

Psychosocial Distress and Well-Being: Resilience among Marginalized Women in Western Guatemala



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Project Overview

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Fellowship Rationale and Objectives

My McBurney Fellowship was part of a larger initiative funded by Grand Challenges Canada, entitled “Tackling maternal psychosocial distress among marginalized women in Guatemala: a community-based approach.” The objective of the larger project was to develop a community-based intervention to reduce inequities and improve access to management of psychosocial distress among women in areas with high levels of adversity and infant stunting.

As the project sought to improve psychosocial well-being in an attempt to address social inequities, I thought it would be best to take a strengths-based approach in understanding how women cope through psychosocial distress. In the midst of significant and chronic adversity, resilience can be viewed as an indicator of mental health and well-being. As such, I thought resilience would be a useful research tool, especially for policies and interventions aiming to promote positive outcomes. We sought to create an intervention that could empower individuals and their communities to strengthen resilience using local available resources.

My hypothesis was that women whom had a diverse social support network would be more resilient in the face of significant adversity, experiencing greater well-being, and would suffer less psychosocial distress than those without such support. Thus, my objectives were to:

- 1) examine the dominant discourses about mental health and illness among indigenous women of childbearing age;
- 2) identify main sources of social adversity and causes of psychological distress; and
- 3) identify sources of support fostering resilience and social cohesion among women.

Activities

I was in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala from June to November 2014, volunteering with Buena Semilla, a community-based organization aimed at empowering women. I spent the first 3 months mostly focusing on the larger project, by filling in gaps wherever help was needed, as well as attending interviews and doing participatory observations to gain an in-depth perspective of local women's daily lives. During the first month or so, which was the recruitment phase, the team and I gathered quantitative data from participating mothers and their children in 8 communities. We helped nutritionists weigh and measure every child and gathered basic socio-demographic information on the mothers. Later on, I followed individual interviews with men or women, and observed focus groups with key informants in each community. The largest task of mine involved creating a data entry website for the organization and entering complete data for all 300 or so participants. This was extremely time-consuming. I spent the remainder of my time in Quetzaltenango conducting individual interviews with a total of 7 women in 2 communities, holding focus groups with key informants, and experimenting with Participatory Action Research (PAR) through fieldwork activities.



Challenges and Successes

I had quite a few difficulties with my project and adjusting to life in Guatemala. I arrived in June, expecting to do some observations during my first couple of weeks and then get started on my own fieldwork, although nothing went as planned. The organization was behind on gathering data, so I couldn't start my own interviews, my field supervisor didn't arrive until August, and there were misunderstandings about my role there, leading to me doing some tasks I hadn't intended on doing. My original project proposal looking at structural violence was denied, as it was assumed it would be too dangerous to talk about, so I had to change my project topic a few times while being here. Furthermore, I spent a few weeks solely doing data entry for the 300 or so women participating in the organization's project. This led to quite a bit of frustration and the feeling as though my fieldwork would never begin.

I had even more of a difficult time as I tried to adjust living in my new surroundings. My level of Spanish was not nearly as polished as it should have been and I had a lot of trouble communicating and expressing myself. Whenever I attended meetings held by the organization, or went into the field, I could barely understand the rapid Spanish being spoken (and at times the Mayan languages, Mam or Quiche) and no one I was working with spoke any English, therefore translations could not be provided. I could tell that my co-workers had the impression that I didn't want to be there, but it was so difficult for me to express my confusion, frustration, uncertainties and loneliness, and as I felt like my presence was useless, I began to distance myself to focus on learning more Spanish. Although I had only planned to take 2 weeks of courses, I was motivated to learn more and took 4 hours of classes per day for 2 months.

I had some time to reflect and what I realize now is that rarely anything in life ever goes as planned and that it was almost silly of me to assume that I could effortlessly carry all my plans from Montreal to Guatemala without there being any changes to be made. While I was thinking that I was wasting my time for two months, I was really bringing my Spanish to a necessary level of proficiency, adapting to life in Guatemala, and most importantly, learning more about the women I would be working with, which had ultimately allowed the creation of a better structure for my project. Although at first I wasn't too happy about spending 15 hours a day for weeks on end doing data entry for someone else's set of data, the help has been reciprocal and I can't appreciate enough the help that has been given to me to make my own fieldwork possible. The data I entered also gave me a quick visual of the problems the participating women face every day, whose data was collected over months. It would not have been possible for me to ever collect that amount of data during my time there.

In terms of what worked and what did not in my project, I found it rather difficult to study resilience in this community. I tried my best to use local idioms of distress in studying mental health, as well as linguistic terms that could be easily understood. However I had difficulty framing resilience in ways that made sense to the women I was working with. Although I tried asking my participants about their and others' strengths and successes, I was often met with either silence, or discussions about the problems being experienced in the communities rather than strengths. However, when we did touch upon the subject, many people said the same thing, which was an interesting finding. Faith in God seemed to be the strongest source of resilience for most participants, followed by family and children.

