



Culturally Competent Field Education Practice with Guatemalans

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Abstract:

Over a million Guatemalans have immigrated to the United States; they are the sixth largest Hispanic group in the country (Motel & Patten, 2012). This article seeks to provide a background for social work students so that they can be culturally competent in engaging with Guatemalan clients. The author examines the violence and poverty that drive Guatemalans to emigrate, as well as the pressures and trauma of immigration into the U.S.A. and the unique strengths of Guatemalan culture, including their traditions and religious beliefs.

Over a million Guatemalans have immigrated to the United States; they are the sixth largest Hispanic group in the country (Motel & Patten, 2012). According to Motel and Patten (2012), forty-one percent of these Guatemalans in the U.S. live in the West, and one-third live in the South; therefore, social work students across the country are likely to encounter Guatemalan clients. It is important that these students understand the history of poverty and violence in Guatemala that has driven many of its citizens to immigrate to the United States and that students attend to the multiple traumas to which these immigrants have been subjected. In addition to advocating for basic amenities as well as health and mental health services, social work students can build on the many strengths of Guatemalan culture, especially religion, that help Guatemalan clients to survive. This article presents information crucial for social work students' development of cultural competence in working with Guatemalan clients.

Poverty in Guatemala

Social work students working with Guatemalan clients need to understand the severity of the poverty and violence that has driven them to immigrate to the U.S. Guatemala is a country of 13 million people with high rates of poverty, illiteracy, disease, infant mortality, and malnutrition (World Bank, 2004). Throughout its history, Guatemala has suffered from an authoritarian government, low tax collection, and inequality. Marini and Graganolati (2003) state, "Compared with other countries with a similar per capita GDP level, Guatemala stands out as having an inordinately high rate of poverty" (p. 5). Poverty in Guatemala is especially severe in the rural and indigenous areas of the country. Some families have to struggle to feed their children on a daily basis. Nybo (2009) discusses the programs sponsored by UNICEF to deal with poverty and child malnutrition in Guatemala, feeding children to avoid stunted growth and lower IQ's. Health problems in Guatemala include high rates of malnutrition, high rates of infant mortality, fragmentation of healthcare, a lack of health services in rural areas, and a lack of health insurance.

Poverty forces even young children in Guatemala to work. Based on 2003 statistics in Guatemala, 23% of the workforce was between the ages of five and 17 (Tuttle, 2006). Offitt (2008) describes street child labor as a major problem in Guatemala; to help their families survive, child street laborers normally sell foodstuffs and dry goods and provide basic services. In addition, children work in factories and in the service industry or in small shops (Salazar, 1998). In agriculture, children as young as five years old tend flocks of small animals and progress to planting and harvesting as they grow older. As domestic service workers, children are exposed to harsh conditions and long hours. Children may also be pressed into criminal gangs and forced into prostitution (Tuttle, 2006; Fernandez, 2001). In Guatemala City alone, there were 2000 boys and girls as young as seven-years-old exploited in 600 brothels (Tuttle, 2006; Fernandez, 2001). Girls eight to twelve years old are taken to jails to serve as prostitutes for prisoners.

Violence in Guatemala

In addition to poverty, violence is endemic in Guatemala, rooted in a society divided by class and ethnicity and with a history of discrimination and injustice based on a 36-year-long civil war (Manz, 2008). Between 1960 and 1996, two-hundred-thousand of the country's nine million inhabitants were killed (Vanthuyne, 2009). Though the war ended in 1996, its legacy of violence continues. The indigenous population and the elites and military have not yet been effectively reconciled. The ex-military is responsible for lynchings, acts of vigilante violence, and criminal and drug-related activities.

Guatemala has become a center of the drug trade, and drug cartels and gangs terrorize its citizens (Brands, 2011). Drug traffickers move drugs through Guatemala by various means and use corruption to obtain influence with local governments. In addition, neighborhood gangs (pandillas) and national gangs (maras) create unstable conditions. Pandillas specialize in extortion, robbery, and

small-scale drug distribution. Maras participate in drug and arms smuggling, human trafficking, racketeering, and other organized crime. Gang violence, kidnappings, and attacks on area buses for money are prevalent. Because the state is not strong enough to raise revenue to administer justice, and government corruption is rampant, Guatemalans have turned to their own security guards and vigilante violence.

