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Finding a Voice:
the Benefits and Impacts of Community Participatory Research in the NSF-REU Site Program
on Immigration Policy and Border Communities

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Why Community Participatory Research Approach (CPAR)

Coming from a mixed-status background, raised by Mexican immigrant parents, and advocating for the immigrant community in New York City led me to participate in this NSF-REU program. Carrying out research in the El Paso/Las Cruces/Ciudad Juarez binational region was unlike other experiences in my undergraduate career in New York City.

Prior to becoming familiar with the Community Participatory Research Approach (CPAR) I was introduced to other methods of research similar and at the same time different from CPAR. My knowledge of previous immigration policies was adequate, having been a research assistant for a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study prior to starting this ten-week program. Whilst I had some experience on how to conduct research, I felt the need to explore other methods to further understand immigration policies and their impacts in border communities. I was able to partake in multiple research studies as a research assistant nevertheless I can contrast both research techniques. While I engaged in PAR we followed a similar approach in allowing participants whom we were interviewing to lead discussions, input their ideas to the ways in which questions were asked and furthermore how we were analyzing and mapping out collected data. Because of the introduction and early exposure to PAR research as an undergraduate student I was able to break away from simply looking at research from an “outsider” perspective which is not uncommon. I think having had this initial research exposure following a participatory research approach enabled me to shift the perspective as to thinking as “participants” more than just that but rather collaborators and equal partners in research. Through this approach, and through the emphasis of CPAR through the REU I was able to adapt my past skills while also learning new skills that extended from a small group of individuals to a wider frame, that of community.

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Engaging in CPAR through the REU program allowed me to think of the vast ways in which research can be tackled. While reflecting on the current notion of research and past perception of research I can't stop but to think of the ways in which some of my professors had noted research from what I perceive as one sided. If I had not been introduced to the multi perspectives of PAR nonetheless, CPAR, I would have probably never thought of the possibilities of research having a cross over with advocacy and community work. I think that having engaged in CPAR for the course of 10 weeks, in another state, concentrated in examining the impacts of immigration policies through a community engaged approach is what made this research experience unique and quite frankly impactful not just to the community but reinforced fundamentals of research.

CPAR becomes this intricate and multilinear research approach that goes beyond a typical classroom setting. Moving past the exploration of theoretical research, methods rather follow an empirical approach that explores the complexities and hidden "structures" and realities that are overlooked or left out of a research approach. When engaging in CPAR, as a researcher you are not trying to fit observations, encounters and analysis of data into "boxes" or categories, but rather are letting all those things lose. Though a holistic approach, the intraquecy of CPAR makes it a research method that is effective and engaging in the multidimensional manner which is essential in exploring the phenomenon of migration, immigration policies, agency and systems of power. Further, taking this approach allowed us to refrain from following one simple model, or the traditional way of carrying out ethnographic work. Becoming immersed, and learning as well as unlearning became the root for us to see our everyday experiences through a dynamic lens.

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In the following section, I will provide recounts of my experiences and accompanying reflections as an undergraduate student and upcoming researcher undertaking CPAR.

Upon arriving in Texas and adjusting to our new living situations and community in New Mexico I remember my first weekend as being one that highlights what the REU and CPAR represents. That first weekend we partook in a protest, we were marching with the community and community leaders for the closure of the detention center located on Mattox and Montana. We had known that we would be protesting, as we joined and integrated ourselves into the rest of the group we continued to chant soon coming to realize that our final destination would end in Department of Homeland (DHS) grounds. I had never been near DHS grounds, it was my first time seeing CBP officers in person. There was a feeling of fear deep within me as I recalled the many instances my own family feared “authoritative” people. I reflect now, and think of that fear as having been instilled from a very young age. I think that the uneasiness came with the reality that my parents, just like many members of my community, fear these people who can easily impact the lives of families. To have felt triggered by simply being there in a span of minutes uncovered a sense of reality, the reality of presently understanding that things can occur within a span of minutes and the possibility of the unexpected. Further, Seeing the community organizations and community members partake in this march was insightful and truly showed me the sentiment of the community and their solidarity towards immigrants in the El Paso region. My experience in NYC is quite different given that mobilizing marches needs heavy stratification and planning, given the influence and sentiment regarding migrants I feel like it could have easily turned into a conflicting protest due to the anti-immigrant sentiment present. I felt empowered, angry and resilient. I never imagined we would end up in DHS grounds, this

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first encounter as an advocate and researcher allowed me to live an important moment, one that shapes my values and makes me become more involved in matters of injustices.