I wanted to do individual interviews to acquire in-depth information about how community-level factors influence individual resilience. My field supervisor had warned me this wouldn't be an easy task as many women in the communities did not have much trust in outsiders, nor did

they feel comfortable talking about themselves. Many were in fact worried that word about whatever they had said would get out to others in the community, creating gossip. My approach then was to give participants the option to talk about either themselves or other women in the community. For example, some of my questions included; “can you describe a woman in your community who is in good health and doing well?” or “I would like you to think about a challenge you (or someone that you know) have faced in the past that you (they) got through and that made you (they) feel stronger afterwards.”

I also realized that in fractured societies, which no longer possess a sense of community or social trust, what is most needed to heal wounds is to rebuild the sense of trust and connection. Focus groups on whatever topic at hand appeared to be quite therapeutic, as they established a sense of connection between attendees. This conclusion was confirmed at the end of several focus groups, when some attendees were in tears and thankful for the opportunity to share their views, and listen to others or have themselves heard. Many were shy or afraid to speak, which is one reason we preferred to also incorporate participatory methods in our questioning.

Although I had taken a workshop on participatory action research before leaving for Guatemala, I found it difficult to tailor the methods to this specific group. I had done one activity which involved writing sources of stress and of strength on circular pieces of paper and placing them close to women in order of importance and impact. I was thinking this would engage everyone and allow them to move around, but I wasn't thinking how this would impact those who are illiterate. My focus group facilitator wrote out what others said instead and she placed the papers herself. It was still a good exercise, but I felt terrible about my negligence. What I did next to incorporate participatory methods in those illiterate communities was to have role-playing games. One game involved asking a woman to pretend as though she was suffering and ask her whom she wished to turn to for help. She would then call upon other participants to represent these people and they would engage in role-playing together. The woman who was in the suffering role would then explain why she would hypothetically turn to those selected people in times of need. In another game, we asked women to either act as strong or as weak and they would later discuss the differences that came up between each person.



Training/mentoring

As previously mentioned, my field supervisor, Anne-Marie, was the Principle Investigator of the large community project and a PhD student of my McGill supervisor. Despite her busy schedule, Anne-Marie was incredibly helpful before I set out to Guatemala. We met on several occasions to discuss potential project topics and she was always sending me emails containing news of Guatemala, important talks, and journal articles. She prepared me before leaving by getting me in contact with the local organization, information on housing, telephones and Spanish schools.

Although there was much confusion at the start of my fellowship between myself and the organization regarding my role and objectives, our relationship improved as my communication in Spanish did. I developed an amicable friendship with the organization's coordinator and research assistant, whom I spent a great deal of time with in the office and the field. They offered to facilitate my focus groups at no extra cost, as they had experience leading groups in the past and knew the communities well. The coordinator also frequently offered early morning car lifts to the further communities. During my first few weeks, I couldn't appreciate this kind offering more. I was so nervous, and was getting lost all the time ---Quetzaltenango doesn't exactly have Montreal's transport system. Needless to say, I was extremely grateful for all their support throughout my fellowship.

Community Implications and Further Work

The ground-work I did over the past five months will be used to inform a psychosocial intervention to begin this year. This intervention will first involve training local community health workers to recognize and respond to signs of distress in other women. Another part will be to create "Women Circles", much like support groups, which will provide women with practical and educational tools to help them overcome their troubles. The main goals of the intervention will be to integrate mental health services into community health services; empower individuals and promote agency in addressing mental health issues; and ultimately improve functioning and wellbeing among women living in marginalized, resource-poor communities. Women experiencing psychosocial distress will have increased access to care, which will ultimately improve their functioning and has the possible benefit of improving other areas of their lives, including their children's health.

Collaborators include the Institute of Nutrition in Central America and Panama (INCAP), local health organizations and local non-governmental organizations whom are engaged in public health programs and in the position to strengthen networks between local stakeholders. These stakeholders have the ability to increase awareness of the problems facing rural indigenous groups in Guatemala and can inform public health officials to take a course of action that may reduce health inequities.

The first step in translating these findings into policy action will be for me to analyze my data and then disseminate the results. I have applied to present a research poster at several conferences and am waiting for responses. That is one way I can reach a wide audience and potentially interested stakeholders. However, for policy change, I believe we have to target a more narrow audience, one which is particularly vested in the Guatemalan health care system and/or maternal mental health and infant development. Our research findings on sources of psychosocial distress and well-being are one important aspect for inspiring social change at a local level, although in order to influence action on a political level, we will need evidence to show how those findings can ameliorate communities and Guatemala as a whole.

Program evaluation

This fellowship was my first fieldwork experience, which I had been curious to try since my Bachelor's work in anthropology. I have always wanted to work with other cultures, especially in the field of mental health, to see how a group's ways of living can influence health and illness. I had numerous in-depth conversations with people I met on the subject of cultural differences and similarities. Furthermore, I had recently taken an interest in the social determinants of mental health and decided to pursue my thesis in this sub-field of psychiatry. The McBurney fellowship not only allowed me, but encouraged me to conduct this social scientific research. I stress the subject of encouragement, as the social determinants of health are not widely accepted in a biologically-oriented field such as psychiatry. The work is often dismissed as unscientific and funding is very difficult to obtain.

