children in Honduras, also found meaning in being able to be with her children and to return home without any physical injuries. Here is her reflection on her time in a Mexican prison and her return home.

M: Look, I cried, the six days in jail and they are expecting me..... so this filled me with sorrow to know that I was not rigorous because I wanted one day to have money, no, I want to give my children studies

I: Sure

M: I say, and if I succeeded in crossing, it wouldn't be hard for my children to study, I had this goal, but... well, it did not happen.

....

M: But thank God I came back well because people jump on and off trains. There was a man who lost his hand and his leg when he was jumping on the train... so, now I reflect, thank God that I came back well because if God did not want to or if he did not protect me on the way, I may have come with a missing arm....

M: I tell people it is not worth it [to go] because truly people do not think of their families when they leave ... My cousin in the U.S. told me do not come, I will help you, it is better you stay there with your kids and work because here people who come to the U.S. suffer on the way and here [says the cousin].

Even though Maria is very disappointed about not reaching her goal of supporting her children through school from the United States, she is very thankful that she returned home "whole," physically unharmed. She did fall victim to the Mexican police and mistreatment in Mexican prisons but at least, she says, she did not suffer any injury like many others do. She attributes this to God's support along the way even though she did not explain why God did not help her to get to her U.S. destination. She also finds meaning in being with her kids because others who go and make to the United States suffer a lot and may not be able to support their families in Honduras. She even mentioned another cousin who was injured only after five months in the United States and died. That was another reason why Maria now feels it was better that she was returned to Honduras to stay with her children.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences undocumented migrants have on their journeys from Honduras to the U.S. and how they process and recount them in retrospect. I also wanted to bring to life the often de-personalized accounts of undocumented migrants by sharing their lived experiences, emotions, and identities in the sociopolitical context in which they take place.

The analysis of high points revealed a number of experiences that participants found salient, the most frequent ones relating to crossing the Mexico-U.S. border, encounters with gangs and Mexican police,

and riding the trains. I was surprised to find so many high points centered around the crossing of the U.S. border because many migrants also mentioned that crossing Mexico was the most difficult part of the journey. It is possible that even if the last part of the journey was not the most dramatic to the migrants it was the most important part at least psychologically because it was the last hurdle they had to overcome to reach their dreams. German's narrative on page nine indicates that if one makes it all the way to the border, "one says, I have to make it." High points also identify various actors that play an important role in the process of the journey. U.S. and Mexican immigration and police were clearly the actors that most frequently impacted the migrants' behavior, as they needed to be avoided at all cost. Thus they journeyed through very difficult terrains, hid in enclosed vehicles where they could not breathe, and were exposed to dangerous elements of nature. In addition, having to go through secluded places exposed them to far more danger from local thieves, gangs, and drug cartels. A female participant (Marcela) who made it to the U.S. but turned herself in because she was exhausted in the desert reported:

M: Still, I am back for five months now and when I see police in Copán, I panic and I try to hide, I can't breathe. I am afraid. The whole time in Mexico we worried about the police catching us. It was the most important thing. To avoid the police – Marcela.

Marcela's narrative presents her awareness of the long-term impact of the journey on her wellbeing. There are many such consequences that migrants may need help in understanding. In addition to high points, I was able to theorize about participants sense-making of the journey. I found that several migrants who did not make it spoke of some situations where they helped others, usually in a dramatic way. Others expressed their happiness in being back home and resuming their role as a parent, husband, daughter, or son. To redeem anything from the unsuccessful experience, they stressed their important role in their home community. Paolo went even further and made himself an "expert or moral judge" by advising others of the potential dangers of being away from family. Marcela positioned herself as a victim of the forces that returned her home and made her life a living nightmare.

The migrants who made it to the U.S. often portrayed themselves as witnesses and helpers to other migrants' suffering. Even though Conchetta referred to the difficulties of the journey, it was never through her own suffering. Her narrative stood out in that the most intense narrative evolved around others: because *they* were suffocating; it was the most difficult for *my companions*; *their* clothes scratching *them*; *they* suffered much; *their* skin raw and peeling, etc. It is indeed possible that her journey was not problematic. On the other hand, she may have been narrating some of her own experiences through others. This way she may have been distancing herself from the effects of the hard journey and by attributing them to others, yet still communicating the difficulties of the process to me through them. Freeman (2004) explains that "endings determine beginnings and middles; for only when a story has ended –whether the ending in question is temporary, as in life, or permanent, as in death– it is possible to discern the meaning and significance of what has come before" (p. 65). The end of migrants' journeys determined the tone of their narratives and their reflections on the experience.

Narrative analysis of personal interviews proved to be an extremely effective method to obtain the desired results. Conducting systematic analyses using the narrative tools of high point enabled me to locate the most salient events in the participants' narratives and obtain rich details of their experiences. Moreover, narrative analysis enabled me to identify how migrants made sense of their experiences. Thus, this study shows that narrative analysis that pays close attention to the actual language goes well beyond the common thematic analysis of interviews and gets to the salient issues important to the participants. Questionnaires and census data produce mostly quantitative information about immigrants or more



general categories or themes. Participant observation can provide details of behaviors and settings but not necessarily get to the socio-psychological insights from the participants. These details are lost in much immigration research not designed to solicit or analyze narratives produced by migrants and also because many qualitative researchers do not look closely at language.

