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Moving Beyond Ethicality: Humanizing Research Methodologies with Undocumented Students and Communities

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In a sociopolitical context where immigrant and undocumented students are increasingly targeted by racist nativist practices and policies,¹ ethical considerations for research with these communities are imperative.² Acknowledging such considerations should be the responsibility of all researchers, and serve as an entry point into the study of the experiences of any historically marginalized population. In this brief, I argue that a move beyond ethicality is necessary to engage humanizing research methodologies that consider: 1.) The hierarchical power imbedded in the research process itself and, 2.) The ways we collaborate with undocumented communities in the methodological processes we design. I discuss *testimonio* as methodology informed by Chicana Feminist Epistemologies and Critical Race Theory (CRT) in Education to offer an example of a humanizing research approach with undocumented students in higher education.

Ethical vs. Humanizing

Recently, scholars have advocated for more ethical research practices with undocumented communities. Lahman, Mendoza, Rodriguez & Schwartz³ examine issues of anonymity, confidentiality, and consent that consider the heightened vulnerability of participants. Indeed, considering such issues is important to maintain greater protections for undocumented research participants. This would be ethical. Humanizing research begins with the premise that historically, the research process has functioned as a colonial project.⁴ This fact is a beginning point for how researchers theorize and articulate humanizing research methodologies. Such methodologies extend beyond ethics to consider the sociohistorical contexts and structural oppression that mediate the experiences of marginalized groups in our research approaches and practices. These methodologies include commitments to care and dignity,⁵ but should also move us toward collaboration and relationship building with those whose experiences we

seek to better understand.⁶ One example of a humanizing research methodology I have used in my own work with undocumented students in *testimonio*.

Testimonio as Methodology

Testimonio as a collective anti-colonial strategy of resistance can be traced back decades to Latin American human rights struggles.⁷ Only recently has *testimonio* been theorized as a holistic research methodology.⁸ In this section, I describe how I have utilized Critical Race Theory (CRT)⁹ and Chicana Feminist Epistemology (CFE)¹⁰ in education to theorize *testimonio* as a research methodology developed to collaboratively engage knowledge production about undocumented communities *with* undocumented students, concerned with healing from structural oppression.

CRT provides a lens to center and theorize from the lived experiences of People of Color amid the permanence and pervasiveness of racism in U.S. society.¹¹ CFE specifically challenges researchers

to consider how they collaborate with Communities of Color to establish a foundation of knowledge through collective theorizing.¹² Testimonio as a research methodology allows for a social witness account of collective experiences, political injustices, and human struggles that are often erased by dominant discourses and offer a pathway towards healing.¹³ At the same time, testimonio reveals the resistance, resilience, and hope we engage in our research to challenge and transform that subordination to collectively move toward social justice.¹⁴

A testimonio methodology that is guided by CFE allows Chicana/Latina researchers and participants to enter ourselves—our knowledge, positionalities, and experiences—into the process of theorizing and researching that creates space for teaching, reflecting, collaboration, and healing. In my research that examines how racist nativism mediates the educational trajectories of undocumented Chicana/Latina college students, a testimonio methodology has allowed me to engage such a process.

One strategy I engaged was what I call a *shared vulnerability*. If I was to ask participants to share very personal and sometimes intimate details of their lives, I had to be willing to do the same. This began early, during the recruitment and rapport-building process, and continued throughout the research. For example, to inform participants of the study, I began by sharing my own personal journey to my research as a U.S. born Chicana from a working-class family, and the personal reasons I pursued my research. Throughout the interviews, I often described the multiple roles I negotiated as a first-generation college student in academia, as a daughter, as a mother, and my own marginalizing and empowering experiences in education. Shared vulnerability challenges power of the researcher-participant dichotomy and opens possibilities for a collective endeavor of storytelling, a critical element of testimonio.