The first weeks as we were starting to become comfortable with the community dynamics, other team members and I met with grass root organizations including ACLU of New Mexico, Hope Border Institute and NM CaFe. Working with a grass-root organization and being introduced to Community Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) gave me the opportunity to extend the work and bring awareness to newly implemented immigration policies such as the Migrant Protection Protocol or MPP (Remain in Mexico) and document the impact it creates for the immigrant communities on both sides of the U.S.- Mexico border. Understanding the complexities of immigration first hand, outside an educational institution environment allowed me to holistically understand immigration and the attributing factors from a first hand perspective. Learning the changes in immigration policy through direct involvement shifted the manner from which I now am informed. Previously being reliant on news, social media and in class discussion this research experience allowed me to question policies, think of ways to better document the happening and reconstruct the narrative which is so often distorted.

Learning about the humanitarian crisis while at the border through praxis is when for the first time I began to acquire the skills necessary to understand the complexities of the systems that impact immigrants from various countries. While having an understanding of how to conduct research, CPAR was different in many ways. I did not interact as a single agent in regards to what was happening in my surroundings. While conducting research I faced the difficulties of having to establish my role as a researcher. I often found myself overlapping my role of a student, a daughter of immigrant parents, and an advocate. Learning to implement and use these agents made me more apt to undertake the difficult situations I witnessed during court

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observations. Having to adapt to the environments, to situations that were triggering and learning to comprehend the “court culture” was difficult and confusing at times. Learning to be present, intentional and versatile the first couple of weeks was rough, engaging with other members of this research study, having discussions, debriefing on our way home and talking over what we witnessed and experienced on a daily basis also (regrounded/ cultivated) gave rise to further questions and other ways in which to better document what was happening in the border region.

Using my body as a method of delivery and attainment of information was something new I was exposed to during this research experience. Being present and documenting the court observations and producing first hand data for HOPE Border Institute was something I had never been exposed to. Like using my body as an agent for change during protests was another way that made me realize the different ways I could be involved, and in many ways contribute to the change both actively through protests and through the creation of actual data from direct observations.

Debriefing

In addition to this experience, I think it is important to note and reflect on my feelings. While not having done so initially upon the duration of the program I began to reevaluate my own feelings and repressed emotions after and up to today. While we engaged everyday at our designated organization and carried out different tasks everyday we had little to no time to debrief. I find myself having conversations on my research experience in an academic setting. I think of how we lacked the time to process our emotions, our daily encounters and experiences. I reread fieldnotes, look at images and recount specific instances that bring me to realize that I never sat down to process. Debriefing was something I was starting to familiarize myself with.

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Often, as an undergraduate student there are many roles to fulfill. I come from a family, where we never truly were outspoken about feelings. I don't know how I had not thought of self-debriefing as part of a reflective process. Only having been introduced to debriefing my Junior year, I was able to understand the importance of holding a space to process our feelings and thoughts. I recall after our long days at our field site we would drive back to New Mexico, by the time we would arrive we would be tired, hungry and mentally exhausted. I think our debriefing or our attempts to debrief occurred when we cooked or held evening get-togethers with our cohort. We would talk about all of the things we had witnessed, I realize now we never really left our work in El Paso and once the REU program ended. We continued to discuss openly and engage in conversation with peers as a form of debriefing. Maybe only then were we able to think clearly on what we had witnessed, experienced or felt.

Experiences

The first few weeks of the program we engaged in the "rocket docket" proceedings or most commonly known as operation streamline. Having been unaware of the actual way in which these court proceedings occurred made me feel tied, unaware of the court culture and angry at the manner in which young girls possibly my age were being criminalized. Having seen young girls even younger than my shackled, wearing colored suits and only a few inches away made me feel helpless for the future of immigration reformation and laws that would help migrating youth. I recall staring blankly at the girl before me, I recall looking at men standing next to one another while the judge proceeded to order their removal, while scolding them for having entered the U.S. The judges' words echoed repeatedly after only a few minutes. The process of waiving their rights to be processed and removed from the country occurred usually every 5 minutes. People were giving up their rights to a trial for having entered the country unlawfully.

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The judge read the next four points:

1. Not a U.S. citizen, Had been previously deported. 2. Came back 4. Did not have a right to return.

It was only after a few more exchanges of words and scolding penalties that migrants would be told they would be proceeded to be deported. And so it was then that they would be walked out of the courtroom through a side door, making room for the next five individuals to come to the front of the court and stand before the judge. The judge then proceeded to point out the four points while every so often noting the misdemeanors and immigration charges upheld. The misdemeanor immigration charge would apply if there was an unlawful entry through a non existing port of entry by a non-U.S. citizen. Also, noting the disparities in charges such as one facing up to 20 years in prison for an unlawful reentry blew my mind. I was shocked to learn of the ways laws were severely unjust for migrants. This showed in the disparities the judge held when sentencing native born citizens who received a fine and scolding when found guilty of aiding migrants entry but were easily left off. Migrants waving their rights to a trial were being dismissed with words of “You are not authorized to return and are strongly recommended you never return to the U.S”. (Fieldnotes, 2018).

