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Recommended Citation

Hernandez-Arriaga, Belinda and Dominguez, Daniela, "Dibujando En Tent City: Art By Asylum Seeking Children in the U.S. - Mexico Border" (2020). *Psychology*. 69.

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DIBUJANDO EN TENT CITY: ART BY ASYLUM SEEKING CHILDREN IN THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

BELINDA HERNANDEZ-ARRIAGA AND DANIELA G. DOMÍNGUEZ^{1,2}

Article

ABSTRACT

The existing Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), also known as the “Remain in Mexico” policy, have criminalized asylum and dehumanized asylum-seeking individuals. MPP requires asylum seekers who arrive at any U.S. port of entry across the entire southern border to wait in Mexico while their cases are processed in U.S. immigration courts. Using testimonio research, this study presents the artistic accounts of 7 Central American asylum-seeking children who are living in a “migrant camp” in Matamoros, Tamaulipas next to the Gateway International Bridge. Migrant camps are open-air tent encampments in which asylum seekers are living in unsafe and unsanitary conditions while they await their asylum interview. These hazardous conditions make them susceptible to respiratory diseases such as coronavirus (COVID-19). Sharing these experiences is critical to ensure that health professionals’ advocacy efforts reflect asylum seekers’ needs and life experiences. Given the violence inflicted by MPP and the risks associated with COVID-19, this manuscript demands the end of this policy to protect the psychological health of an already vulnerable community, asylum seeking children. Advocacy implications are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Asylum seekers are sometimes displaced from their home country due to the immediate dangers associated with violence, political turmoil, poverty, human rights violations, natural disasters, and forced gang-recruitment

(Domínguez, 2019). Hoping to escape these immediate risks, they often migrate across Mexico to pursue international

protection at a United States (U.S.) port of entry (Leutert, 2020). The treacherous journey across Mexico often exposes asylum seekers to abuse from the Mexican National Guard, extortion from organized crime, physical injury, among other traumatic events (Domínguez, 2019). Although asylum seekers have “undeniable rights under both federal and international law to seek asylum in the United States (Bickelman, 2020, p. 57),” they are currently facing unique challenges due to the “Remain in Mexico” policy (Nielsen, 2019) and the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) (Garrett, 2020). In this manuscript, we use the term asylum seeker to describe a Latinx person who is seeking protection in the U.S. from persecution or other human rights violations in their country.

WHAT ARE MIGRANT PROTECTION PROTOCOLS (REMAIN IN MEXICO)?

In November 2018, the U.S. and Mexico negotiated the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), also known as the “Remain in Mexico” policy (Leutert, 2020). Officially implemented on January 28, 2019 by officials from two Department of Homeland (DHS) agencies, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), MPP requires asylum seekers who arrive at any U.S. port of entry on the southern border to wait in Mexico while their cases are processed in U.S. immigration courts (Nielsen, 2019). Prior to MPP enforcement, asylum seekers were allowed to wait in the U.S. while their asylum cases were pending. Some scholars argue that MPP and other “racist policies,” aim to “prevent the blackening and browning of America (McKanders, 2019, p. 21).”

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF MPP DEPORTATION PROCEEDINGS

As of August 2020, approximately 67,000 individuals have been processed into the Migrant Protection Protocols program (TRAC, 2020). Of those, approximately

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33,000 individuals were given removal orders and were therefore barred from returning to the U.S. for a period of years, or in some cases permanently. According to TRAC 2020 data, the majority of asylum seekers were returned to Ciudad Juarez followed by Matamoros, two of Mexico's most dangerous border cities. Only 570 individuals were granted relief from removal and were allowed to enter the U.S. The rest of the cases are either pending, closed, transferred, or involved voluntary deportation orders.

