

REFLECTIONS ON SAN MIGUEL TZINACAPAN: "I AM NOT THE SAME PERSON"

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Mexican American social work students from the University of Texas-Pan American spent two weeks in the state of Puebla, Mexico, including one week learning from the Nahua residents of the village of San Miguel, Tzinacapan. Students stayed in a small motel run by an indigenous women's co-op, and spent days visiting with the denizens of the village, including, the *curandero* (healer), mid-wife, radio station operators, bi-lingual (Spanish-Nahuatl) teachers, and families with sons in the U.S. Student writings conveyed themes of respect for our common humanity, acceptance of differences in cultural values and deepened understanding of the interaction of historical, political, and economic forces. The students suggest the life-altering nature of their experiences.

Twenty one social work undergraduate students and their professor traveled to the interior of Mexico for a summer class on Social Welfare in Mexico. Although the two-week trip was divided into an urban experience in the city of Puebla and rural experience in the rural area of Cuetzalan, this paper will focus on the rural experience. Social welfare services and issues are different in the city, where there are more governmental and non-governmental organizations providing services to at-risk populations, such as orphans, street children, battered women, AIDS patients, and law violators. In the rural area, services are more informal and the entire population of indigenous people can be seen as at-risk.

Our group was one of many groups of college students who had traveled to San Miguel Tzinacapan to learn about indigenous culture. However, unlike any other group that had come before us, we were from the Rio Grande Valley on the Texas-Mexico border. So, we were familiar with an item called a tortilla warmer: two pieces of round fabric about 10 inches in diameter sewn together with an opening. The first student who saw the warmers bought them all as souvenirs for family members. Others admired them and asked the women if they would come again with more of them. For the next three days, the village women visited our hotel with a few more warmers every day and we bought every one of them. It led to interesting exchanges

with the women who told us that we were not like most groups they had met because of the tortilla warmers. When we learned that many visitors take them to be little pillow covers, we shared laughter.

Indeed, our group was a bit different from their average college tourists. We hailed from the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, an agricultural area known for citrus, onions and watermelon. The University of Texas-Pan American is located in Hidalgo County Texas on the U.S.-Mexico border, where 88% of the 600,000 residents reported Hispanic origin to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau. People on both sides walk and drive across the area's bridges daily: Mexicans come to shop at the U.S. malls and discount stores, while Americans cross to buy medications, visit dentists, get a haircut, and shop for traditional Mexican goods. Both English and Spanish are spoken on both sides of the border, although the Spanish on the U.S. side is often a dialect, called Tex-Mex. While many Mexicans may refer to most North Americans as *gringos*, those of Mexican descent are often called *pochos* and the dialectical mixture of English and Spanish is a herald of this identity. In stereotypical terms, the pocho doesn't know the culture, history, or language of Mexico (Richardson, 1999). Certainly, our students had not studied Mexican history and culture in the public schools of Texas. Only a generation ago, Texas public school students were punished for speaking

Spanish. Whatever the students knew about Mexico, they had learned from their families and others in the community.

The Study

So that we could write about our experiences, a formal study plan was presented to the university's I.R.B., asking the question, "What is the educational impact of a short term, study-abroad course on non-traditional social work students?" Research instruments included student daily journals, reflection papers after we returned and focus groups conducted one year later. Twenty-one Mexican-American students (four males and seventeen females with an average age of twenty-eight) signed up for the research study. Sixteen reported that they were the first in their family to attend college. Nine reported Spanish as the primary language in their home. Two thirds (14) of the students had never visited Mexico beyond the border cities, with only four having been south of Monterrey (about 100 miles south of the border). Early student journal entries expressed both eagerness and anxiety about the trip. They were eager to see new places and learn new things, but they were anxious about being away from their families for the extended period of time.

The students were excited at the possibility of visiting in the interior of Mexico, or "the real Mexico" as some phrased it. All of the students spoke Spanish, though ability ranged from some spoken Spanish to fluent and literate. Some had never traveled without family and only four had ever been away from family for two weeks. So it was not surprising that some students became homesick and many students called home every day. This was easy when we were in the Spanish Colonial City of Puebla, where we stayed in the middle-class historic district.