I was also disturbed to know of the refoulement interview. Essentially being a “made-up” provision of Remain in Mexico which upheld a second like credible fear interview. The difference being that this would occur on grounds of people having a fear of remaining in Mexico while undergoing their asylum process. Our intentions to amplify, jot down occurrences and the disturbing things happening in the dockets made me uncomfortable.. To witness young children wailing at their mothers who tried to explain their situation to the immigration judge, mothers trying to remain calm while their children fidgeted, and asked to go to the bathroom

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made me realize how a court is not an environment that makes migrants feel welcomed. Further, having noticed that the court police officer had to lock the door, and open it using a pin code disturbed me. Why were they being let out and in, how can a universal human right like going to the bathroom be denied. Asking to leave and then requiring escortment enraged me.

Occasionally, A full docket which reached a max capacity when over 30 people were brought to court turned into directed words of “you need to leave” (towards us). Having been removed adds to the disappearing recounts of the “hidden injustices” which will not be followed through or remembered. To see the reporters given priority, someone who has only been at the docket for less than twenty minutes to then report on the occurrences later that evening was not capturing all that has gone or continues to occur. How do we do more than just observe? The importance and knowing of our positionality is in fact very important to doing and engaging in this kind of research. This is one of the many things I learned through the CPAR method and REUexperience.

One of the experiences up to this day that remind me and allow me to challenge and question what is said in the media is a day we accompanied HOPE research analyst Edith Tapia to a church which served as a shelter for migrants who did not have a place to stay in Ciudad Juarez. Coming into this space with intentions to inform migrants of the asylum process easily turned into a distorted statement by the media which ultimately portrayed it as a way of “coaching migrants to exploit and circumvent the asylum process”. Knowing exactly what had occurred that day, then seeing the complete opposite being circulated by the media has allowed me to use different sources up to this day to question, inform and share information that is much more accurate than what the media insinuates. Having gone to the shelter in Ciudad Juarez, approximately 20 minutes across the border, We had anticipated collecting data and talking to

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migrants awaiting in Mexico from Africa and Latin America. I provide recounts from my field notes:

“We walked into a small office where we waited for a while, Edith introduced the research group and asked if we could talk to migrants waiting at the church, which by now had been transformed into a shelter. Walking to the back of the shelter, we surpassed a few people who glanced at us and made our way into the church. We walked in, there were mattresses, rebozos and cobijas rolled up for those who did not have a bed. The church benches were used as beds and everyone was cramped or laying in what would be their space of rest. While some laid in their bed, others sat in the tables set up at the entrance. Edith introduced herself, she asked if we could interview and collect some screening information. Wanting to explain the asylum process and hold screening interviews was part of this meeting. Having clearly mentioned that we were not giving legal advice nor that anyone in the group were legal attorneys, we carried out our interviews for that morning. After having interviewed and explained migrants of their rights we left.”

Having seen a distortion in the media was overwhelming and frankly disturbing given that we had been portrayed as some kind of “criminals”... since when is informing people of their rights a crime ?

Finding a voice

Learning to engage in a bilingual setting was put to use. I felt that this program not only allowed me to advocate, unlearn and undertake research but it also allowed me to use my native language. Spanish being my first language is a language I mostly engage in at home. I had just

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begun to gain more confidence in speaking Spanish and having conversations with peers at my home institution. This gave me the confidence to elaborate on responses in the REU program. I was able to strengthen my speaking skills, as not only were we engaging with other cohort peers who spoke some fluent Spanish, but we were able to have conversations with community members, advocates and directly impacted individuals. While we engaged with migrants from Cameroon and Cuba we juggled with English and Spanish. I had not been given a translation course as to how to interview people, feeling somewhat unprepared I tried my best to clearly ask questions. The ability to speak Spanish facilitated the interaction because it created a sense of comfort. Conversing, documenting and ultimately explaining the trajectory of seeking asylum took approximately fifteen minutes to complete. The nature and explanation of the questions helped me adapt a better way to document responses.

I think about the times we witnessed young Guatemalan mothers unable to share their accounts at court due to the language barrier and not having a translator at disposition. I witnessed migrants become in a way disempowered through the simple reason of not having a decent translator in court. The lack of having interpreters from these communities already makes them vulnerable of being left unheard and in worse case scenarios deported. The ways in which courts "function often lead to the overlooking of people and the real harms they are trying to leave behind. The issues of not having adequate translators makes me question the preparedness of the court. The court, having been aware of all the possible languages that are spoken day to day proceedings, is unable to have a translator on dial. I found it interesting to note that the translator a judge was able to connect was in fact an anthropologist who had learnt the indigenous language required. I question and reflect on this occurrence more and more than I did two years ago, as it makes me wonder how other individuals who are not directly impacted come

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to interpret the words. Moments of silence, tone, and utterances in courts have significance and they too must be translated.