The highest number of asylum seekers impacted by MPP are from Honduras (35%), Guatemala (24%), Cuba (14%), El Salvador (12%), and Ecuador (7.5%) (TRAC, 2020). Many of those who were removed from the U.S. have sought shelter in crowded tent encampments and are exposed to hazardous conditions such as flooding and intense heat. At the beginning of 2020 and before the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 3,000 asylum seekers were living across from Brownsville, Texas in a tent encampment in Matamoros, Tamaulipas next to the Gateway International Bridge (Sanchez, 2020a). According to an August 20, 2020 border report, approximately 1,000 of those living in the Matamoros camp were children (Sanchez, 2020b).

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND COURT CLOSURE

According to health professionals, the crowded and unsanitary conditions at tent encampments make asylum seekers susceptible to respiratory diseases such as COVID-19 (Brito, 2020). They explain, "with an average of 4 people per tent, communal cooking, meal distribution, and porta potties, any quarantine—self or enforced—is nearly impossible (Leiner et al., 2020, p. 143)." Asylum seekers' susceptibility may also be related to difficulties: (a) following recommended hand hygiene protocols because of poor access to clean water, (b) accessing healthcare services due to a lack of or limited health insurance coverage, and (c) paying for medications to treat underlying health problems and chronic diseases (Brito, 2020). As of September 2020, five migrants have tested positive to COVID-19 at the Matamoros tent encampment (Solis, 2020).

Citing concerns about COVID-19 transmission, on March 20, 2020, the Trump administration indefinitely suspended U.S. immigration court proceedings. This means that asylum seekers who enter the U.S. between ports of entry are no longer being placed in MPP proceedings but are rather expelled to Mexico without ever being processed. The closure of immigration courts are pressuring asylum seekers to swim across the Rio Grande river. Tragically, asylum seekers have drowned in search of a safer life in the U.S. (e.g., Guatemalan asylum seeker Rodrigo Castro; Sanchez, 2020b). Most recently, following Hurricane Hanna, three deaths occurred in the span of 24 hours (Sanchez, 2020b). In response to these deaths and the

inhumane treatment that asylum seekers are experiencing, psychologists must speak up and demand justice for their lives. Research that sheds light on the unique challenges that asylum seekers experience as a result of MPP is vital.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Although previous literature has highlighted the need to improve the quality of life and well-being of asylum-seeking children (Garcini et al., 2020; Warshaw, 2019), additional literature is needed to understand the unique experiences of the asylum-seeking children who are living in tent encampments. In this study, we used testimonio research in the form of asylum seekers' artistic accounts to explore their experiences as children living in "tent city." Our research took place at the Matamoros, Tamaulipas tent encampment, the largest encampment on the Southwest border (Sanchez, 2020). We completed our research prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and before border travel restrictions were implemented. We present participants' art to amplify their voices and to bring visibility to the inhumane conditions they have endured.

METHOD

Testimonio research, "a subjective, critical, and political methodological approach (Cervantes, Flores Carmona, & Torres Fernández, 2018; Domínguez & Noriega, 2020, p.7)," was used in this study to capture the experiences of 7 asylum seeking children who were going through the asylum application process in the U.S.-Mexico border. Emerging out of Latin American studies (Booker, 2002) and in reaction to Eurocentric and traditional research paradigms (Cervantes et al., 2018; Cervantes & Torres Fernández, 2016), testimonio research explores the stories, narratives, and first-person accounts of participants' lived experiences (Hernandez-Arriaga, 2017). Testimonios can be shared in written format (e.g., autobiography, journal entries, letters), oral form (e.g., spoken word, interviews), art, or other materials and are analyzed by the researchers to represent the meaning it has for its author (Domínguez, Hernandez-Arriaga, & Paul, 2020; Hernandez-Arriaga, 2017). This methodological approach "is not meant to be hidden, made intimate, nor kept secret. Rather, testimonio research is meant to catalyze creative dissent and bring to light a wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call for action (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 525)." We relied on artistic testimonios as a decolonizing methodological approach to present the experiences of our participants.

