DECOLONIZING FAMILY STUDIES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY EXAMINING HOW WOMANHOOD AND MOTHERHOOD ARE PERCEIVED AND EXPERIENCED BY MAYA WOMEN IN GUATEMALA

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation was to apply a decolonizing methodological approach to a community-based research project and to challenge the processes of coloniality embedded in the discipline of family studies. Therefore, this dissertation consists of two distinct studies. The first was a community-based research project that explored how Maya women perceived and experienced womanhood and motherhood in a rural community in Guatemala. Maya womanhood was primarily experienced through three major family dynamics including their childhood upbringing, their relationship with men as adults, and their roles as mothers. The second study of this dissertation was a critical autoethnographic study that centered on the lived experience of the primary investigator of this first study. This critical autoethnography highlights how the doctoral candidate experienced the tensions of being in an institution grounded in neoliberal Eurocentric policies while intentionally building a community-based project with a local collaborator in a Maya community in Guatemala. The findings of this dissertation contribute to decolonial feminist literature and provide insights to fellow scholars, who are committed to social justice, human rights, and challenging the systems that continue to subjugate marginalized communities.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My connection to Guatemala began in Summer 2012. As I completed my first year in my master's program at Boston University, I wanted to take advantage of one of my last summers as a student by traveling to Latin America. Although I had spent time during college in South America, I had yet to travel to Central America. After some planning, I decided to spend a month in Guatemala with a homestay family and volunteer at a local shelter for children. Prior to arriving in Guatemala, my academic mentor in my master's program challenged me to critically reflect on how privilege has skewed my own perception of the world that we live in. It was through this challenge that I realized how uncomfortable I was accepting and owning up to my privileges due to personal guilt and fear of taking on this responsibility. However, I learned that if I did not fully engage in this process, I would always be living in a deeply inauthentic way and not be present for life-to-life human connections. It was through this intentional, introspective work that I was able to observe and engage with families in Guatemala and learned more about their worldview, culture, and history. Although I could only be there for a limited amount of time, a profound impression was left on my life. With every encounter that I had, I felt a sincere warmth, a rich sense of humanity as each person carried themselves with incredible volition, integrity, and an unwavering desire and commitment toward constructing a better life for themselves and their families.

As I wholeheartedly absorbed the beautiful land and culture, I remember as a 24-year-old, I was deeply struggling to find my place in this complicated world. An expat named David approached me one day while I was reading a book at a park in Quetzaltenango. We struck up a conversation about all that was wrong with America. David was 42 years old, originally from Detroit and moved to Guatemala in 1996 to get away from the corporate greed and obsessive

culture of consumerism in the United States. We wrestled with this idea of modernity and how out of touch we as Americans were becoming with ourselves and the natural world. Near the end of our conversation, David questioned me, “Why do you want go back?” At that time, I remember feeling conflicted, but I gave him a practical response saying I wanted to earn my guidance counselor license so that I could work in the Boston Public School District. David just sighed and left with some parting words saying, “Well, hope you don’t sell your soul while you do that.”

It has been over a decade since that encounter, but I still remember it as if it took place yesterday. Did I ultimately end up selling my soul? How has adulthood changed me? In the end, there came a point in my career as a guidance counselor where it was time for me to move on. As much as I believed in my students and their vast potential, I lost a tremendous amount of faith and trust in the educational institution. I knew that I did not fundamentally agree with the contradicting values and beliefs of the U.S. public education system. I directly saw the level of trauma and demoralization that our schools were inflicting on so many youth, particularly those from marginalized communities and it profoundly disturbed me to my core. I knew that if I just accepted the status quo and conformed to how society operated, I would be selling a tremendous part of my soul. Instead of doing that, I longed to make sense of what I was experiencing and discover new tools to re-engage with society with a renewed sense of commitment and purpose. It was from this spiritual, emotional, and mental standpoint that I decided to pursue my doctoral degree at Michigan State University.

My doctoral journey was by no means a linear, simple path. It was full of detours and dead ends with a whole array of emotions ranging from frustration and feeling lost to purposeful and liberating. My dissertation is an embodiment of that journey. It consists of important

theoretical underpinnings that explore the ways coloniality continues to permeate our institutions and the creation of alternative ways of being and resistance as a doctoral student. This introduction chapter begins by presenting the decolonial feminist framework, which serves as the theoretical foundation for this dissertation. This framework addresses how coloniality continues to manifest in sociopolitical systems including our educational structures, which further perpetuates a racialized and gendered form of oppression and subjugation. It then provides sociohistorical contexts on Guatemala to help inform the reader on the historical and political systems that Maya families are inextricably a part of as they navigate their daily lives within their communities. Lastly, it highlights the need for more decolonial research particularly in the social sciences, a scholarly field that greatly emphasizes diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Decolonial[1] Feminist Theory

Decoloniality is a praxis that centers on dismantling a racialized, capitalist, and gendered global system that continues to subjugate and exploit populations for the gain of others. Aníbal Quijano characterized this system as the "coloniality of power," which refers to the Eurocentric capitalist power structure that dominates "four basic areas of human existence: sex, labor, collective authority and subjectivity/intersubjectivity, their resources and products" (Quijano, 2001-2, p.1). Quijano posits that during the European colonization of the Americas, racial and gender identities emerged as a newly formed hierarchy that could be exploited for the gains of the European elites. In other words, race became a central mechanism to establish the superiority and inferiority of the population. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) argue that "coloniality is constitutive, not derivative, of modernity" (p. 4). Put simply, modernity cannot function without

[1] Decolonial/decoloniality as a term in this dissertation refers to Mignolo & Walsh's (2018) work on decoloniality; it is "a way, option, standpoint, analytic, project, practice, and praxis" (p.5) while contending within the parameters of modernity/coloniality and reimagining alternative ways of being.

the forces of coloniality. The coloniality of power was formed in the 16th century when European colonizers invaded the Americas. Although sociopolitical shifts have taken place throughout the subsequent centuries, this fundamental structure of power (coloniality/modernity) exists to this day as the agenda to modernize and 'westernize' continues to be the primary aim of global development initiatives.

Lugones (2008) critiques and subsequently builds on Quijano's coloniality of power by exploring more deeply how gender operates within this power structure. She argues that Quijano's understanding of the coloniality of gender was too narrow in scope. Although Quijano highlights the intersection of race and gender, it does not consider how it excludes the experiences and identities of non-white colonized women. In other words, "it accommodates rather than disrupts the narrowing of gender domination" (Lugones, 2008, p.9). Additionally, Lugones characterizes the coloniality of gender based on "light" and "dark" sides. The light side enforced the gender identities based on the lives of white bourgeois men and women, and the modern/colonial meaning of being a man and a woman. In other words, the understanding of manhood and womanhood only referred to the lives of White bourgeois people. Inversely, the dark side constituted the gender system that embodies and perpetuates violence and the total dehumanization of non-white colonized people including Indigenous and African slaves. Based on this system, non-white colonized people were viewed as non-human and therefore genderless. A defining quality of this system of gender is the "categorial, dichotomous, hierarchical logic as central to modern, colonial, capitalist thinking about race, gender, and sexuality" (Lugones, 2010, p. 742). According to Lugones, the modern colonial gender system must be explored in its totality to generate a genuinely liberating praxis.

The coloniality of power and gender are structures that are deeply engrained in Guatemalan society (Martinez Salazar, 2012). The historical legacy of Spanish colonization, the brutal genocide of the Maya people in the 20th century, and the overwhelming initiatives to modernize by the Guatemalan government is an enduring trauma that continues to confront Maya communities. The subsequent section will provide a brief historical context on how the coloniality of power in Guatemala was formed and has been sustained to this present day.