Takeaways: How CPAR and REU has impacted me

I recall from my field notes that on May 23, 2019 we had met with HOPE Border Institute and the team. When we were discussing the mission and overall work of the organization, I learnt that more than 96% of asylum cases are denied. Those numbers are much higher when we are referring to the cases that are dismissed when no one shows up at their designated hearing. The notion of expedited removal was new to me, nevertheless understanding the power dynamics that granted the judge full discretion to deport someone who did not show up to their initial court hearing. In many cases, while reviewing the ways in which he would go about removing those who were not in court, he noted several exemptions. Nevertheless, I thought... how would they know? Were they told about the exceptions before? I myself was confused by all these sudden power dynamics that were beginning to unfold before my eyes.

The tools used to generate data and document the individuals who had their "Notice to Appear" NTA was one that I was also new to. Getting accustomed to the hearings, to the speed of things, to the environment and sudden disturbing sentiment in the courtroom was something I had to learn to handle. To witness the injustices, the unfairness of the court proceedings and inadequate attitude in the courtroom brought different yet crucial perspectives. These proceedings and court observations shedded light to the the never ending and confusing process of seeking asylum, especially with the recent implementation of the MPP, the need to understand the new "sequence of events" that occur in closed settings, with "limited seating" for media and community members is often unexposed and overlooked.

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CPAR has impacted me as a student, as an advocate and as a scholar. I have become more critical in examining “hidden” meanings. I have become observant of things I would have not paid close attention to if not for PAR research. I think of CPAR as a research mechanism that allows me to step away from “traditional research” by understanding the dichotomies that captivate the essence of community based research. Through the multifaceted experiences I understand research as having direct impact at a local level while at the same time at a macro scale. Partnering and working closely with a grassroots organization, being physically present, having my intentions clear, and recollecting data to further understand the newly implemented MPP policy has helped organizations like HOPE Border Institute further advocate, help the community and call out the injustices that target vulnerable people.

As someone who is pursuing a career in Anthropology and undertaking research, this experience has been unequalled and frankly eye opening. Knowing the context from which anthropology stems, that being of a colonizer mindset and the othering. I have compromised and learned to feel, view and think of moments as being indefinite. The continuation and further examination of migration policies, impact and relating phenomena should be explored through a dynamic approach. Bounding the intersectionalities of migration through one scope limits the interdisciplinary understanding from multiple angles. Given that this REU program scouted ten students, five being from the area and five from outside the bi-national region enriched the perceptions, the analysis and the questions that we often engaged in. The layout of the program, and the partnering with multiple organizations allowed us to become integrated into a life in the binational region.

I remember coming across fake news and comments of people mentioning getting citizenship “right way” or seeking protections “legally”. When I think of this, I reflect on the

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realities of the immigration system, the hidden barriers the public don't see and that the media fails to accurately portray. Thinking of how immigration policies shift, how the media continued to portray migrants and all the occurrences that continued followed me back to New York. Having to end this research experience did not end upon the termination of the program but rather became part of my critical thinking and research. Having completed the REU program I decided to do my thesis paper on the psychological triggers that young adults experience associated with the fear of familial deportation. The REU program prepared me to engage with participants who were closely affiliated to such topics and affected by immigration policies. I carried out interviews that enabled me to adequately follow up, ask and hold space for participants to speak. Aside from enabling me to work on research I was able to fully recognize how important examining past scholarship and phenomena on related topics was that I decided to pursue a research career .

The exposure to research during my undergraduate studies strengthened through this REU experience. This has led me to focus my PH.D. studies on migration, immigration policies, the shaping of identity and the sense of belonging of the Mesoamerica diaspora. Further, CPAR research has furthered my involvement with my community and organizations that advocate for the immigrant community. Soon after the REU I began working with a start up non-for profit initially as a community advocate intern and continue my commitment now as an advisory board member. The organization renders aid in the form of legal advocacy and holistic support for young immigrant women in New York City.

The REU experience was one that succeeded expectations. Having initially thought that I would be working from an office like most experiential learning experiences I can't stop but think of what would I have learned if not for working and immersing myself. The protests, court

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observations, the encounters with CBP and collaboration with community leaders shaped my perspective on the dynamics of research that often are not engaged in or even pursued. Every person has a role, every moment we were at court had meaning, had purpose and was important. To document, to witness, to feel reminds me of the long way we must go, the many times we must raise our voices, use our bodies and call out injustices. To go beyond the office and into the field, whether that is a protest, a court hearing or attempting to get access to a detention center. This REU has given me personal courage to stand firm to do right, and to continue the fight for my people. We must also understand to “embrace in not knowing the answer”, (Ava). My involvement in the summer REU has strengthened me to continue fighting against the injustices and false narratives that wrongly portray people deserving of life.