PARTICIPANTS

Seven asylum seekers representing 2 countries were recruited for this study. Five identified as female and 2 identified as male. Ages ranged from 7 to 9 years with an average age of 8 years old. Participants were living at a

migrant camp known as “tent city” in Matamoros, Mexico after: (a) being forcibly displaced from their home country due to a combination of violence, political unrest, absolute poverty, and human rights violations, (b) traveling under cruel conditions and exposed to serious threats across Mexico (e.g., extortion, robbery, physical and sexual assault, etc.), (c) and experiencing long delays in the processing of their asylum claims. All participants were impacted by the implementation of MPP. Participants were given pseudonyms, and all identifying markers were removed from this study (e.g., names blurred from drawings). See Table 1 for more detailed demographic information about participants.

PROCEDURE

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of San Francisco [#1145]. Following receipt of IRB approval, we traveled to Matamoros, Mexico. Prior to conducting any interviews, we reviewed the ethics code for psychologists in Mexico, a product of the Mexican Society of Psychology (i.e., SMP). Once we arrived at “tent city,” two Mexican psychologists were available by phone for consultation during the study. To ensure that our collaboration with the children was not influenced by a colonial or hegemonic approach, we interacted with participants over several days to build rapport and to first address food, clothes, and bedding needs. In addition, local humanitarian volunteers traveled to “tent city” with us to offer supervision. These humanitarian volunteers were familiar with the children and had established a close and trusting relationship with them. The inclusion criteria for this study was the following: (b) ages 7-18 years old, (b) asylum seeking child, (c) Latinx-identified, (d) impacted by MPP. All participating children were accompanied by at least one parent during the study.

Given the sensitive nature of this study, interviews were conducted in Spanish and audio-recorded by the first author, a bilingual/bicultural licensed social worker with qualitative and trauma-informed training. The second author was available by phone during and after the interviews to offer support and assistance to the first author. The interviews were conducted individually under a tent with art supplies, tables, chairs, snacks, toys for play, and coloring book kits.

Prior to drawing their artistic testimonio, the first author reviewed the informed consent form with parents, received assent from children, and stressed that participation was voluntary. Parents and children were told that their names and any identifying information would not appear in any documents or publications. The children and their parent(s) understood that participation was voluntary and that they could discontinue participation at any time. In addition, demographic questions were used to collect data on age, gender, nationality, immigration status, and length

of time living in tent city. Once parents consented and children assented to participate, they were invited to share their artistic testimonios. Participants were told that at the conclusion of our time together, they would have the option to keep their drawing or share their art with others. We explained that their drawings would be showcased at professional presentations and published in academic journals.

Subsequently, participants were asked by the first author to reflect and respond in art form to the following prompt- Using these art supplies, please draw a message that you would like to share with others regarding your experiences here in the camp. The prompt was broad to allow asylum seeking children to explore their experiences freely. Although this study focuses on the experiences of asylum-seeking children, both parents and children were given a small canvas to draw and paint. Some participants requested a second canvas. It is important to note that mental health services were not provided at any point during the study.

All testimonios were drawn and collected in October 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. The audio recordings and drawn testimonios were stored by the first author in an encrypted and locked file. The second author was responsible for de-identifying the drawn testimonios prior to sharing them with others. In addition, both authors committed to continued follow up with the families and children beyond the conclusion of our study. We have maintained ongoing phone communication with all participants and continue to speak with them.

TESTIMONIOS

Attached to each artistic testimonio, we include a brief description of the drawing. In some cases, we also include information about interactions we may have had with participants and their parents during our trip in Matamoros or during subsequent phone conversations after we returned to the United States.

DRAWING 1. AMA A TU PRÓJIMO

The first art piece was drawn by Mariposa, a nine-year-old female from Honduras. She came with her younger sister and both parents to participate in the study. She first drew a river in the middle of the white canvas. On one side of the river, the U.S. side, she drew her “tía” [aunt]. On the Mexican side of the river, she drew her parents and two siblings with a smile and tears streaming down their face. While drawing, Mariposa voiced her dream of being reunited with her tía. Swimming in the river, she drew alligators, the same river in which she bathes-in daily.

