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# Trauma in Guatemala and Postville, Iowa

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## Trauma in Guatemala and Postville, Iowa

Tucked into the corner of rural Northeast Iowa, a small town with a population of just over 2,000 welcomes each passerby, visitor, and resident with a sign that reads: “Postville, Hometown to the World.” Postville is an anomaly in racial and ethnic diversity in an otherwise very white area. The majority of Postville’s diverse population migrated from Guatemala as a response to the Guatemalan Civil War, escalating violence, and extreme poverty (Jonas). On May 12, 2008, an immigration raid targeted Postville’s Hispanic population at the local meatpacking plant, Agriprocessors, and detained 389 undocumented citizens. Psychological trauma was a consequence of this devastating event for the detainees and for their families, friends, and community members. While the event itself induced negative mental health issues for those caught in its path, the full extent of exposure to trauma must be understood through historical and current structural violence and through political, social, and economic lenses. In order to explain these issues, I will seek understanding of the transnational combination of trauma in Guatemala and Postville.

Trauma, according to the American Psychological Association, is “an emotional response to a terrible event [. . . and] longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea” (Trauma). Trauma does not always occur from a singular event. It can also happen in the build-up of numerous events or conditions that cause stress and fear which can eventually lead to a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, mood and anxiety disorders, and substance abuse (Juby and Kaplan). Sister Mary, a local church-leader in Postville, emphasizes the combination of trauma and she believes the people were quadruple victims because they endured trauma and mistreatment in their home country, in Postville before the raid, during the raid, and then for the way they were

treated by our legal system (*Abused: The Postville Raid*). This combination of different traumatic events and conditions are why the affected people need access to better mental health treatments.

As Farmer notes, our analysis of major health issues must be historically deep; this implies we must understand the historical factors leading up to a population's current condition (Farmer 42). Guatemalan citizens were not prompted to leave their home country and travel over 2,500 miles to Postville without reason. In my focal village of Santa Maria, the Guatemalan Civil War which lasted from 1960 to 1996, had detrimental mental health impacts on its residents due to traumatic conditions and structural violence (Taylor). Santa Maria is located in the Quiche region of Guatemala, and it is home to a mostly indigenous, Mayan population. The Guatemalan Civil War was fought between the government of Guatemala against leftist, rebel groups supported by Mayan indigenous people and many peasants living in rural Guatemala (Jonas). As a rural, mostly Mayan village in Guatemala, Santa Maria was one of many places directly targeted by the Guatemalan government where "thousands of peasants [were] slaughtered in a calculated scorched-earth drive by the army to eliminate an insurgent armed resistance" (Taylor 1). The historic oppression of Mayan peasants exemplifies the ethnic dimension of power structures that continue to keep this minority group in a position of powerlessness.

As much of the trauma was induced by war related events, survivors were often left looking in vain for loved ones if they did not see them murdered personally. Over the course of the 36 year war period, approximately 200,000 Guatemalan citizens were murdered and 150,000 fled as refugees (Steinberg et al., 2006). Mass destruction and fear caused many Guatemalans to flee their homes in an attempt to escape the violence. For the returners, the shared connection of undergoing horrific events would help to form a mutual bond. However, traumatic events were not able to be reflected on due to army officials' disregard of any fault or connection on the

military's behalf (Taylor 155). As time continues to help heal old wounds, the freedom to talk about the past assists many citizens in reaching closure. While current army officials would much rather ignore the destructive history they took part in and move forward without blame, the community members of Santa Maria are able to bond together through their shared histories of what really happened.

While those living in Guatemala after the Civil War continue to try to heal from old wounds, many citizens were not able to pick back up where they left off. Although the extreme levels of violence have been reduced since the civil war ended, violence is still prevalent and current economic conditions pressure many families into leaving. In recent years, unemployment in Guatemala has reached 77.2% in rural areas ("Guatemala: National Socio-Demographic Profile"), and 52 percent of people living in poverty are indigenous ("The World Bank in Guatemala"). While trauma alone is enough of a reason to flee a country, difficulty cultivating a livable income contributes and exacerbates the living conditions of villagers in Santa Maria. For the indigenous population, the social structures that favor employing non-indigenous persons work against them and explain the discrepancy between the higher rates of the indigenous poor. The combined economic disparities and political oppression resulted in waves of people leaving their homes, and the continued economic hardships create challenges for people moving forward with their lives after they re-enter the country (Jonas). While speaking with a psychologist will not fix economic issues, the trauma that occurs from living in poverty could be reduced through treatment from trained psychologists. Unfortunately, access to mental health services are limited, and the financial burden of paying for psychological help is impossible for the many Guatemalans battling poverty (Taylor).