### Limitations

The present study has a number of limitations. For instance, other studies are needed with different stakeholders of the journey, like migrants who made it to the U.S. and never returned to Honduras. Previous research (Sládková, 2007) indicates that Hondurans intend to go to the U.S. only for a short period of time, so it could be the danger of the journey that keeps them in the U.S. because they may not be able or willing to undergo it again. It is also important to do more research with children and women who underwent the journey. Children likely process these experiences differently and may thus need different interventions. Even though none of my female participants referred to rape in their narratives, several male migrants witnessed it. Some research shows that many women start taking birth control pills before embarking on the journey anticipating possible rape and preventing pregnancy. Others write SIDA (AIDS) on their chest (Nazario, 2006). More in depth research with female migrants or with a direct focus on gender issues needs to be conducted in order to understand the impact of the journey on their physical and psychological selves. Interviewing Mexican police, immigration officers, border patrol, coyotes, even gang members would provide data from those affecting the migrants.

### Implications/Recommendations

This study has many implications and recommendations for practice, policy, and psychosocial migration research. They come from my understanding of the systemic issues that underlie the experiences of my participants and are fully grounded in the lived experiences of migrants. Most of all, Balcazar et al. (2011) claim that through the lens of narrative literature, "liberation becomes a process by which oppressed people can deconstruct the dominant cultural narratives, thereby fostering the change of unjust structural conditions, and reconstructing their personal life stories through the development of empowering community narratives in shared settings" (p. 285). Thus, research, where individuals or groups of migrants share their stories (of the journey or other) can lead to their empowerment and possible liberation from the oppressive narratives.

In addition, as migrants travel through communities and countries, either slowly or quickly, they do need to acculturate or at least adapt to local norms to some degree in order for their journey to be smoother. Thus, acculturation psychologists, especially those who aim to serve the acculturating communities and individuals, could provide interesting frameworks for research and interventions along the way. For instance, like Paloma et al. (2010) express in their paper, community and cultural psychology can be used to "understand acculturation as an empowering process" by which journeying migrants acquire and develop "critical awareness that transforms both "self" and society" (Ward & Kagitcibasi, 2010, p. 98). Prilleltensky (2008) considers PTSD, marginality, loss and grief, and exclusion as risk factors for migrant wellbeing. While he considers those risk factors affecting migrants within the host society, I believe that the same factors present during their journey have impact long after they arrive in the host society or even more so if they never reach it. Stressors produced by the journey, though finished in real time, may be influencing psychological and/or physiological outcomes as illustrated by Marcela's narrative and could thus be integrated into studies of acculturation within the United States. Immigrant trauma is mostly the concern of work with refugees

assuming they have gone through severe experiences impacting their wellbeing. Nevertheless, this study shows that migrants undergo tremendous, sometimes war-like, experiences on their journeys that can result in trauma. Thus, practice and research with (especially undocumented) migrants in the U.S. should take their journey to the U.S. into consideration. Psychologists could also benefit from more integrated transnational research that takes into consideration that most migrants live lives split in between at least two countries and so need to pay attention to contexts in transnational fields of migration.

The research also points to the need for services and programs for those who undergo the journey in countries of destination (U.S.), origin (Honduras), and transit (Mexico). There are a few shelters operated by private Mexican citizens or religious organizations that take injured migrants in and provide some medical help, get in touch with migrants' families, and feed and clothe them. Nevertheless, there are not enough of these shelters and their services do not cover the vast needs of the sojourners. Other programs could include individual or group counseling services catered specifically to experiences migrants have or are going through on the journey and workshops in Honduras that give migrants information and tools to decrease their suffering on the way or to help integrate those that did not reach the U.S. Programs could also be developed with those left behind, who are often living in uncertainty of their loved-ones' fates or who receive back injured or dead relatives. Training for guards in detention centers and prisons on the border should include sensitization to the immigrants' recent experiences. Treating migrants as dangerous criminals when their only crime was trying to get to a place where they could work and feed their families is unconscionable, especially considering that crossing the border unauthorized the first time constitutes only civil offense.

The biggest implications relate to policy. These journeys would not need to happen if the immigration policy of the U.S. changed and officially acknowledged the need for unskilled labor and provided visas for migrants who want to and can do the work that most Americans refuse to do (like fruit and cotton picking, restaurant dish-washing, meat-packing, etc.). Since the White House and the U.S. lawmakers started to work on immigration reform, there is hope that some of the problems associated with undocumented migration will be resolved in the near future. Mexico should adopt policies that would protect rather than persecute those traveling through. Legalizing migrants in Mexico would end the travel on top of trains and make sneaking through a jungle or desert unnecessary. It would also provide fewer opportunities for gang and police abuse. Enforcing programs focusing on gang violence in Mexico would generally lower crime, including against migrants, across Mexico. Unfortunately, Mexico is under a lot of pressure from the U.S. to keep detaining migrants before they reach the U.S. border, so a change would require collaboration and paradigm shifts in migration-related policy in both countries.

Ending Honduras' dependency on the U.S. and investing in its development would ultimately lead to a decrease in the need to migrate. People don't want to leave their homes unless they have to. If work and study opportunities are available in Honduras, they will stay. Small steps are being taken by researchers and community developers, such as in the Mesoamerican Development Institute (MDI) at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, who work on the development of Honduran-operated coffee production, where coffee "is dried using renewable energy technology that eliminates the use of firewood and fossil fuels to dry the coffee harvest" (MDI, 2013). This project, coupled with educational programs for young and adult Hondurans, has been bringing people back to the community from Honduran urban areas as well as abroad. Projects like this one that focus on sustainability of Honduran communities could be another piece of the outmigration puzzle. Clearly, more social science research committed to the common good and social justice is necessary to bring us closer to equitable solutions.



## Conflicts of interest

The author of this article declares no conflicts of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In the presented excerpts from interviews, "I" refers to the interviewer and the other letters refer to the participants' nicknames. All excerpts were translated from Spanish as literally as possible.

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