When the first author asked Mariposa and her parents about the alligators in the drawing, her father indicated that they both had witnessed their presence in the river. At the far-right end of the river, Mariposa drew a

picture of a police vehicle, which she identified as “la migra.” Under “la migra,” she drew a “puente” [bridge], the same bridge that Mariposa and her family have stood on repeated times to attend their multiple asylum court dates. In her drawing, she also wrote the words, “You’re your neighbor as yourself. My name is [blurred to protect confidentiality] and I want to leave here [i.e., leave tent city] because I cannot be happy, and I cannot sleep.”

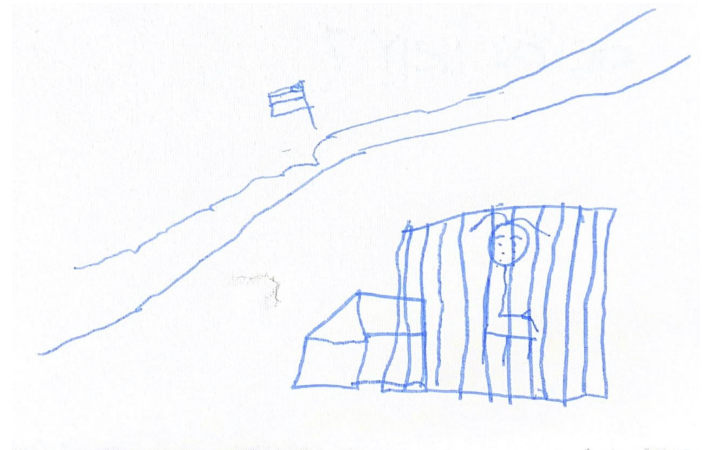
While she continued drawing, she told the first author, “Queremos llegar a los Estados Unidos, ya no quiero estar aquí. [We want to arrive in the United States. I don’t want to be here anymore.]”



DRAWING 2. LA PESADILLA

This art piece was drawn by Luna, a seven-year-old female from Honduras. She came to our study in the company of her father. At a diagonal angle on the canvas, Luna drew the U.S. flag across the Rio Grande. She drew herself on the Mexican side of the river inside a cage. Next to the cage, she drew a tent and explained that this is the same tent in which she sleeps every night. While drawing, she shared, “Extraño a mi mamá y mi casa, pero no estaba segura en mi país [I miss my mom and home, but I wasn’t safe in my country].”

After our return to the U.S., we continued having phone conversations with Luna’s father. During one of our conversations, he indicated that Luna was forced to shelter in isolation with him because they were both exposed to COVID-19. He reported that as a result of the “increased stress” and “isolation” she experienced, she began sleepwalking and experiencing frequent night terrors. According to her father, her time in isolation in addition to the fact that Luna witnessed the removal of a couple of bodies from the river, has haunted her memory.



DRAWING 3. LA TIERRA PROMETIDA

This art piece was drawn by David, a seven-year-old male from Honduras. He came to our study in the company of his mother. While carefully grabbing a marker with his small hands, he proudly shared “Soy de Honduras.” He drew the U.S. on one side of the Rio Grande river and tall trees on both sides of the border. While drawing, he shared quietly with his eyes down, “Esta es America, a donde no me dejan ir [That is America, where they are not letting me go].” He explained that “la migra” had sent him to live in the camp because “no nos quieren [they don’t like us].” In his drawing, he named the U.S., “La Tierra prometida [The promised land].” He elaborated on his hopes to be able to “cruzar la frontera un día con mi familia [cross the border one day with my family]” and discussed his dreams of going to school in the United States, “quiero estudiar [I want to study].” According to his mother, David has not had access to consistent school or learning since they arrived at the tent encampment.



DRAWING 4. NUESTRAS CARPAS

This art piece was drawn by Paolo, a seven-year-old male from Honduras. He came to our study in the company of his mother. With his small hands, he reached over to grab a canvas and asked for markers. Slowly and with focus, he drew tents of different shapes, colors, and sizes, representing the camping tents where asylum seekers sleep and wake up every night and day. Paolo also drew a blue truck on the other side of the river and said, “Aqui esta [here is] la migra.” While he was drawing, his mom shared that Paolo cries at night because his back is in pain from sleeping on a thin mat.