When immigrants look for a country with financial opportunities, choosing the United States is a common choice. Word of mouth is one method of communication that immigrants use to share work opportunities with their family members and friends (J. Schutte, personal communication 10/16/17). In the case of Postville, IA, the opportunity for steady employment was spread from current Postville residents, who had fled from their home countries, to their personal connections back in Guatemala; this caused an upsurge in Postville, IA's immigrant population (Jonas). In a town that used to be predominantly white, the current community school has a 46% Hispanic population and 16% Somalian population (J. Schutte, personal communication, 10/16/17). While the town itself has a current population of 2,116 ("Postville City, Iowa"), this number would be significantly smaller if Postville had not attracted a large immigrant population through Agriprocessors--a large meatpacking plant that is well known in the area to hire undocumented immigrants (*Abused: The Postville Raid*).

While knowingly hiring undocumented citizens is illegal, the plant is able to make a significant amount of money because its workers are unable to speak out against unfair wages, missing paycheck hours, physical abuse, or hazardous conditions because they fear deportation and must provide for their families (*Abused: The Postville Raid*). This constant fear of deportation increases their psychological trauma on a daily basis, and combines with the trauma that many workers face when working in these unsafe and unfair conditions (Juby and Kaplan).

The raid has left a scar on the town of Postville, and many community members are still impacted by this traumatic event today. Some members of the community can still remember the sounds of the helicopters that were flown in by ICE on the day of the raid. Jenny Schutte, Postville Community School's Dean of Students, still vividly remembers the day of the raid. When the helicopters began to fly in, Schutte recalls,

. . . that day, anyone who was there has that trauma. I was with a group of students sitting at a reading table [. . .] and one little fourth grader said, ‘Mrs. Schutte, ICE is here. We were told they weren’t coming until tomorrow. My parents are at work.’ And then tears started streaming down her face.

Kids were bussed to a local church while school workers tried to find out which parents were detained. Rumors had been spread about ICE’s upcoming arrival, so the building fear of the students escalated further when the helicopters flew in and kids began crying and panicking.

The total number of detained workers was 389, or approximately one-sixth of the town’s total population. These workers were shuttled to Waterloo, IA, but their families and friends had little information on who was taken and what would happen to them. In this way, the disappearances of Guatemalans, which typically meant the murder of family members, is directly correlated with the trauma felt by Guatemalans who once again did not know what happened to their families and friends. During the raid, many parents would lie to immigration officers by saying they did not have children because they feared they would be harmed too (*Abused: Postville Raid*). At this time community support of church members and school officials assisted in the reuniting of families, and churches were offered as safe places for families to go. Churches were essential in keeping the community together because families “distrust community support (often with the exception of churches) [and] are likely to become isolated, and experience increased anxiety and depression” (Juby and Kaplan 147). Without the help of the churches during and after the raid, the widespread confusion, anger, and depression could have been even greater.

After the detained workers were sent to Waterloo, the majority did not return home to their families. These workers were sped through court proceedings which charged them with

elevated accounts of identity theft. Once criminally convicted, the detained immigrants were transferred to prisons across the country, spent five month prison sentences, and then immediately deported (Camayd Freixas). These deportations split up families, and many are not able to see each other in person due to the high cost of travel and out of fear of being unable to return to the U.S. This separation exacerbates the trauma felt by children who must grow up without their parents.

The immigration raid in Postville, IA directly connects to the atrocities of the Guatemalan Civil War in political, economic, and social aspects. First, the political connection between the raid and the Guatemalan Civil War are uncomfortably comparable. In Guatemala, the Mayan population was targeted by the government due to the ethnic power structures in which the Mayan population is lower on the hierarchy than the non-indigenous and Spanish speaking population evident by ongoing segregation and structural violence (Jonas). Government officials, almost always non-indigenous persons, are at the top of the social hierarchy which allowed them to enact their scorched-earth policy with few repercussions (Taylor). The majority of the Mayan population is economically disadvantaged and the lack of power enables the government to take advantage of them. In the same way, government officials in the U.S. are pre-dominantly white, and this allows the government to focus less on meeting the needs of its increasingly diverse population. This underrepresentation of minorities in U.S. governmental offices contributes to a lack of empathy from the country's standpoint because personal connections cannot be made on many immigration issues. In order for Guatemalan citizens to better trust the U.S. government, it would help to increase the number of ethnically diverse members in governmental positions.

In a similar fashion, the strained ethnic relationship between Hispanic, undocumented immigrants and the white population creates a lack of empathy from surrounding communities. I

grew up in a pre-dominantly white community a twenty minute drive away from Postville, and a common response to the immigration raid was, “It was bound to happen eventually.” This statement lacks empathy and understanding of the gravity of the situation for Guatemalans. There is also noteworthy confusion in my hometown of which cultures and countries have immigrated to Postville. Many of my schoolmates and family members talk about the large number of Mexicans that live in Postville even though Guatemalans make up a far greater percentage of the town’s population. This lack of understanding separates my community from the community of Postville mostly due to ethnic differences. The social responsibility of helping one’s neighbor out does not apply to the majority of my community members if the neighbor is not white and this contributes to the structural violence Postville residents face.