Coloniality of Power in Guatemala

Guatemalan Indigenous activist and 1992 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Rigoberta Menchú (1983), once shared, "We have kept our identity hidden because we have resisted" (p. 220). The coloniality of power and the modern colonial gender system have been a perpetual and sustained structure within Guatemalan society. Guatemala is a nation with rich cultural diversity where over 25 sociolinguistics groups exist and an estimated up to 60% of the 17 million total population self-identify as Indigenous (Global Americans, 2017). The Maya civilization has endured over the course of thousands of years and was known for their advanced writing system, which was disrupted after the Spanish invasion of Mesoamerica in the 16th century (UNC-Chapel Hill, 2012). For the next 300 years, the Spaniards brutally colonized the present-day region of Guatemala and, in 1821, the elite and powerful in Guatemala organized to formally declare independence from Spain and subsequently merged with the Federation of Central American nations, which included Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. The complete independence of Guatemala was established in 1840 after Rafael Carrera defeated the armed forces of the federation. Although the nation of Guatemala was established, the colonial structure and violence toward Maya people was unwavering. Rigoberta Menchú (1992) argued,

> To speak of the last 500 years is to speak of the oppressed of America, of women, of Indigenous peoples; to speak of the Third World, of life's depth of meaning and the experiences of all the peoples who inhabit the so-called Discovery… When we speak about democracy…we speak of fictitious democracy. Democracy for whom? Who determines what democracy is, how it is defined for the lives of people who day after day plant the coffee, do the hardest work and receive disdain rather than a proper salary befitting his or her effort? (p. 63-64)

The next century after formal independence, Guatemalan society underwent various economic reforms capitalizing on exports such as coffee and bananas. In 1899, the U.S.-owned United Fruit Company, a transnational corporation which traded tropical fruits grown in Latin America, was established and became a dominating and colonizing force on government policy going into the 20th century (Bucheli, 2008).

Near the end of World War II, Guatemala experienced the beginning of democratization after the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico was overthrown in 1944. Through the newly established leadership of President Juan José Arévalo, new social-democratic reforms were introduced which included free speech. Succeeding Arévalo, President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán continued his predecessor's efforts to further strengthen democracy in Guatemala by expanding voting rights, encouraging labor organizing, and introducing an agrarian reform law which redistributed private land to landless peasants. His progressive policies were perceived as a threat to the United Fruit Company, which then lobbied the U.S government to dismantle the Guatemalan leadership (Bucheli, 2008). In 1954, a U.S.-backed military coup forcibly removed Guzmán from office and brought right-wing militarists into power resulting in the authoritarian leadership under President Carlos Castillo Armas. Subsequently, political resistance organized by leftist insurgencies led to

a violent period from 1960 to 1996 and resulted in over 200,000 casualties of which the majority were from Maya communities (Taft-Morales, 2019). According to the Truth Commission's Report (1997), they found agents of the Guatemalan state committed formal acts of genocide against the Maya people and that out of all the human rights violations that took place, 93% were committed by the state forces and related paramilitary groups. In 1996, the signing of the Peace Accord formally concluded this conflict, but Maya survivors to this day have continued to demand justice for the inhumane atrocities that took place (Velasquez Nimatuj, 2016).

Although the genocide formally ended, the coloniality of power within Guatemalan society continues to subjugate and threaten Maya communities. A report found that in the first half of 2019, over 300 attacks on human rights defenders took place including murders, attempted murders, and criminal charges (Elias, 2020). In addition to state violence, there are profound inequalities that disproportionately affect Maya families including in education, healthcare access, and employment opportunities. Given the high rate of poverty and violence, development agencies such as the USAID and the U.N. have focused significant investments to "empower" Maya children, youth, and women. The problematic notion of these concerted efforts is the fact that the modern/colonial forces are the primary stakeholders who are instigating these development initiatives and promoting individualized solutions to structural problems. For example, Boyd (2016) argues that women rights initiatives in developing countries, that supposedly is committed to promoting women empowerment, are in actuality reinforcing gender inequities through capitalist modern/colonial logic. This logic includes taking advantage of consumer markets, exploiting cheap labor, and increasing prospective borrowers in the credit markets (Boyd, 2016). The modern/colonial logic is fundamentally centered on the idea of "empowerment as window dressing for economic expansion" (Boyd, 2016, p.161). Within recent

decades, non-profit organizations typically funded by Western donors have proliferated throughout Guatemala with a specific agenda on servicing Maya communities. Despite proposed aims of empowerment and dismantling systemic barriers, the capitalist modern/colonial forces are the primary agents facilitating this change. Put simply, the coloniality of power endures and thrives to this day in Guatemala.

Decolonizing[2] the Social Sciences

As Maya communities continue to experience sociopolitical marginalization in Guatemalan society, research projects that amplify Indigenous voices are vitally needed. That said, historically, research has demonstrated to be problematic due to its strong Western bias and prejudice (Smith, 2012). Within the social sciences, scholars have argued that disciplines such as psychology impose Western standards as normative development without any meaningful emphasis on the contexts that human development takes place (Ciofalo, 2019; Tuck, 2009). Instead, they argue that greater value is placed within a positivist paradigm that centers on universal measurability on a given phenomenon (Deloria, 2009; Smith, 2012). The field of Indigenous psychologies emerged to counter this tendency and is defined as a "systems of knowledge and wisdom based on non-Western paradigms originating in their particular ecologies and cultures" (Ciofalo, 2019, p.7). Dutta (2018) further posits scholars can perpetuate colonizing processes due to the presumed authority they take on in their role as a researcher. Moreover, critics have argued that there is a history of depicting marginalized populations from a "damage-centered" perspective which can be dehumanizing and perpetuates colonization and systemic oppression (Dutta, 2018; Tuck, 2009).

[2] Decolonize/Decolonizing as a term in this dissertation refers to the "de-linking" or decolonial epistemic shift (Mignolo, 2007).

To prevent this loss of personhood, Paris and Winn (2014) posit how vital it is for researchers to continuously be intentional in creating humanizing spaces when conducting research with historically marginalized communities. They conceptualize humanizing approaches as a decolonizing process that builds "relationships of care and dignity and dialogic consciousness raising for both researchers and participants" (p. xvi). They further argue that the researcher-participant relationship must be centered on respect and reciprocity and be a collaborative and interactive process as opposed to a one-sided approach with the power and interpretive authority being attributed only to the researchers. Smith (2012) posits that decolonizing methodology is a critical approach that analyzes the ways coloniality may be perpetuated particularly when it comes to how we understand knowledge and what we deem as legitimate scientific inquiry. Over the years, an intellectual movement has emerged among scholars to decolonize traditional understanding of methodological approaches particularly when conducting research among historically marginalized and minoritized populations (Maldonado-Torres, 2017). By applying a decolonizing methodological approach in my dissertation, my hope is to challenge the colonial narratives that often emerge when describing Maya families in Guatemala and to humanize and dignify a culture and people that historically has been subjugated and excluded.

Neoliberalism and Academia

That said, it is imperative to critically examine the significant role that educational institutions play in how scholars organize and produce their work. Since the 1980s, academic capitalism has had an increasingly greater impact on how universities were managed. Neoliberal capitalist policies "are characterized by a combination of free market rhetoric and intensive managerial control practices" (Lorenz, 2012, p. 600). This logic include privatizing education, deregulation, and instituting a market-based restructuring in how universities are operated and

managed (Burke, 2020). Furthermore, the increased commercialization of research and teaching has been intensified due to a decrease in government funding toward these institutions (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). Within a neoliberal institution, faculty and students are subjected to market ideology where faculty are heavily scrutinized based on performativity (Ball, 2003) and students are viewed more as consumers than learners (Desierto & Maio, 2020). By imposing standardized evaluations on academics, it incentivizes productivity, measurable progress, and competition, all outcomes that are considered superior in market logic (Lorenz, 2012). A systematic review on how neoliberalism impacts academics found that health consequences include high anxiety, stress, insecurity, fear and frustration (Mula-Falcón & Caballero, 2022).

In addition, neoliberal policies promote and sustain the coloniality of power through gender domination. Feminist scholars have critiqued neoliberal policies in how they perpetuate gender inequities and preserve the modern/colonial parameters of gender (Burke, 2020). Atkins and Vicars (2016) articulate,

> Women in positions of power are only able to fulfil those roles to the satisfaction of the neoliberal academy by describing and producing a self which identifies with particular concepts of maleness. Similarly, this might also explain the relative invisibility of those "feminine men" who locate themselves in feminised discourses of caring and compassion which are in tension with those concepts of "masculine" maleness which are associated with leadership and power within the academy. (p. 260)

Given the widespread presence that academic capitalism has in educational institutions, the efforts to promote decolonial inquiry and methodology within academia are that much more complex and multileveled. It was within this premise that I began my doctoral journey. As I became more familiarized with decolonial feminist theory, I decided to apply a decolonial lens to

my dissertation research among Maya families in Guatemala. However, as I navigated my doctoral program, I slowly became more aware of the institutional colonizing forces that I was contending with. It was during these uncomfortable and tense experiences that I realized the critical insights I was gaining when applying a decolonial lens as a doctoral student and hence decided to integrate my own lived experience into my dissertation research. As academic institutions espouse their supposed commitment to social justice, inclusivity, and equity, an honest reflection must take place among leaders to evaluate how institutional processes stifle creative/critical thinking, innovation, and ultimately the humanization of the people including faculty and students. Without substantive and thoughtful efforts to promote social change, the discourse on social justice, inclusivity, and equity only become buzzwords with no real meaning and value.