Another strategy I have utilized was a three-phase data analysis process that included participant collaboration. Following an initial preliminary analysis of data, I entered a second phase of analysis with participants in a workshop setting where participants engaged in discussions about how the data should be analyzed, interpreted, and categorized. I have previously used the term “focus group” to describe this meeting with participants.¹⁵

However, it was not a traditional focus group interview, and I would not suggest such a format for testimonio methodology. Rather, the meetings functioned more like a workshop that was interactive and iterative. Exemplar pieces of anonymous data were shared with the women as well as questions for them about my preliminary analysis. Engaging in dialogue about the data as it related to and/or contradicted the women’s experience was critical. In addition to the discussions about the data, these workshops provided an opportunity to reflect on the process of testimonio itself. It was in these discussions that reflections on healing emerged. Beatriz, an undocumented undergraduate student expressed:

“Just to have a space where I could start from the beginning. Not everyone has many hours to do both [testimonio] interviews. A lot of my close friends know a lot about me and my own history . . . my hopes and my faith and they know the struggle, but I think having this type of step, where you let enough space for us to say our stories, I feel like I was not rushed so it gave me freedom to say much more. I think in a way it also scratched heridas que, that I guess I have to say . . . because sometimes I was not able to say everything with such detail so it hurt at the end. It was healing as well, because . . . just to be able to say everything with detail and not holding back, it’s just like having someone having enough time [to listen].”

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Beatriz explained that the process “scratched *heridas*” (scratched wounds), allowing her to speak freely, and with detail about difficult experiences that she does not often get to share with others. Not being able to fully explain these painful experiences can leave her feeling hurt, as if a wound had been scratched. In this way, Beatriz describes the re-living of trauma that can take place in interviews, when participants share difficult and traumatizing

experiences. To “scratch *heridas*” can be the resurfacing of pain without the relief of fully expressing a story that leads away from the trauma and towards a place of hope. Using this metaphor of “*herida*,” Beatriz describes how testimonio is a distinct experience from other forms of interviewing because of this sense of healing it brought to her. Engaging in such a process means that I, as a researcher, can create opportunities for reflection and a shared vulnerability with my participants.

There are other examples of research methodologies scholars have engaged with undocumented and immigrant communities that consider a reclamation of humanity in research. *Convivencia* (Trinidad Galván, 2011),¹⁶ *Pláticas* (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016),¹⁷ *Muxerista Portraiture* (Flores, 2017),¹⁸ and *Critical Race Feminista Praxis* (Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017)¹⁹ are some of the more recent developments in educational research that I would encourage readers to follow who are engaged with undocumented students, communities, and research. Similar to testimonio, these methodologies are concerned with:

- 1.) Establishing collaborative relationships with those whose stories we seek to tell, theorizing from their lived experiences as a collective.
- 2.) Creating space in the research process for the researcher and participants to engage in reflection, shared vulnerability, and to find a sense of healing in the telling of their stories.
- 3.) Being grounded in a critical epistemological and theoretical perspective that aligns with humanizing, social justice research goals.

Humanizing research methodologies honor the dignity, knowledge, and experiences of the students and communities we work with as researchers. Moreover, humanizing research methodologies can allow for unique perspectives into the experiences of undocumented students and communities. They can open opportunities to see beyond the structural racism that creates so many challenges and barriers, and provide insight into the everyday practices of resistance, agency, and hope these communities engage.

About UndocuScholars' Policy and Research Brief Series

This research brief is part of UndocuScholars' Policy and Research Brief Series, which aims to disseminate knowledge about key issues related to undocumented youth in higher education.

About UndocuScholars

As an extension of the UndocuScholars Project launched in 2014 at UCLA, the ongoing efforts of UndocuScholars are to engage institutional agents, college and university students, scholars, and community advocacy partners to create and further build on sustainable and effective best practices for undocumented youth in higher education.

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 2. Racist nativism is a form of racism that assigns a subordinate status, including non-nativeness, to Immigrants of Color and those perceived to be immigrant. Historically, racist nativism has targeted various immigrant groups, and has been used to justify the perceived superiority of whites in the U.S. Today, discourses of racist nativism most frequently target Latinx immigrants and those perceived to be immigrant. Racist nativism operates through individual acts of racism, and systemically through policies that marginalize and exclude.
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