Economically, Postville, IA and rural Guatemala have greater poverty rates than other areas of their respective countries. The Mayan population in Guatemala has higher rates of poverty than the non-indigenous population at a total of 52% (WHO-AIMS). Similarly, Postville, IA has a 24.4% poverty rate compared to the national average of 12.7% (Postville City, Iowa), and if the Guatemalan population could be separated from the rest of the population, the poverty rate would likely be higher than 24.4%. The indigenous population, although citizens of Guatemala, often face language barriers on top of belonging to a lower social status which is disadvantageous in the workforce. The amount that an undocumented immigrant can earn is much less than what a U.S. citizen can make due to the structural and legal barriers that prohibit these undocumented immigrants from working. On top of the citizenship barrier, undocumented immigrants from Guatemala may also face language barriers in the U.S. in addition to their lower social statuses. Traveling over 2,500 miles to Postville, IA increases the Mayan population’s

ability to get a job, but these same language and social barriers prohibit this group from achieving true financial prosperity.

When I drove home days before the 2016 Presidential Election, I noticed increasing amounts of yard signs that supported the Trump candidacy. When I drove closer to Postville, I had expected to see a decrease in Trump supporting signs due to the city's embracement of its diverse population which conflicts with Trump's message to increase immigration control and to expand the current U.S. and Mexico border wall. When I drove through the town of Postville, an equal amount of Trump supporters could be visibly identified by these signs. While there are many reasons to support a political candidate, I was shocked to see so many Trump supporters in this area after the immigration raid had taken place because these community members know firsthand how immigration raids can terrorize a community.

While just one event can cause trauma, Guatemalans who moved to Postville, IA were exposed to numerous accounts of trauma-inducing events and conditions, and these events must be looked at as a whole in order to understand the depth of the trauma that these people have endured. The violence and war that targeted an already disadvantaged group is more than enough to cause psychological trauma, but the added economic disparities which cause extreme poverty add to the trauma these Guatemalan citizens face. In addition to this, those that fled Guatemala's violence and extreme poverty are faced with a journey that can cause trauma on its own. Crossing the U.S. and Mexico border is extremely hazardous and many families are split by the decision to cross the border where many crossings end in fatalities due to the harsh, desert conditions and physical barriers (*Anthropologist Jason de Leon*). On top of this, Guatemalans are not granted refugee status, and the citizenship requirements are too time-consuming and expensive for most migrants to afford. Trauma is expounded further by the constant fear of

deportation (Juby and Kaplan) and the working conditions that many resettled Guatemalans faced in Postville's meatpacking plant (*Abused: The Postville Raid*). In addition to this, the 2008 immigration raid was detrimental to the mental health of those that were forcibly detained by immigration enforcement officers and for the family members and loved ones who had to wait in a state of 'not knowing' where their family members had gone (Juby and Kaplan). The detained workers were exposed to further trauma when they were sped through the justice system and criminally convicted of crimes they did not commit. The economic hardships and splitting of families after the raid exacerbated the already dangerous levels of trauma these people were exposed to. While just one of these events warrant a need for mental health counseling, Guatemalans living in Postville, IA have experienced numerous accounts of these human rights violations.

The psychological trauma from all of the above events can lead to significant mental health consequences. Unfortunately, mental health resources are very limited for those that were deported to Guatemala, where only 1.4% of the health budget is spent on mental health even though 22% of the total burden of disease in Latin America comes from psychological disorders (WHO-AIMS). In Postville, many women who worked at Agriprocessors during the raid were sent home with GPS bracelets and were not allowed to work (*Abused: The Postville Raid*). Affording mental health resources is unlikely for families that can barely pay for food and rent. After the raid, there were some volunteer psychologists that worked with traumatized individuals, but with the entire town impacted, volunteers struggled to meet the needs of the Postville community, and psychologists were only available for a short amount of time (Juby and Kaplan).

In order to decrease current levels of trauma, one obvious solution is to change policies to grant more immigrants citizenship so they are able to legally work at better jobs and not fear deportation. Increasing access to mental health services while being mindful of economic barriers and lingering distrust of public officials will be essential to getting people the help that they need. In addition to mental health resources, the overall town inclusivity should continue to be developed so all residents feel safe and welcomed. Additionally, surrounding communities need to fight the social stigmatization of minority groups and undocumented immigrants as being less deserving of the help of the privileged.

While the tasks ahead are easier said than done, steps have already been taken to achieve several of these goals. In the spring of 2018, the third rendition of Postville's Celebration of Diversity will work toward honoring ethnic differences and celebrate the diverse groups that live in the community through food, dance, and other festivities (J. Schutte, personal communication, 10/16/17). Thanks to motivated immigration lawyers, some Postville residents have been granted U-Visas due to the transgressions that occurred in their time working at Agriprocessors (*The U-Turn*). Migrant grants have helped to increase the English as a Second Language programs within Postville's community school and focus on integrating its students into their increasingly diverse classrooms (J. Schutte, personal communication, 10/16/17). These acts of inclusion show that Postville has not given up since the raid and there is still hope to heal from all that the Guatemalan population of Postville has faced.

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