Dissertation Study

The purpose of this dissertation was to apply a decolonial lens to a community-based research project and further challenge the processes of coloniality embedded in this field of family studies. The first study in this dissertation is a community-based family research project that explored how Maya women experience and define womanhood and motherhood in a rural community in Guatemala. The second study was a critical autoethnographic study that centered on my lived experience as I navigated my doctoral journey and applied a decolonial feminist lens to every phase of my research project including the formation of research questions, data collection, and analysis. This critical autoethnography highlights how I experienced the tensions of being in an institution grounded in neoliberal Eurocentric policies while intentionally building a community-based project with a local collaborator in a Maya community in Guatemala.

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CHAPTER 2: DECOLONIZING GENDER: EXPLORING THE MEANING-MAKING AND EXPERIENCES OF WOMANHOOD AMONG MAYA MOTHERS IN GUATEMALA

Abstract

Decoloniality posits that the underlying driving force of modernization is the processes of coloniality. Among non-governmental and development projects in Guatemala, great emphasis is placed on gender equality and women empowerment but these efforts are often rooted in colonial/modern logic. These initiatives neglect to critically examine how Maya women understand what it means to be a woman within their own family and community structures. To address this, this study using a decolonizing methodological approach explores how Maya women define and experience womanhood in rural Guatemala. Nine Maya mothers between the ages of 20 to 56 were recruited to participate in this study. Through inductive thematic analysis, the study found womanhood was primarily experienced through their family dynamics during their upbringing, their relationship with men, and their roles as mothers. Findings challenge the idea of modern/colonial logic of empowerment for women and emphasize the profound role that Maya womanhood and motherhood have in promoting agency, a sense of purpose, and meaningfulness. These insights challenge the development initiatives that often define women empowerment only within the parameters of education and career advancements.

Introduction

Grassroots initiatives promoting girls and women's rights and empowerment in Guatemala are largely spearheaded by non-profit organizations and international agencies. Based on 2020 data, there are 1,394 non-governmental organizations (NGO) and 796 foundations officially registered in Guatemala for a population of more than 17 million people (Rolland, 2020; World Bank, 2023). Among these initiatives, organizations offer services in secondary and vocational education (MAIA Impact, 2023), gender-based violence support (SERniña, 2016), and expansion to markets for women-owned businesses (USAID, 2023) with a particular focus to serve Maya communities due to widespread socioeconomic marginalization. Despite this emphasis on Indigenous women empowerment, these organizations, which are often funded by Western nations, rarely make a concerted effort to understand how Maya women perceive and define what womanhood means to them particularly within their family and community structures. Decolonial scholars have critiqued organizations for perpetuating coloniality due to the power imbalance in their decision-making and program implementation (Dutta, 2018). It brings forth ethical concerns when NGOs create programming and services with their own assumptions of what Maya women should strive towards and become. In other words, this agenda of what 'progress' looks like can be a colonizing force which Maya communities have for centuries resisted and fought.

Decoloniality is a praxis grounded as a response to coloniality in the modern world (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Anibal Quijano (2000) theorized that the European colonization of the Americas established the coloniality of power, a racialized and gendered Eurocentric capitalist system of power that has endured to the present day. A core principle of the coloniality of power is underpinned by the notion of modernity and progress. In other words, coloniality is the

underlying driving force of modernity. Hence, to promote modernization is to colonize and generate a universal notion of what progress and development should look like.

An example of this is the widely embraced initiative for girls and women to pursue their education and careers as opposed to marriage and motherhood, which often are viewed as traditional gender norms. Although educational and career gender disparities are certainly a social issue in Guatemalan society, it is critical to unpack the assumptions this makes. In other words, are marriage and motherhood viewed by NGOs in opposition to women's empowerment and progress? What does motherhood and womanhood mean to Maya women? Are they viewed as detrimental forces to their own sense of growth and identity? By utilizing a decolonial feminist framework, this study explores these questions by examining how Maya mothers perceive and experience womanhood in Guatemala.

The Coloniality of Power in Guatemala

When describing present-day Guatemala, it is critical to highlight that there are various narratives that often emerge. Traditional Euro-American perspectives from international agencies such as the United Nations and World Bank often portray Guatemala from a deficit-based perspective. A deficit model of families is problematic as it focuses on shortcomings and frequently characterizes marginalized families as deficient and suboptimal based on Standard North American Family qualities (Minniear, 2023). An important aspect of decolonizing women’s progress in Guatemala is to challenge the modern/colonial logic of what progress means. For example, within this logic, empowerment is narrowly defined within the parameters of education and career advancements. Hence, international agencies frequently highlight statistics such as the high education dropout rate of Indigenous girls in Guatemala (six out of ten before age 15), and their young age for marriage (four out of ten girls were married by age 17)

(UNFPA, 2014). In addition to educational and marital outcomes, according to the USAID (2022), Guatemalan women are underrepresented in the labor force, where only 37% of women in Guatemala participate in the formal labor market (as opposed to 85% of men), and 28% have access to financial credit and markets (as opposed to 66% of men). These statistical narratives are problematic due to their underlying assumptions. In other words, for NGOs, can Maya women experience growth and empowerment in non-educational and career spaces?

Although gender disparities reflect a reality for many Maya women in Guatemala, it is important as scholars to examine more critically on how neoliberal capitalist policies construct colonizing narratives when it refers to the lives of Maya people. In other words, the formal labor market and educational structures deeply reflect Western institutions that have been forcibly imposed onto Indigenous families and communities. Although these institutions inevitably affect how families navigate their daily lives, it is important that as scholars, we do not perpetuate coloniality by imposing modern/colonial logic and values when conducting studies with Indigenous communities. Instead, decolonial studies that center and amplify the voices, self-determination, and experiences of historically marginalized communities are imperative.

Coloniality and Gender

Decolonial theory in critical ways addresses these challenges as it expands how coloniality is broadly examined. Decolonial theorists argue that modernity is inextricably linked to coloniality (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Quijano, 2000). Quijano (2000) argues that the original concept of modernity was formed through the colonization of the Americas in the 16th century. He further elucidates that through colonization, a new world order, which he frames as the coloniality of power, was established. The coloniality of power refers to a world system based on a racialized and gendered hierarchy with profound political and economic implications.

Moreover, this system deeply influenced the power of knowledge in that it gave birth to the racialized ideas of modernity and rationality. According to Quijano (2000), the coloniality of power strategically used race as a legitimizing force in the inhumane domination of what was then seen as "inferior races" including African and Indigenous peoples. This racialized hierarchy brought forth the notion that whiteness equaled rational, civilized, and modern. Decolonial theorists argue that this racialized colonial structure continues to exist in the present day (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). According to Allweiss (2021), coloniality is defined as, "the global continuities of colonial structures and their operation through raced and gendered capitalist expansion and structures" (p. 209). This colonial structure exists in all modern-day industries and in recent years, scholars have begun to critically examine the effects of coloniality in education (Kincheloe & Stenberg, 2008; Stanton, 2014), public health (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2012), social work (Gray & Coates, 2010), and psychology (Kim et al., 2006).

Critiquing and building on the coloniality of power, Maria Lugones (2008) introduced the coloniality of gender to outline the modern/colonial system of gender. She challenges the hegemonic feminism advocated by predominantly White women as another colonial mechanism to negate the voices and experiences of non-white colonized women. The origin of the modern/colonial ways of gender referred to "the European bourgeois woman...as someone who reproduced race and capital through her sexual purity, passivity, and being homebound in the service of the white, European, bourgeois man" (Lugones, 2010, p. 743). In other words, hegemonic feminism spearheaded by White women has been to gain rights and be viewed as equals among White men within the colonial structure of power but not to fundamentally dismantle the system itself. Therefore, this hegemonic form of feminist struggle was still bounded by the modern/colonial logic.

The establishment of the coloniality of power during the European colonization of the Americas forged the dichotomous hierarchies including the human and non-human (Quijano, 2000). Lugones (2010) expounds,

> Under the imposed gender framework, the bourgeois white Europeans were civilized; they were fully human. The hierarchical dichotomy as a mark of the human also became a normative tool to damn the colonized. The behaviors of the colonized and their personalities/souls were judged as bestial and thus non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful (p. 743).

Thus, the hegemonic notion of gender was fundamentally rooted in the modern/colonial logic hence erasing any space for other belief systems and cosmology belonging to the colonized.