In Puebla, students were excited to stroll amidst cathedrals and buildings that were erected in the 1500s. But just as the architecture of the Puebla historic district was a pleasant surprise, the food was a surprise of a different sort. The regional cooking of Puebla is very different from the typical Tex-Mex fare the students identified as Mexican

food. The discovery of McDonald's and Domino's Pizza eased the transition for some. Spanish language ability facilitated communication with everyday Mexicans. Most students interacted with cab drivers, waiters, shopkeepers, restaurant patrons and hotel guests, and at their field sites with ease. Nevertheless, lectures conducted in Spanish proved difficult for all but a handful of fluent speakers. Most students' vocabularies were limited to everyday words rather than the complex vocabulary and syntax of professionals. Everyone took notes in English. The Puebla city experience provided a base from which to reflect on the very different culture we would experience next.



San Miguel Tzinacapan, Cuetzalan de Progreso

The second week was spent in Cuetzalan, a small central city surrounded by indigenous villages in the northeast of the state of Puebla. While the poverty rate for Mexico as a whole is 42%, the indigenous poverty rate is 90% (Hall & Patinos, 2005). The Nahuatl descendants of the Aztecs, represent 75% of the approximately 45,000 Cuetzalan area residents (INEGI, 2001). The local economy is based on coffee and two types of tourism: ethnic and eco. Ecotourists who come from the U.S., Europe, Canada, and urban areas of Mexico visit Cuetzalan to explore the extensive cave system, springs, waterfalls, and tropical flora (Butler & Hinch, 1996). Others, such as our group, come to experience indigenous culture. In San Miguel Tzinacapan, the Cuetzalan village that we visited, their mission is to preserve and provide education about the history and culture of the Nahuatl and the Nahuatl language (Baez, 2004). The schools are bilingual, therefore the Nahuatl language is preserved. Juanita was the woman who managed the little hotel owned by an

indigenous women's cooperative where our group stayed. The dining hall was the meeting place of the co-op board of directors. All of the women arrived for the meeting dressed in the tradition of their various groups representing several of the area villages. The co-op had turned a profit for the first time and the board voted to use the funds to assist battered women in the surrounding indigenous villages. In addition to providing physical and financial assistance to battered women, the co-op also provides community education on the topic via radio and through human rights organizations. Afterward, Juanita, who is also the co-op director, gave a history of the organization, including its Nahuatl name, *Taselotzin*, meaning "from the earth." Juanita provided a lecture-discussion with the students and noted that Spanish is the second language of most of the people in the area. Most of the women over forty do not speak Spanish because they were never sent to school. Girls are now sent to school, so the younger generation is more educated. However, traditional dress and customs continue to dictate a division of labor based on gender that affects immigration to the U.S. as well. It is only the young men who have left San Miguel for El Norte. As the manager of *Taselotzin*, Juanita is aware of her visibility as a role model for young women who aspire to non-traditional roles.

Juanita continued to be a most gracious hostess throughout our stay and at the end allowed the students to plan a party for our last night. Students invited musicians from one of the interviewed families to perform. The men came with their wives and other family members as did our guides and their families. To express his feelings to us, one of our waiters performed a very special dance, called El Negrito. The complex dance dates back to the colonial period when slaves were imported from Africa to Mexico. Our waiter performed the dance, a cross culture tribute, as a gift to us. This was the final event of the evening and our journey; we departed the next morning for the twelve-hour bus ride back to the border where a caravan of family members greeted the returning students.

Major themes

Two weeks after our return, students turned in final reflection papers. Students were asked to reflect on how the trip affected them personally and professionally. How did the trip impact their beliefs and stereotypes as well as their education as social workers? These papers, along with their daily journals, were reviewed for this narrative. The journal assignment was to write about their observations, what they did, and how they reacted to these experiences. Several themes emerged, beginning with changing stereotypes about Mexico. Journals documented the process of letting go of ethnocentrism, along with a growing appreciation of the power of geopolitical, historical, and economic forces as one explanation of the difference between the U.S. and Mexico. Students wrote about their growing awareness of the inequality among indigenous peoples, European descendants, and *Mestizos* (a mixture of Spanish and Indian) within Mexico. The students learned that most of them would be considered ethnically *Mestizo* if they lived in Mexico. Their ties to that country through family immigration clearly influenced their recognition of the relationship between personal life experiences and personal value systems for social work practice and the development of the self.

Breaking Down the Stereotypes of Mexico

Students had preconceived ideas of what Mexico was like, often because of stories from grandparents or parents or the local media. Student journals reflected awe at the beauty of Mexico, a surprise to most of the students who were only familiar with the flat gulf plain of Northeastern Mexico and South Texas. One student observed, "Before the trip I thought that if you've seen one Mexican town, you've seen them all." Another felt that, "Mexico is not at all what we see on the 6:00 o'clock news where all you hear are reports of kidnappings, violence, and drug cartel activities on the border." Many expressed fear and apprehension as they prepared for the trip, in part due to concerns that their parents or other family members expressed about dangers lurking in Mexico. Many of the

younger students who lived with parents would not have had permission to travel without the sponsorship of the University. Fears were allayed in part because in Puebla we stayed in the historic district, a middle class to affluent area so that everyone felt comfortable and safe going out in the evenings. Cuetzalan is a small town where everyone knows everyone else and thus feels safe. We stayed surrounded by the proverbial village.