DRAWING 5. FLORIDA

This art piece was drawn by Angelica, a nine-year-old female from Guatemala. She came to our study in the company of her mother. She wrote the word “Florida” on the U.S. side of the border where her “primos [cousins]” are waiting for her. While drawing, she explained that “la migra” policed asylum seekers, “cachando a los que cruzan el río [catching those that crossed the river].” Angelica explained, “Esta es mi familia llorando, ya queremos irnos de aquí porque las condiciones donde vivimos son muy difíciles. Ya no aguantamos [This is my family. They are crying. We want to leave this place because the conditions where we live are very difficult. We can’t tolerate it anymore].”

While she drew, Angelica’s mother shared they both had left their home in Guatemala to escape violence. She explained that the flag that her daughter had drawn, represented “nuestro sueño para cruzar y estar con mi familia [their dream to cross and be with her family].”



DRAWING 6. LA JAULA

This art piece was drawn by Esperanza, a seven-year-old female from Honduras. She came to our study in the company of her mother and father. She appeared excited to share her thoughts as part of this study. She took her time focusing intently on drawing the Rio Grande. Then, she drew a small U.S. flag next to her tia [aunt] on the U.S. side. On the Mexican side, she drew herself all alone trapped in a cage. She explained, “Yo ya me quiero ir de aquí. Quiero que el Presidente de Estados Unidos nos ayude. Tengo miedo. Ya quiero dormir en una cama. [I want to leave this place. I want the President of the United States to help us. I am afraid. I can’t wait to sleep in a bed].”

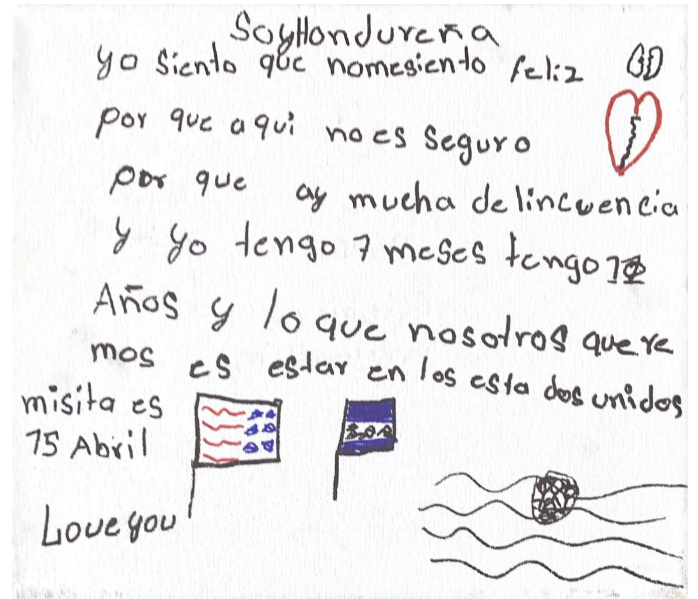
After our return to the U.S., we continued communicating with her father using group messaging (i.e., Whatsapp). In one of those messages, he stated “lo que ella

está viviendo es puro sufrimiento [what she is living through is pure suffering].”



DRAWING 7. MIS PALABRAS

This art piece was drawn by Luz, a nine-year-old female from Honduras. She came to our study in the company of her mother and father. To start, Luz wrote down on the canvas her national identity, “Soy Hondureña [I am Honduran].” On the bottom right corner of the canvas, she drew the river and explained, “Este es el río y aquí hay un familia cruzando para Estados Unidos [Here is the river and there is a family crossing to the United States].” She drew the U.S. and the Honduran flags side by side and wrote her family’s asylum court date. Rather than using additional images, Luz focused on using words to share her message in Spanish. She explained that she wanted others to understand what she is living through, “I do not feel happy because it is not safe here. There is a lot of violence and I have seven months here and I am seven years old. What we want is to be in the United States.” Next to these words she drew two broken hearts, one on top of the other. On the bottom left corner, she signed off, “Love You.”