In addition, feminist postcolonial theory similarly examines the relations between Western and Indigenous women and the complicated history that colonization has had on women's movements globally. Historically, evidence of coloniality has been observed in the women's movement in that race was frequently removed from the sociopolitical discourse and that women were categorized into the first world and third world cultures which were rooted in racist undertones (Lewis & Mills, 2003). In addition, Western scholarship has historically characterized non-Western women with dehumanizing qualities such as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, [and] victimized" (Mohanty, 1988, p. 65)," which further reinforced the colonized position of non-Western women.

A major criticism of Western feminist theory is the essentialization of so-called third-world women and the blatant disregard for their heterogeneity (Mohanty, 1988). In other words, rather than examining Indigenous women's experience as a monolithic entity, feminist postcolonial theory argues for multidimensional, nuanced approach to understanding the

contextual factors to authentically capture the lived experiences of women from non-Western cultures. Building on this, scholars have also argued the critical importance of grassroots perspective in understanding cultural and political dynamics occurring within non-Western nations (Lewis & Mills, 2003). In other words, rather than deeming traditional practices as gender oppressive from a Western interventionist approach, feminist postcolonial theory argues for the women of non-Western nations be encouraged to set their own agenda, interpretations, and approaches.

This framework is used here to examine concepts such as womanhood and motherhood to ensure a sociohistorical understanding of terms that have been previously assumed given different pedagogical and theoretical assumptions. Rather than thoughtfully investigating the extensive historical and cultural contexts, Western-based NGOs that promote women rights and empowerment frequently establish their own definitions and scope of what Maya women should strive for. Additionally, these non-local entities often determine the skills Maya women need to attain 'success' in society, which is fundamentally rooted in the colonial structure of power. In other words, instead of the goal being liberation, the agenda lies in adapting Maya communities to a modern/colonial power structure that is inherently racist and sexist.

Womanhood in Latin America

In Latin American culture, gender dynamics heavily influence family structures and dynamics. Specifically, machismo is a gender ideology that promotes the superiority and control of men over women and is a prevalent force in Maya women's lives. It is viewed as a subculture of the patriarchal structure in Latin America (Wands & Mirzoev, 2022) and is often expressed through hyper-masculinity in the form of sexual and physical aggression (Larite, 2011). In addition, machismo has profound colonial ties. Hardin (2002) states,

> Machismo is a legacy of the Conquest, of the Spanish conquistadores and the two-spirit. It was the product of the rape of indigenous women, the response to indigenous imperial ritual, and the sublimation of indigenous male sexualities and genders. It was a response to social and religious control of the male body (p. 20).

An ethnographic study examining machismo and Maya women's mental health revealed the high rate of distress that Maya women were experiencing due to problematic male behaviors including alcoholism, control over household income, extramarital relationships and promiscuity, prohibiting women from working, and control over household decision-making (Carr, 2016). As Wands & Mirzoev (2022) examined intimate-partner violence (IPV) among Maya women in Guatemala and found that most participants viewed machismo as a primary cause for the violence they were experiencing by their partners. Another study explored how gender-based violence influenced the mental health outcomes of Maya women in Guatemala and found that these victims of IPV experienced emotional distress including sadness, physical ailments, fear, and suicidal ideation (Rogg & Pezzia 2023).

To combat machismo, many NGOs in Guatemala have focused their efforts on educating Maya women about their rights and providing Maya girls and young women with educational and career opportunities to challenge gender inequality. An ethnographic study explored these Maya girls' empowerment initiatives in Guatemala and found the complicated ways womanhood was integrated in their programming and services. Wehr (2014) particularly notes that discussions on love, marriage, and starting families were intentionally ignored among these girls. In one particular case, situations were observed where older female mentors who facilitated these groups would suddenly disappear and not return without any explanation to the participants. Speculation among the girls was that the mentor either got married or pregnant and it was

perceived as a taboo topic to bring up in the program. Examples such as this highlight the problematic ways womanhood was being embraced by empowerment programs and their facilitators.

Current Study

To provide deeper insights on Maya women's experiences, this present study explores how Maya women perceive and experience womanhood and motherhood within their family and community structures. It expands the literature on decolonial feminist literature and contextualize it within the Maya community in Guatemala. This study is a qualitative community-based research project which consisted of semi-structured interviews with Maya mothers in a rural community in Guatemala.

Methods

Study Site

Data for this study was collected in Panajachel, Guatemala from October 2022 to January 2023. The study was conducted in the Lake Atitlan community in the Sololá Department, which is approximately 2.5 hours from the capital city of Guatemala City. Kaqchikel and Tzutujil Indigenous people make up to 90% of the population in the villages along Lake Atitlan (Britannica, 2013). This community is known for many foreign tourists and expatriates due to the scenic views of the lake and surrounding volcanoes. Due to its strong presence of foreigners, non-profit organizations have become widely present in the communities surrounding Lake Atitlan of which majority have been founded by foreigners hoping to provide resources and opportunities to local Maya families. Among these NPOs, services particularly toward girls and women are prevalent. These services include mentoring, maternal health services, education, and entrepreneurship training.

Study Design

This exploratory study developed through a community-based collaboration with a Maya mother, who worked as a local freelance interpreter and translator in her local village in the Solola Department. The study applied a decolonial lens to every phase of the research process including the formation of research questions, data collection, and data analysis. A decolonial lens entails the active engagement and commitment of the researcher to practice critical reflexivity to examine whether preconceived judgements, emotions, and assumptions influence any aspect of the research process. As the first author was educated and trained in Western institutions, it was imperative to persistently engage in this introspective work to ensure that coloniality would not be perpetuated throughout the course of this study. This introspective effort consisted of constant reflective journaling, discussions with the community partner in every phase of the study, and a mentorship with a scholar who had years of experience in decolonial praxis rooted within a Maya sociohistorical context. The research agenda was informed by Smith's (2012) metaphor of Indigenous research as the ebb and flow of an ocean consisting of four directions: decolonization, healing, transformation, and mobilization and tides representing "movement, change, process, life, inward and outward flows of ideas, reflections, and actions" (p. 120). Instead of the traditional linear way of conducting research, this study embraced a cyclical approach that allowed flexibility for changes as the collaboration with the community partner and circumstances evolved over the course of the study.

Participants

Eligibility criteria for the study included identifying as a woman, mother, 18 or older, and of Maya ethnic background. Participants included nine women between the ages of 20 to 56

(mean age 35). All participants had biological children, identified as Maya Kaqchikel and resided near Lake Atitlan for most of their lives.

Materials

This study utilized a semi-structured interview protocol. The questions were formulated centering on various lifespan developments including girlhood and womanhood during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood based on Maya literature and scholars whose expertise were rooted in Maya communities (Carr, 2016, Wehr, 2014). In addition, probing questions were developed to facilitate more in-depth responses from the participants. Example questions include: Were there experiences that helped shape your identity as a woman? Do you feel your community has supported you as a woman? Why do you feel that way? Are there people in your life who you go to for guidance and advice as a mother? If so, who are they? From your perspective, do you think motherhood is an important part of being a woman? All questions were reviewed by the community partner and minor changes were made to better relate to Maya women's experiences. The questions were approved by the partner before the Institutional Review Board (IRB) submission.

Procedures

Due to the private and sensitive nature of these questions, the community partner took on the responsibility to recruit participants and conduct all interviews except for one which was completed by the first author. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling in the community where the local partner resided. Interviews were conducted in private homes between October 2022 to January 2023. For many of these participants, Spanish was their second language, and therefore it was important for the community partner to facilitate these interviews due to her language fluency in Kaqchikel, the native Maya language in the community. All

interviews were conducted in Spanish with minor translations in Kaqchikel when participants were not sure if they were understanding the questions correctly. Additionally, every interview was audio recorded after receiving the oral consent from each participant. It was reiterated prior to the interview that the participant had every right to stop the interview or refuse to answer any question without any penalty or reason. Each participant was given financial compensation for their time.

Ethical Consideration

The IRB at Michigan State University was reviewed and approved prior to the study. To ensure the privacy and confidentiality of each participant, interviews took place in private spaces where the participant felt the most comfortable. All participants were assigned pseudonyms by the first author to ensure anonymity and all access to data was protected by a password-protected online platform. Due to the private and sensitive nature of the questions and mitigate power complexities, interviews were conducted by a research team member who had already established trust and rapport with the participant prior to the study.