Although I am passionate about this subject, my fellowship made me realize how difficult it may be to secure a career in this line of research. Most academics involved in research also hold teaching positions at universities and conduct research on the side. This has always been out of the question for me, as I do not have any interest to teach, but I realized that this would make my chances for a research career bleak. One thing I learned through this fellowship was where my true interests lie. I could still study the social determinants of health among other cultures without having it be through the lens of a researcher. Within the organization in Quetzaltenango, there were researchers, clinicians, nurses, nutritionists and social workers. I often found myself thinking about clinical psychology, providing social aid. I loved all the in-depth conversations I had with people and I felt that I had a natural ability to soothe when it came to highly emotional situations.

Through this fellowship, I had the opportunity to see, hear and feel things I would have otherwise never experienced on my own in Guatemala. I was living in the city of Quetzaltenango, whose indigenous population is very high and their Mayan traditions are still widely practiced. However, it was a city and modernity had also ruptured the traditional systems. It was fascinating, yet sad and upsetting, to observe this contradiction. On the surface, one would see these contradictions living together peacefully; the men are farming, women are working in the markets and their children are playing nearby and everyone smiles when you say hello. Others are working in boutiques, teaching or going to university. But the surface does not show their past, nor how they live at home, nor their dreams and aspirations, and it does not show the rampant discrimination that is mostly responsible for the social division. I was privileged to sit down with local people and listen to the narratives of their lives and their people. I had read a lot about the suffering indigenous Guatemalans had endured over centuries, even to this present day, but the stories resonated to a new level when I saw them or heard them from the people themselves- when all the numbers of mortality, morbidity, malnutrition, illiteracy or displacement became real and tangible. I encountered people living side by side with perpetrators of the recently ended civil war, women still making 500 tamales every day to sell on the corner despite their husbands' disappearances and childrens' murders, ex-guerrilla fighters giving up violence in order to promote sustainable communities peacefully. These stories and more, where people are working to achieve brighter futures for themselves or their children, display the resilient nature of individuals and communities. I learned what it meant to be resilient in that society and for most, it meant survival and hope.

That being said, my greatest advice to others beginning fieldwork would be to *be patient* and allow yourself some time to organize your project. It takes time to meet everyone who will be involved (and you may underestimate just how many people that may be- nothing, realistically,

can be done entirely on your own) and to develop the necessary level of trust. Plans will change; as interested as I was in the topic of structural violence, upon meeting participants and noting their lack of trust in others and general reserved nature, I saw why I had to change my focus.

Further, I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to be able to *communicate in the language* in which you plan to work as this will single-handedly affect all that you do. When you cannot speak the language, everything is a struggle, from buying groceries and negotiating prices to taking phone calls and negotiating your tasks. Once basic linguistic skills have been acquired, it's then easier to develop friendships or work relationships. Being able to speak a little Spanish, I began to feel more comfortable around my colleagues and I was capable of expressing my interests. This leads to another important piece of advice; *speak up about what you want*. As time went on, I felt more comfortable and I was able to let others know what I wanted or required for my project. Finally, also relevant to the last point, is *learning when to say no*. After having done so many tasks that had me leaning towards burnout and wanting to quit, I knew I had to focus my strength where it was needed most and to turn down other tasks that could either wait or which could be completed by others. Looking back now, in my particular case, I think I should have also asked for help when I needed it.

Unfortunately and regrettably, I did not interact much with other fellows. I left for my fellowship shortly after the pre-departure orientation that was held at the IHSP. At that meeting, it was lovely to meet other fellows preparing to leave for vastly different projects, although with similar goals. We exchanged great travel advice and I heard some that was particularly useful for myself from students who were from Central or South America. I especially enjoyed the activities aimed at communicating the intentions of our fellowships effectively, as well as those aimed at targeting our audience. Most of us were unable to find a suitable date to meet for our pre-departure meeting, although the emails exchanged were useful, and reminded me of things I had to prepare, such as registering as a Canadian abroad through Minerva and organizing my insurance. Although we were encouraged to speak with other fellows while abroad, I never felt entirely comfortable as I had not met most and I thought we'd all be busy with our own fellowships. There was one instance where I had shared some of my experiences by email and another fellow had replied regarding her own, which was comforting, as I felt we were able to relate to each other's experiences. Unfortunately, I was not able to attend the end of year event to present my project, but I know that it would have been an excellent opportunity to network with other fellows.

Although I cannot comment on the end of year event, I believe the program could benefit from a more extensive pre-departure training. I felt as though we were prepared in terms of logistics (what documents we had to fill out, travel registry, insurance, etc), but not enough on the social policy side. My suggestion for the future would be to perhaps involve a workshop on health and social policy with experts in the field, as well as a handbook for reference. This handbook could include information on how we can influence social policy in the health field, with journal articles, governmental information, as well as stories by experts and students. It could also have excerpts from previous McBurney fellows' reports, with advice on dealing with challenges in the field. A list of important contacts could also be a visual reminder for students of the extensive sources of aid there are while in the field.