A wonderful example of village child care was witnessed by about a dozen students walking to the village church with our Nahua guide, Miguel. A small child began choking on a piece of candy and his slightly older sister didn't know what to do; very quickly Miguel picked up the boy and turned him upside down causing the candy to be expelled. Away they ran to play again. We also came across an older man asleep on the side of the road, a bit hungover but in a safe place. Miguel murmured that his wife would soon be on her way to get him.

Geopolitical Social and Economic Inequality

The contrast between the poverty of San Miguel and our lives in the U.S. was so impressive to the students that every one of them commented on it. "We have so much and they have so little." Another stated, "I can never go back to living an unconscious life of privilege. I was born only twenty miles on the U.S. side of the border; I could just as easily have been born on the other side." Many noted that, "We are so spoiled." "Now, I really understand why my grandparents migrated to the U.S."

To the locals, San Miguel Tzinacapan is considered within walking distance of Cuetzalan, but a rather long walk. So, the students were inclined to take the bus or a cab. When they saw that several of the women who came to our motel to sell their crafts would walk the two miles barefooted, they were surprised. One student even gave bus fare that would take the woman most of the way home, which she graciously accepted and then walked home. Another lesson in values for the students: the ride was not worth forty cents to the average village resident. Students' comments

included, "How used to driving we are... how little forty cents means to us... how many pairs of shoes we have... wonder what she thinks of us wanting her to waste forty cents on a bus ride? She thinks we are fat, rich and lazy." Numerous students made resolutions to do more walking when they returned home.

Pairs of students visited with several village families who agreed to be interviewed on various topics, such as their culture and history and immigration to the U.S. In Cuetzalan and San Miguel, students wondered how people could have so little and be so hospitable. Many noted the grace and humility of the Nahua people. "How gracious they are when they have so little. Here they are living in houses with dirt floors and wood stoves, but they invite us in to share." Although the poverty in the rural area was clearly greater than that in the city, the sense of community and strong religious faith in the indigenous village was noted again and again in student journals. "We are so material; they are so spiritual." These factors, plus the lack of television, movies, department stores, and other trappings of wealth, suggested a different lifestyle to the students, not the same as the grinding poverty seen in the city of Puebla where poor migrants from rural areas, who had hoped to better themselves, perform the lowest paying jobs. The students felt that people in the village had dignity and wondered how that was impacted by the immigration experience where they would be called illegal aliens and *mojados* (wetbacks).

The pervasiveness of the poverty, combined with the obvious lack of opportunities to move out of poverty, gave students an up-close perspective on how large social systems impact people. For example, although the Mexican government provides some scholarship assistance to indigenous youth who finish high school, the competition for the funds is such that only one student out of every eighty applicants will receive one. There is no university or community college in Cuetzalan. Again, the grandparents who immigrated to the U.S. were mentioned by students as the ones who went through the hardship so that they could now have an opportunity to get a college education. Even those who had no

immigration experience could relate to this. Valley residents are aware of Texas history, which includes a dispute as to whether the border with Mexico would be the Nueces River or the Rio Grande. If it had been the former, the Valley would have been in Mexico. While students respected the Nahua, they didn't want to live that lifestyle.

Immigration

Immigration was a central theme in journals. A majority of students had families with immigrant roots as well as life experiences growing up in an area where they were members of an oppressed majority population. Most grew up hearing family stories of migrant farm work, discrimination, and lack of opportunity. They could identify with the immigrant experience.

Because of poverty and lack of opportunity in the rural areas, there is massive migration to the big cities, such as Puebla, and to the *maquiladora* factories on the U.S.-Mexican border. In fact, Reynosa, which is just across the border from Hidalgo County, contains numerous *maquiladora* factories owned by U.S. companies located in Mexico that hire Mexican workers. Even so, unemployment, low wages and proximity to the U.S. tempt many to hire "coyotes" (clandestine transporters of immigrants) to take them to the U.S.