Positionality. As part of the decolonial framework, it is imperative for scholars to address their own identities and experiences as it may affect how they conduct their research (Bermúdez, Muruthi, & Jordan, 2016). The first author is a second-generation Japanese American, who grew up in a middle-class, two-parent, heterosexual household in a predominantly white neighborhood in the midwestern part of the United States. She studied abroad in Santiago, Chile where she developed her Spanish language abilities and took university courses in cultural anthropology, sociology, and history courses to learn about the Latin American sociohistorical contexts. She was introduced to decolonial feminist theories during her doctoral training and in August 2019, she secured a predissertation grant, which allowed her to travel to Guatemala to begin laying the

groundwork for her dissertation. During this research opportunity, she established a community partnership with the local Maya mother with the intention to generate a research study that could be both valuable and insightful to the community and serve as a dissertation requirement.

Analysis

All interviews were transcribed in Spanish and then translated to English via a professional service. A back-translation process was used to enhance validity by the first author. Themes were generated through an inductive thematic analysis with a series of steps that are recommended by Cypress (2018): 1) identify initial codes, 2) reduce codes to themes (note patterns and identify salient themes and patterned regularities), 3) note relationships of concepts and variables, 4) contextualize with the framework from known literature and Maya cultural belief systems. Additionally, as a community-based project, the initial codes and themes were identified and analysis were conducted together with the Maya community partner to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. The first author traveled to Guatemala in January 2023 and spent four weeks together with the community partner working collaboratively to write out the codes on a poster and discuss specific quotes from the participants. Quotes were then organized into an excel document and salient themes were generated based on the codes. Throughout this process, the community partner provided in-depth contextual background pertaining to her Maya community and cultural values to better situate the Maya women's experiences.

Results

Through inductive thematic analysis, we found three emergent themes. Maya mothers in Guatemala experienced womanhood through their family dynamics including their childhood/adolescence, relationship with men, and role of motherhood.

Family Dynamics During Upbringing

A formative part of Maya women's experience in their gender identity formation occurred during their upbringing. Participants described how they first became aware of gender differences during this developmental period. For example, Carmen shared how she observed this difference when she saw her brother receiving more opportunities than her, which she attributed to their gender. She described,

> No tuve la oportunidad de estudiar porque solo tuve un hermano y le dieron la oportunidad de él. Es por eso que no dieron la oportunidad a mí. Siento que en mi comunidad no apoyan a las mujeres porque nuestras autoridades nunca piensan en nosotros. Las mujeres, uno como mujer, tiene que buscar sus propios medios para poder defender sus derechos y defender a sus hijos.
>
> *I didn't have the opportunity to study because I only had one brother and they gave him that opportunity. That's why they didn't give me a chance. I feel that in my community they don't support women because our leaders don't take us into consideration. Women have to find their own means to be able to defend their rights and defend their children.*

Carmen believed that women could not expect the community to meet their needs and respect their rights. Using her own personal example, Carmen illustrated the preferential treatment that her parents imposed on their children. Esperanza echoed this dynamic in her own upbringing, "Desde que ella nació no fue muy bien recibida por la familia de mi padre, porque es una niña. Igual cuando yo nací venía ese círculo también. Cabal cuando mi hermano nació, igual, mi papá tuvo esa preferencia por el hijo varón. Siempre preferían a los varones que a nosotras. Es muy triste y muy lamentable, pero es una triste realidad." *Since [my older sister] was born she was not very well received by my father's family, because she was a girl. Just like when I was born*

that also happened. When my brother was born, my father expressed fondness for his son. They always preferred boys over us girls. It is very sad and very unfortunate, but it is a sad reality. For Esperanza from an early age, she became aware of the gender differences and that boys were viewed more favorably than girls by her father and his family.

On the other hand, some shared they felt their parents treated their children equally despite discrimination from their neighbors. Carolina remembered,

> Empezando por mi familia, ellos nunca tuvieron diferencia con nosotros por ser mujeres. Yo recuerdo que incluso la gente de aquí les decía a mis papás, "Ustedes solo mujeres tienen, no tienen hombres", porque sí había mucho el machismo. Sin embargo, en algún momento nosotros les decíamos a mis papás y a la gente de que a nosotros no nos importaba lo que decía la gente, porque si nosotros en algún momento nos teníamos que defender o defender a mis papás, lo podíamos hacer, ahí sí como dicen ellos, con la fuerza de un hombre. Definitivamente, el amor que nos dan en nuestra familia es muy importante, porque a nosotros nos querían tal y como somos y eso nos hacía a nosotras seguras.
>
> *Beginning with my family, they never treated us differently because we were women. I remember the people told my parents, "You only have girls, you don't have any boys," because there was a lot of machismo. However, at some point we told my parents and others that we didn't care what people said, because if at some point we had to defend ourselves or my parents, we could do it as they say with the strength of a man. Definitely, the love that our family gives us is very important, because they loved us just the way we are and that made us feel safe.*

For Carolina, her father had a protective role in shielding the effects of machismo that were prevalent within the community. She grew up with three sisters but not once felt any vitriol or resentment from her father. She further shared, “A pesar de que nosotras en la familia somos cuatro mujeres y le agradecemos a Dios por bendecirnos con mis papás, porque mi papá nunca tuvo aquella diferencia o nunca le reprochó a mi mamá por qué no había ningún varón. Al contrario, él nos ama, él nos cuidaba bastante.” *Despite the fact that we are four women in the family. We thank God for blessing us with my parents, because my father never treated us differently or reproached my mother for not having a boy. On the contrary, he loved us, he took great care of us.*

Although parenting can have a protective role in gender discrimination among Maya girls, it can also have a traumatic role. Some participants described the abusive relationship they had with their fathers during their childhood. Julia, for example, grew up with her father battling alcoholism and was violent throughout her upbringing. She shared how afraid she was of him as she observed the domestic violence taking place between her parents and facing her father’s abuse herself. For another participant, Maria, she also became a victim of violence due to her father’s alcoholism and her mother’s subsequent relationships. She shared, “Ciertamente, en mi niñez fui una niña muy sufrida porque mi papá era alcohólico. Ya cuando yo tenía 10 años mi papá se separó de mi mamá. Se separaron, mi mamá quedó un tiempo nada más viuda, ella se volvió a juntar con otro señor y ese señor nos trataba como animales. *Certainly, during my childhood I was a very long-suffering girl because my father was an alcoholic. When I was 10 years old, my dad separated from my mom. They separated, my mother was left a single mother for a while, but she got together with another man and that man treated us like animals.*

One way these Maya mothers coped with their trauma was through community support. For Julia, she found friendship and support through her local church. She shared,

> Mi adolescencia es más diferente porque yo busqué otra iglesia y yo dije, "No importa lo que dice mi papá porque yo quiero tener más amigas. Estoy muy apartada. Me gusta liderar. Yo me metí en este grupo y tuve más amigas. Salimos más a pasear en el campo. Me gustó mucho eso. Yo sentí que me ayudó mucho porque no tenía amigas y yo dije, "Tengo que buscar amigas. Tengo que salir a hacer algo diferente."
>
> *My adolescence was more different because I looked for another church and I said, "It doesn't matter what my dad says because I want to have more friends. I was very withdrawn at the time and so I wanted to take the initiative. I got into this group and made more friends. We went out more for walks in the countryside. I really liked that. I felt that it helped me a lot because I didn't have any friends and I said, "I have to find friends. I have to go out and do something different."*

Similarly, Maria found encouragement and support later in life when she joined a volunteer fire brigade,

> Cuando estuve con bomberos voluntarios fui parte del cuerpo de bomberos voluntarios. Allí me enseñaron a no tener miedo, a luchar siempre por lo que yo quiero en esta vida, siempre y cuando sea para el bien de mi familia, de mi comunidad, sin perjudicar a nadie. Ahí fue que aprendí muchas cosas, a valorarme como mujer. Al igual que cuando me fui metiendo en las cosas de la iglesia también.
>
> *When I was with volunteer firefighters, I was part of the volunteer fire brigade. There they taught me not to be afraid, to always fight for what I want in this life, as long as it was for the good of my family, my community, without harming anyone. It was there that*

I learned many things, to value myself as a woman. Just like when I got into church stuff too.

It is important to highlight that trauma and violence were not the only narratives describing the lives of these women. Both Julia and Maria shared, despite their difficult upbringing, their motivation to build a better life for themselves and their children was unwavering. In Julia's case in particular, she found a partner who supported her desire to have a family and a career as a local Maya cuisine chef.