DISCUSSION

Using testimonio research, we explored the experiences of 7 Central American asylum-seeking children in a “migrant camp” in Matamoros, Mexico. The testimonios were collected in an open-air tent encampment, where asylum seekers have lived in unsafe, unsanitary, and hazardous conditions while they await their asylum interview. We presented their testimonios in the form of drawings to bring to light the human rights violations taking place every day that MPP is in effect. The art pieces show images of the Rio Grande, bridges, cages, alligators, tents, tears, broken hearts, and representations of “la migra.” While drawing, children recounted repeated experiences of fear, isolation, and inhumane conditions. Their drawings display the pain and suffering caused by the U.S. and Mexican governments’ failure to protect asylum seekers, especially children. Through their drawings, we can see that they are calling on others to witness their harrowing journeys.

LIMITATIONS

The testimonios in this study should be understood within the context of certain limitations. The asylum-seeking children in this study were only from one “migrant camp,” the Matamoros, Tamaulipas tent encampment. In addition, artistic testimonios were collected only once; therefore, this study does not report on how participants’ experiences may have changed over time. Future studies may benefit from including asylum seeking children from a variety of areas across the U.S.’s southern border to explore how their experiences may be different based on geographic location or border crossing and should explore how their experiences change days and even months after living in “tent city.” Although these limitations exist, the current

study provides initial information that can help health professionals better understand the experiences of children who are impacted by the “Remain in Mexico” policy.

ADVOCACY IMPLICATIONS

Psychology research has shown that psychological stress in disadvantaged communities can be reduced through access to safe housing, economic security, adequate nutrition and education, affordable health care, and quality childcare (Bullock, 2019), all resources that asylum seekers in “tent” city are lacking due to MPP. Therefore, we demand the eradication of MPP. To accomplish the eradication of MPP and other racist immigration policies, a broad coalition of health associations and experts such “as health economists, health policy groups, and policymakers” will have to boldly protest the ways in which these policies harm the physical and psychological health of asylum seekers, especially children (Domínguez et al., 2020, p. 2). Psychologists from the National Latinx Psychological Association (NLPA), for example, should collaborate with other health associations and build interdisciplinary partnerships to hold the federal government accountable to protect those who are most vulnerable. We also propose that all members of NLPA must leverage their power to explain how oppressive policies such as MPP are rooted in racism, anti-Blackness, nativism, and xenophobia (Domínguez & Noriega, 2020).

MPP and other racist policies will not be eradicated unless psychologists move beyond the comfort of the therapy room, the classroom, and the research lab. Psychologists will have to adopt a boots-on-the-ground approach and participate in an active national effort around migrant justice. Such participation can be accomplished by participating actively in grassroots and humanitarian efforts that work to improve the lives of asylum seekers. Active participation requires ongoing struggle, conviction for change, and the political will to speak-up against oppressive systems of power such as Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Those of us who have witnessed the relentless fear and helplessness that asylum seeking children are living through, as portrayed in their artistic testimonios, must speak out, uplift their voices, and amplify their stories to demand change. As professionals in the field of mental health, we must demand the immediate eradication of MPP.

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Dr. Belinda Hernandez-Arriaga identifies as a Mexican social worker and dissenter who fights for the abolition of racist immigration policies and carceral systems. **Dr. Daniela G. Domínguez** author identifies as a Queer Latinx psychologist, abolitionist educator from Mexico, and activist who is fighting in collaboration with others to abolish Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Both authors are assistant professors at the University of San Francisco and volunteer members of the Bay Area Border Relief, a humanitarian organization that serves and advocates for children and families seeking their right to asylum. Drs. Belinda Hernandez-Arriaga and Daniela G. Domínguez are also health professionals with a special interest in trauma and migrant justice. Between 2018 and 2020, they took multiple trips to the U.S.-Mexico border to support asylum seekers with first-aid crisis supplies distribution, fundraising efforts (e.g., crowdfunding to pay for tents and showers), and referrals for legal support and housing. Their pre-existing relationship with asylum seekers at “tent city” in Matamoros, established a foundation of trust and facilitated participants’ support of this research study.