Mirroring the violence of the society, there is a high level of violence toward women in Guatemala. This is a society based on the idea of machismo, where women did not obtain the right to vote until 1966 and where males have a higher rate of literacy and hold higher-paying jobs, including most positions of authority (Bellino, 2009/10). Bellino (2009/10) and Ogrodnick and Borzutsky (2011) report that sexual abuse, torture, and killing of women in Guatemala is a serious problem. In 2008, in response to the abuse and killing of women, the government passed the "Law against Femicide and Other Forms of Violence," but the law has proved inadequate due to an ineffective police force and judicial system. Most cases do not go to trial, and criminals are rarely brought to justice. Ogrodnick and Borzutsky (2011) point to links between this violence against females and the country's poverty. Many non-governmental organizations have limited success in combating violence against women. Putman et al. (2008) also state, "Rates of violence, including family violence and child maltreatment, are high in post-civil war Guatemala, and child sexual abuse is an area of particular concern" (p. 349).

Immigration Issues

The first wave of migrants to the U.S. from Guatemala came for political reasons; however, now Guatemalans immigrate to the U.S. primarily for economic reasons. Forced to immigrate illegally to the United States, usually through Mexico, Guatemalans face continual trauma in the immigration process (Chumil, 2009). Immigrants may also have experienced traumatic events prior to leaving their country. In the United States, immigrants find only low-paying work; thus, it is a constant challenge for these people to repay debts owed to the "coyotes" who smuggled them across the border while also sending money back to family in Guatemala. According to Perez-Foster (2001), the trauma of immigration also includes the loss of family networks, lack of fluency, children conforming to the norms of a new culture, and other major adjustment stressors. Undocumented immigrants feel unsafe in their U.S. employment; between 2001 and 2010, one-million people were deported from the United States back to their countries of origin due to post-entry criminal conduct (Kanstroom, 2012). In response to the multiple stresses of immigration, migrants often experience adjustment stress symptoms such as depression and anxiety.

Developing Culturally Competent Practice with Guatemalan Clients

A crucial first step for social work students in working with Guatemalan clients is to understand the problems of poverty and violence that drive clients to leave Guatemala and the stresses of immigration. Assessment and treatment of these clients must take into account the multiple traumas that these clients, especially women and children, have endured. Advocacy is required to provide not

only health and mental health services but also basic amenities like housing, heat, and food. Children need these services to ameliorate the deficits caused by a chronic lack of nutrition, health care, and education. Clients will also need ongoing legal advice to deal not only with issues of immigration but also with differences in laws, such as truancy laws, between Guatemala and the U.S.

In addition to providing effective advocacy, social work students need to understand the particular cultural strengths that help Guatemalan clients survive in a difficult environment. In Guatemala and the United States, there is an ongoing Mayan renaissance among the Guatemalan people. Some Guatemalan immigrants of Mayan descent continue to use herbal medicines, speak their native tongue, and/or wear traditional clothing (Loewe, 2009). Social work students should familiarize themselves with Mayan customs – dress, food, family values, and healing rituals – and recognize which customs are important and helpful even as the client begins to assimilate to American norms and values.

Religion is the cornerstone of many Guatemalan families. Some Guatemalans adhere to a mixture of the Mayan and Catholic religions; others are Protestant. The Mayan religion focuses around agriculture, reproduction, the spirits of sacred places, and cycles of darkness and light. There is no theological doctrine inherent in the religions, except for an encounter with the cosmos and respect for the forces of creation in the world. Some immigrants of Mayan descent may celebrate their religion by gathering around an altar and offering natural objects to recall their ancestors and history.

Protestantism in Guatemala is growing in strength as a rival to the Mayan religion (Berger, 2010). The new Protestants are very conservative and call for discipline and honesty, banning alcohol and extra-marital sex. They encourage people to create their own religious institutions. In contrast to the traditional machismo, in Guatemalan Protestantism, women are deemed to be important as missionaries and organizers and can take on leadership roles. Women are even allowed to separate from husbands who do not meet Protestant moral standards. Attending Mayan ceremonies and meeting shamans or attending Guatemalan Protestant services would be very helpful for students' understanding of the importance of religion to Guatemalan clients.

Conclusion

Understanding the social, political and cultural factors that influence clients is essential to fulfilling the core competencies mandated by the Council on Social Work Education, including engaging diversity and difference in practice, advancing human rights and social and economic justice, and responding to contexts that shape practice (Council on Social Work Education, 2008). Effective intercultural communication with Guatemalan clients based on an understanding of their social and political context and the strengths of their culture can provide student social workers with knowledge to help overcome barriers to effective cross-cultural practice. It is important to acknowledge the economic and political context of Guatemalans entering the United States under insecure conditions. Knowing the recent circumstances of Guatemalan immigrants allows for effective advocacy to advance their

human rights and provide for their social and economic justice.

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