Relationship with men

In addition to the family dynamics during their upbring, Maya womanhood manifested in the relationships they formed with their partners and spouses as they became adults. As mentioned previously, a few participants described how despite childhood trauma, they found love and support in their partnerships. Esperanza described her marriage,

> Yo soy madre, soy esposa, pero también tuve la oportunidad de trabajar en una institución, y tuve el apoyo de mi esposo. Esa es una gran ventaja, porque mi esposo aprendió. Él también tiene esa idea, que todos somos iguales, todos tenemos el mismo derecho, la misma capacidad. Nadie es más bajo que un hombre, sino que estamos a la par. Mi caso es un caso muy especial.
>
> *I am a mother, I am a wife, but I also had the opportunity to work in an institution, and I had the support of my husband. That is a great advantage, because my husband learned. He also has that idea that we are all equal, we all have the same right, the same capacity. No one is lower than a man, but we are on par. My case is a very special case.*

For Esperanza, she experienced physical abuse by her father when she became unexpectedly pregnant at 16 and went on to have three children with different men. Despite struggling with

personal shame, she described how understanding and supportive her husband was and how he warmly accepted his role to raise his stepchildren as his own. Her sense of womanhood was centered on being equal to men and it was greatly enhanced when her partner respected and embraced this same sentiment.

Similar to Esperanza, Isabel also shared how much her husband has supported her life. During her childhood, she was abandoned by her mother as a baby and experienced abuse by her relatives due to being an orphan. Although she experienced this childhood trauma, Isabel describes the loving relationship she cultivated with her husband and how he encourages her to pursue her own goals. She shared, Yo con mi esposo no vivo eso [machismo], gracias a Dios. Él es muy diferente, él a veces hasta a mí me dice, "Vos podés hacer esto. Vos sos capaz de hacer eso." *My husband and I don't experience that [machismo], thank God. He is very different, he sometimes even tells me, "You can do this. You are capable of doing that."* Although some of the participants described healthy and supportive relationships they had with their partners, they came to understand during this conversation that their circumstances felt unique and were a blessing in their lives.

Overall, when asked about what machismo means to them, the Maya mothers expressed a clearly negative connotation. Participants consistently describe the power imbalance and the control men have in their families and communities. Sofia elucidated,

> El machismo de esos hombres que dicen que la mujer no está hecha para trabajar ni para estudiar, sino que solo para estar en la casa, cocinar, lavar. Para mí, ese es el machismo, porque no le dan a uno-- Uno es libre de hacer, de trabajar o de lo que sea. Para mí ese es el machismo, que algunos hombres piensan que la mujer solo está para estar trabajando en la casa.

The machismo of those men who say that women are not made to work or study, but only to be at home, cook, wash. For me, that is machismo, because they don't give you-- the freedom to work or whatever. For me that is machismo, that some men think that women are only there to be working at home.

Similarly, Carmen mirrored this sentiment and shared how it affected her personally due to her husband's alcoholism and violence.

Bueno, para mí el machismo es que los hombres obligan a las mujeres y- a hacer lo que el hombre quiera. No dan la oportunidad a las mujeres porque los hombres piensan que las mujeres no son capaces de participar en defender sus derechos. Bueno, para mí sí porque encontré un marido borracho que me mal-- Y a mis hijos, pero ahora que mis hijos han crecido ya no nos molesta, y ¿por qué'? Ya no- ya me puedo defender. Ahora ya no nos pega.

Well, for me, machismo- is that men force women and- to do what the man wants. They do not give women the opportunity because men think that women are not capable of participating in defending their rights. Well, for me it does because I had a drunken husband who hurt me-- And my children, but now that my children have grown up it doesn't bother us anymore, and why? Not anymore- I can defend myself. Now he doesn't hit us anymore.

Carmen describes how machismo in her family changed throughout her marriage as the abuse stopped. However, for many of these mothers, the gender power imbalance is an ongoing presence in their communities.

The Role of Motherhood

For the participants, motherhood played an important role in how they experienced womanhood. Having children and nurturing their lives are immense responsibilities, but many viewed this as a great blessing. As Carmen said, “Los hijos son una bendición, porque los niños a veces nos ponen felices y otras mujeres desean tener hijos, pero no pueden.” *Children are a blessing, because children sometimes make us happy and other women want to have children, but they can't.* For others like Ana, being a mother motivated her to fight and persevere as a woman and further gave her a sense of deep purpose, “Para mí significa la maternidad una mujer luchadora, que persevera. Aunque ella está cansada, aunque ella trabaja, pero en- en su mente siempre lo primero que está es su hijo, por eso está luchando, eh, para que a su hijo ne-no le falte nada.” *For me motherhood means a fighting woman, who perseveres. Although she is tired, although she works, but in-in her mind the first thing that is always there is her son, that is why she is fighting, eh, so that her son does not lack anything.* Although many of the participants struggled socioeconomically, the pervasive theme was to provide and find a way to support their children.

Another important aspect in how motherhood plays a part in being a woman was the role their children have in their lives. Some participants described how having a child was a sense of social security. Rather than depending on partners, some mothers placed higher expectations for their child to take care of them when they became older. Maria shared, “Sí, es bastante importante, porque sabemos que en nuestras vidas nosotros crecemos, nos ponemos ancianos y, cuando tenemos a nuestros hijos, ellos velan por nosotros.” *Yes, it is quite important, because we know that in our lives we grow up, we get old and, when we have our children, they watch over us*. Carolina echoed this sentiment,

> Si nosotros lo miramos por otra parte, beneficia mucho porque uno no se queda solo en la vida sino que tiene con quien compartir las cosas. Cuando uno se enferme más adelante, porque el tiempo pasa, uno envejece y vienen las enfermedades, tiene que ahí sí que quién vele por uno. La maternidad prácticamente es indispensable en la vida de nosotras. *If we look at it from another side, it is very beneficial because one is not left alone in life but rather has someone to share things with. When one gets sick later on, because time passes, one gets old and illnesses come, there really has to be someone to watch over one. Motherhood is practically indispensable in our lives.*

Within this context, motherhood provides a woman with a deeper sense of security and comfort especially as one ages. Considering the Guatemalan government does not provide social security, for these Maya mothers, their children play an important role in their own survival and sustenance. Maria also shared this sentiment proudly stating how her four adult daughters all have stable jobs and support her financially and her home. She further mentioned, "Yo como madre me siento muy feliz. Yo trabajo bastante para que no falte el pan en nuestra mesa diario y apoyar bastante a mis hijas, que ellas salgan adelante. Yo no quiero que ellas sufran como yo sufrí." *As a mother I feel very happy. I work hard so that there is no shortage of bread on our table daily and I support my daughters a lot so that they get ahead. I don't want them to suffer like I suffered.* Although Maria suffered during her upbringing and as a young adult, she used that as a motivation to protect and nurture her daughters so that they could have a better quality of life than herself. This sentiment was reflected among many of the mothers who participated in this study.

Although motherhood had a central role in how these Maya women experienced womanhood, it is critical to note that when asked directly whether motherhood should be a part

of what it means to be a woman, many noted that it should be a personal choice. Esperanza elaborated, “La verdad, una mujer es mujer porque es mujer. Si uno no quiere tener hijos, eso no le impide que no sea mujer. La maternidad es algo que uno quiere, pero si una mujer quiere realizarse, estar sola, empoderarse ella sola, eso no es problema, va a seguir siendo mujer.” *The truth is a woman is a woman because she is a woman. If you don't want to have children, that doesn't stop you from not being a woman. Motherhood is something that one wants, but if a woman wants to fulfill herself, be alone, empower herself, that is not a problem, she will continue to be a woman.*

In addition to a personal choice, when asked what their hopes were for the girls and young women in their community, all participants unanimously expressed their desire for the girls to have more opportunities and be respected. Carolina emphasized,

> Prácticamente, que ellas se sientan valoradas. Si ellas tienen la oportunidad de sobresalir aquí en nuestro pueblo, en sus familias, en algún otro ámbito, es de aprovechar el espacio. También decirles de que sigan adelante, porque ahorita ya se ve un poquito más la participación de las mujeres en todos los sentidos, por ejemplo, en los trabajos, en la participación de los grupos, incluso hasta en las políticas. Aprovechar esas oportunidades y salir adelante.
>
> *Practically, that they feel valued. If they have the opportunity to excel here in our town, in their families, in some other sphere, it is to take advantage of the space. Also tell them to keep going, because right now the participation of women is very low in so many ways. For example, in jobs, in the participation of groups, even in politics. Take advantage of those opportunities and get ahead.*

In addition to opportunities, Maria stressed that teenage pregnancy should be discouraged and instead within the community, she felt young people should delay marriage so that they could focus on their personal development.