Students interviewed indigenous families who had relatives in the U.S. and found differing views. Some families were happy for the financial support their sons sent home. That support gave the family the opportunity to have a little bit more so that children could go to school, houses could have electricity or indoor plumbing, or another room might be added to the family home. Others missed their children, worried that they would never return, and opined that family ties were more important than material goods. One student observed that after visiting the village and seeing the quiet, spiritual life, where no one drives a car or has a television, it was hard to imagine these young people in the U.S. where they would take the lowest paying jobs. One student wrote about how her mother had told her that she was homesick for Mexico and her family after she

had emigrated to Texas. Her friend, though, found it hard to understand parents who didn't want their children to better themselves. The discussion drew in many others with some students decrying the acceptance of undocumented immigrants from Mexico, but most expressed an understanding of the larger social forces that sent the young men in search of economic betterment. The fact that the young people left for the U.S. without documentation meant that they could not easily return. However, most send money home.

As one of the few college-educated residents in the area, our lead guide, Miguel, was conversant in three languages: Nahuatl, Spanish, and English. He was happy to be in San Miguel Tzinacapan teaching school and providing guide services in the summer. He had visited the U.S. to attend a conference of bilingual educators in San Antonio, Texas. He had to travel by bus for five hours to Mexico City to fill out paperwork, pay money, and wait six months before he was issued a legal visa to visit the U.S. Typically, poor people cannot get visas to visit the U.S. for any reason as the law requires a considerable amount of money in the bank or sponsorship in the U.S. (such as Miguel had since he had been invited to speak at a conference). The young men do not even consider applying for a visa to work legally in the U.S. because that is not seen as feasible without connections, money, or the patience to wait more than ten years with no certainty of ever being selected. After listening to Miguel and others, even students who did not like illegal immigration agreed that the immigration system needs reform.

Critical Self Reflection

The fact that the students were primarily of Mexican ancestry led to much reflection on identity. If they were citizens of Mexico, they would be considered *Mestizo*, a term not used in the U.S. At home, many of the students and others often consider themselves to be Mexican, but in Mexico, they were U.S. citizens, a privileged group. Students evidenced their raised awareness by statements such as, "We are a different kind of Mexican...here, I'm the Gringa." Several students took note of the maids who cleaned our rooms and one

observed, "She could have been my grandmother; she looks just like her and she worked as a maid in the U.S. so that my mother, and now I, would have the life we have." Another simply said, "That young woman cleaning my room...that could have been me. If I had been born here, and had no chance to go to school, what choices would I have?"

As one young woman eloquently put it, "As a Mexican-American, I can never go back to leading a life of unconscious privilege." Others said, "I see life differently now...I have been strengthened through this experience...my eyes had been closed and now they are open...we are so spoiled...when I get home I won't take so much for granted. I hope my family still knows me when I return, because I am not the same person." More than half thanked me in their papers for the opportunity to get in touch with their roots or to see life from a different perspective. Many expressed an interest in visiting again with their families. All but two students opined that they now see immigrants differently and several stated a preference for working with this population when they returned. Others stated that they now have a better understanding of Mexican immigrants back home.



Discussion

Students who participated in the study tour cited the experience as having a major impact on them as student social work students, as Mexican-Americans, and as human beings. The success of the trip included the fact that it was planned with the input of non-traditional students unaccustomed to traveling without family, half of whom held jobs, many of whom were parents. Further, the interplay of classroom with volunteer service and the week in the indigenous culture gave students a broad

view of the social environment of the interior of Mexico.

As called upon by C.S.W.E. and others (Johnson, 1996; Reichert, 1998), undergraduate social work programs are strengthened by the addition of an experiential international component. Far away from home, interacting in a new environment, students moved from their ethnocentric perspective and began to view a different culture with more clarity and understanding. Citing the benefits of international experience but the small percentage of college students who study abroad, especially those who are minority or non-traditional students, numerous national agencies call on universities to increase opportunities (Bollag, 2003). As universities increase their numbers of non-traditional students (part time working full-time, married or parenting), fewer students are able to take advantage of the traditional international educational experience due to work, family, or financial obligations. However, there is evidence for the effectiveness of brief study (Festervand & Tillery, 2001). That so many of the participants of this study referred to a two-week experience as life changing adds further substantiation. The returning students provided the strongest voice in recommending that the program make this opportunity available to all students studying social work. One year later, fifteen of the twenty-one students attended focus group discussions and reflected once again on the lasting impact of the experience. Students shared memories as well as current experiences of working with immigrants from Mexico, their understanding of their clients' culture shock, their awareness of indigenous culture, and their common humanity. The consensus was that the educational impact of the trip was transformative: "I am not the same person."

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