Among Maya mothers, womanhood manifests in the myriad aspects of life including their upbringing, relationships and family, and their role as mothers. When asked what womanhood in general means to them, participants shared the profundity and beauty of what it means to be a woman and how all-encompassing it is. Sofia described,

> Ser mujer para mí es una gran herramienta, porque sinceramente, a veces solo por ser mujer a veces nos hacen de menos, pero yo siento que no, una mujer soporta todo. Ser mujer es una gran bendición. Sí, es una parte importante, porque a veces uno-- Mire que a veces uno hasta incluso el trabajo de un hombre. Uno no importa si son cosas pesadas o como sea, uno lo hace. Uno no tiene medida para nada, una mujer da todo.
>
> *Being a woman is a great tool for me, because honestly, sometimes just for being a woman they sometimes make us less, but I feel that no, a woman supports everything. Being a woman is a great blessing. Yes, it's an important part, because sometimes one-- Look, sometimes even a man's job. It doesn't matter if they are heavy things or whatever, you do it. One has no measure for anything, a woman gives everything.*

This sentiment of strength and dignity was also echoed in Maria's response to what being a woman meant to her. She said,

> Estoy muy feliz porque soy mujer, porque también soy parte de la creación de Dios, porque Dios me creó. Que sea mujer no significa que, como le vuelvo a decir, que ya estoy debajo del hombre, no. Porque a la par de un gran hombre, de un gran hombre exitoso, hay una gran mujer. Yo siento que esa gran mujer también ahí estoy yo, porque

de todo lo que he vivido, las cosas duras, las cosas difíciles, las cosas negativas, yo les he sacado provecho, para vivir ahora quien soy yo ahora.

I am very happy because I am a woman, because I am also part of God's creation, because God created me. That I am a woman does not mean that, as I say again, that I am already below the man, no. Because next to a great man, a great successful man, there is a great woman. I feel that this great woman is also there, because of everything I have experienced, the hard things, the difficult things, the negative things, I have taken advantage of them, to become the person I am now.

Despite the discrimination and subjugation, they experienced as women, they emphasize the blessing and happiness they feel to be born as a woman.

Discussion

This study provided critical insights to how Maya mothers perceive and experience womanhood in their family and community structures. First, it builds on the literature on decolonizing gender and contextualize it within the Maya community in Guatemala. Second, the study amplifies the voices and lives of Maya mothers and highlights how their experiences are multidimensional and nuanced, including their roles as mothers, their personal agency, and their dignified way of embracing their womanhood.

Decolonizing Womanhood

Womanhood within the modern/colonial logic centers on preserving the heterosexual patriarchal structure while subjugating non-white colonized beliefs and worldview (Lugones, 2008). Within this modern/colonial gender system, development initiatives frequently define women empowerment within the narrow constraints of education and employment. This study highlighted that for Maya women, they live with a deep sense of self-determination and intention

even while navigating setbacks and adversities. Their way of being as a woman is rooted in their resolve to survive and forge their own path not only for themselves but for their family and community as well. Vizenor (1994) characterized the Indigenous spirit of survival and resistance as survivance. He writes (2008), "Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry" (p. 1). Maya womanhood is not centered on victimhood and powerlessness; it is centered on self-motivation and fully embracing their identity as a woman. They do so by expressing their gratitude and contentment in being a woman and relentlessly facing each day to survive and thrive. What is critical to note is that this sense of womanhood challenges the modern/colonial logic in important ways. Although for most of these women, educational and career opportunities were limited, they by no means live passive, dependent lives. The Maya mothers' survivance stories were characterized by persistence, resourcefulness, purpose, and unwavering belief to forge a better life for themselves and their children. Instead of honoring this spirit and wisdom, NGOs that supposedly are committed to serving Maya women rarely take this into account and focus on implementing Western-based interventions to develop modern/colonial conception of skills development and market-based aspirations.

Machismo

An aspect that was prevalent in this study was the everyday reality that Maya women face with machismo. Although this notion of total male dominance was not the only narrative in the Maya women's personal experiences, it was still unmistakable that machismo is a colonial cultural system that Maya women are aware of and have directly or indirectly experienced in their lives. Largely, the findings from this study were consistent with the machismo literature in that the Maya women in this study also view machismo as a belief that position men as more

powerful and superior over women. Additionally, for mothers who experienced violence and abuse by their fathers and/or their partners, they view machismo as a major factor, which was also demonstrated in previous intimate-partner violence studies in Maya communities in Guatemala (Rogg & Pezzia, 2023; Wands & Mirzoev, 2022). That said, some of the Maya women described the protective roles that their partners and fathers had to reduce gender discrimination and violence. Instead of a gender imbalance, there were powerful examples of Maya men who encouraged and uplifted their partners and daughters to pursue their goals and aspirations.

Motherhood

A central aspect of womanhood for these women was their role as a mother. Amongst the numerous non-profit organizations in Guatemala, topics of marriage and motherhood in girl empowerment initiatives in Guatemala often position themselves to avoid these topics entirely and instead focus exclusively on mentoring and supporting girls to pursue an education and career (Wehr, 2014). This view of what womanhood should be as a means toward greater 'progress' requires deeper critique and exploration. Considering this study highlighted the centrality of motherhood in the identities and understanding of being a woman, it begs the question of what the primary agenda of girls and empowerment initiatives is. In other words, what do we mean by empowerment? Is it defined within the modern/colonial logic that empowerment happens exclusively in the educational and professional realms of human development? If so, then motherhood would not be considered as an empowering or beneficial experience. This observation of avoiding the topic of motherhood was echoed by Andrea O'Reilly (2019) in her work that examined motherhood in academic circles. She articulates,

> I have heard countless stories from motherhood scholars about how their work has been ignored, dismissed, invalidated, or trivialized by academic feminists; how the women's studies conferences they attend have few, if any papers, on motherhood; how motherhood is seldom a topic of discussion in women's studies classrooms and rarely included in academic feminist textbooks; and how articles on motherhood or reviews of motherhood books are all but absent in the leading women's studies journals. (p.19)

O'Reilly (2019) further argues for matricentric feminism, which is guided on the principle that "contests, challenges, and counters the patriarchal oppressive institution of motherhood and seeks to imagine and implement a maternal identity and practice that is empowering to mothers" (p.18).

This study on Maya womanhood and motherhood can be considered an important step toward countering the patriarchal institution of motherhood particularly within the umbrella of the modern/colonial logic. Listening to the experiences of Maya mothers highlights the trauma, struggle, and fight to survive while at the same time there is an unmistakable element of personal agency, dignity, and unwavering purpose in how they carry themselves and support their children and families. The community partner in this project described how healing it was to connect with the mothers during the interview process. As each mother shared their stories and experiences, deep emotions were provoked between the interviewer and participant, which led to deeper connectivity and appreciation for one another. The community partner went on to emphasize how insightful and important these conversations were and the need for more spaces for connection and friendship amongst the women in her community. Although these women who participated in the study became mothers, many acknowledged that some women in their community choose

not to have children or cannot have their own and that the journey of womanhood is unique and personal and should be respected as such.

Limitations & Future Considerations

There are notable limitations to this study. First, this study took place in a community with a significant international non-profit and tourist presence. Hence, many of the participants may have encountered and interacted with foreigners on a frequent basis which may have exposed them to more Eurocentric-Western culture and ideology than other Maya families in Guatemala. Second, this study recruited only women who had children thus excluding women who chose not to have children or could not have their own. To gain a more holistic perspective on Maya womanhood, it would be necessary to include voices of these women in future studies. Third, this study brought forth a deeper understanding to how machismo manifests in the local Maya community in Guatemala but only from a Maya woman's perspective. In future studies, it would be insightful to explore the meaning-making and experiences of machismo among Maya men and how they perceive and understand manhood and fatherhood.

Conclusion

As non-profit organizations and international agencies continue to invest in women rights and empowerment initiatives in Guatemala under the modern/colonial logic, a critical question remains as to whether they are truly benefiting and uplifting Maya women. As this study highlighted, Maya womanhood is multifaceted and nuanced encompassing their various roles in their family and community structures as wives, partners, mothers, daughters, and community members. While the modern/colonial system of gender tries to constrain the voices and experiences of Maya women, it is important to emphasize that Maya womanhood survivance stories center on nurturing life and unwavering fortitude. Their lives symbolize the struggle for

liberation and to live with dignity and authenticity. Western interventionists often do not take this into account and instead impose their own socioeconomic agenda using empowerment rhetoric underpinned by the modern/colonial logic. As Audre Lorde (2018) succinctly put it, “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (p. 112). To bring forth transformative change in Guatemala, a committed effort to dismantle the modern/colonial structure of power must take place centering on Maya people’s decolonial futurities and imagining.

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CHAPTER 3: DECOLONIZING SELF: A CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO EXAMINE THE CHALLENGES AND INSIGHTS WHEN CONDUCTING DECOLONIAL RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF FAMILY STUDIES

Abstract

As calls to decolonize the field of family studies continue to garner attention, it is important to critically examine and reflect on what applying a decolonial lens to the research process looks like in practice. Using a critical autoethnographic approach, this article explores the lived experience of a doctoral student who conducted her dissertation study with a Maya community partner in Guatemala while intentionally applying a decolonial lens to every phase of the research process. This process includes the research project timeline, the formation of research questions, and the data analysis. The purpose of this study was to highlight the critical insights gained while conducting a study using a decolonial lens and provide a practical example on the multifaceted processes of embracing a decolonial methodological approach in the discipline of family studies.

Introduction

As diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in higher education continue to gain traction, a deeper exploration on what these initiatives actually mean is needed. Throughout its inception, academia has historically been rooted in gendered and racialized elitism and privilege (Reay, 2004). However, in recent decades, a movement to promote social justice and greater representation of diversity in academia has garnered significant attention and investment. Although these efforts are well-meaning, it is imperative to perceive and unpack the colonizing forces that characterized much of academia's history and continues to exist in the present day.

Anibal Quijano (2000) introduced the term, the coloniality of power, as a racialized and gendered Eurocentric capitalist system of power, which began during the violent European colonization of the Americas in the 16th century. The coloniality of power is a concept connecting the practices and legacies of European colonization and the enduring colonial structures that have heavily influenced the sociopolitical systems and forms of knowledge production found in the modern world today. Quijano elaborated on this notion of a Eurocentric global power structure,

> The incorporation of such diverse and heterogeneous cultural histories into a single world dominated by Europe signified a cultural and intellectual intersubjective configuration equivalent to the articulation of all forms of labor control around capital, a configuration that established world capitalism. In effect, all of the experiences, histories, resources, and cultural products ended up in one global cultural order revolving around European or Western hegemony. Europe's hegemony over the new model of global power concentrated all forms of the control of subjectivity, culture, and especially knowledge and the production of knowledge under its hegemony. (p. 540)

It is within this premise that academic institutions have existed under the colonial structure that has historically dehumanized and negated the existence of the non-white colonized. A core principle of the coloniality of power is reinforced by the notion of modernity and progress. In other words, coloniality and modernity are inextricably linked and mutually dependent (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). As universities and institutions often are viewed as driving forces to modernity and innovation, the processes of the coloniality of power or the modern/colonial logic are deeply embedded in the university structures.

On a broad level, scholars have critiqued the neoliberal ideology that has become widely embraced in higher education institutions in the U.S. and the world (Burke, 2020; Whelan, 2015). Enright et al. (2017) describes a neoliberal university as a "market-driven system, which employs modes of governance based on a corporate model" (p.1). Neoliberal policy reforms include privatizing the public sector and prioritizing strategies that generate revenue for the institution (Díez-Gutiérrez 2018, Saura & Bolívar 2019). Reay (2004) argues that this corporatization of higher education has promoted and sustained gendered and classed institutional policies that only perpetuate social injustices that have historically plagued academia.

An example of such institutional practices includes the cultural values and ideologies rooted in how research is produced in higher education. Filippakou (2023) argues that the current state of higher education and the myth of research neutrality in particular is deeply problematic due to its promotion of a political agenda that sustains the existing state of affairs without real concerted effort to transform and change systemic barriers that historically disenfranchised certain social groups over others. The promotion of research neutrality "refuses to acknowledge how it legitimates and normalizes… particular social relations and human behavior, representing

a powerful register and arena for defining how education is shaped in political and ethical terms" (Filippakou, 2023, p. 82). In other words, although some may argue that research neutrality is the most objective and therefore most fair, it cannot be understated how it also negates and delegitimizes other ways of knowing and being. This power imbalance is how coloniality is sustained and promoted within the academic institution.

To explore, critique, and challenge the process of coloniality, this study examined the ways coloniality manifests particularly in the field of family studies by examining my own lived experience as a doctoral student. From the process of forming my research questions to numerous disruptions that took place including the global pandemic and a family health crisis, it critically analyzes what it means to apply a decolonial lens to a research project while navigating one's own personal challenges. Before one becomes a researcher, one is a human being. Is it truly possible to remove the personal from the research process? In other words, do personal biases, values, and assumptions affect how we conduct research? If so, how can we facilitate greater self-awareness? Through a critical autoethnographic approach, this study aims to grapple with these questions and offer insights and understandings through my own lived experience. My doctoral journey consisted of applying a decolonial lens to every phase of the research process including the research timeline, formation of research questions, data collection and data analysis.

Coloniality in the Social Sciences

Bermúdez et al. (2016) define colonialism in the social sciences as "the creation of unequal relationships and a hierarchal establishment of power that benefits the dominant group over others" (p. 195). This system of disparities across power, resources, and privileges exists across every nation and perpetuates harmful intergenerational effect on families and communities

(Uttal, 2009). Bermúdez et al. (2016) further argue that one can see the legacy of colonization simply by examining which research studies are viewed as legitimate, informative, and worthy of securing internal and external grants. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) espoused,

> The word itself, 'research,' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary… It stirs up silence… The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity. (p. 1)

Despite institutional efforts within academia to integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, there is still much work to be done to fully address the problematic ways disciplines in the social sciences perpetuate coloniality.

This hegemonic, normative perspective on psychosocial dynamics is profoundly apparent in the field of psychology. Adams et al. (2018) argue that modern individualism is a byproduct of colonial violence in those modern mentalities (i.e., habits of mind and way of being) are defined as normative standards in psychological science. Moreover, the field of psychology has been criticized for its broad application to human psychology and behavior when empirically sampled within a limited population characterized as Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (Henrich et al., 2010). Arnett (2008) argues that the field of psychology must put a more concerted effort to diversify empirical study population so that it can be more inclusive and representative of the global population. An analysis on empirical studies published in 2007 across top-tiered psychology peer-reviewed journals found that 77% of the U.S. sample were White Americans (Arnett, 2008).

Those who do not fit this hegemonic standard are positioned and interpreted as the Other and often are depicted as some consequence of pathological divergence or abnormality (Adams et al., 2018). This dehumanizing process disproportionately affects families and communities from marginalized populations. Moreover, Teo (2010) characterizes this process as epistemological violence as it prevents the research participants from having any authority in the interpretation process within the empirical study. In other words, it is common for scholars to analyze and interpret data and proceed directly to publishing without any meaningful forms of accountability from their participants. It is necessary for scholars to be held to high ethical standards that will prevent research from being a perpetuating force of coloniality.

Another example of the problematic nature of social science research includes when studying family dynamics. Scholars argue that the concept of family itself must be critically examined as a byproduct of colonization (Allen et al., 2009). Historically, the conceptual understanding of family has been defined in an essentialized, heteronormative way that excludes alternative ways of understanding what constitutes a family (Bermúdez et al., 2016). Scholars have coined this as the Standard North American Family (Letica, 2019). That said, recent scholarship has begun to challenge this by redefining family and exploring different family structures and experiences including adoptive parents (Jones & Hackett, 2012), single foster parents (Cooley et al., 2021), and sexual minority parents (Assink et al., 2022).

Reflexivity: A Tool to Decolonize Research Practices

Bermúdez et al. (2016) argue a critical means to decolonize research practices in family studies is the active application of reflexivity among the researchers. They posit, “Without a reflexive stance that focuses on disrupting a colonizing agenda, we will inevitably maintain the status quo and continue to support the dominant discourses that limit our understanding of

families" (p. 199). Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2012) also highlights how reflexivity allows for deeper facilitation of self-awareness that helps reveal the subtle and nuanced ways power dynamics manifest in research projects. According to Grant (2023), reflexivity should be a deep on-going process of self-dialogue, an active engagement to critically examine one's own subjectivity. He lists helpful questions that may facilitate this reflexive process (Grant, 2020b, p.197):

> The last thing a fish notices is the water it is swimming in.
>
> What do you think about what you think about?
>
> What do you think about the way you think?
>
> What do you feel about these things?
>
> What do you think about these questions?
>
> What do you feel about these questions?
>
> The knowledge you produce is produced by the knowledge that is producing you.
>
> And what do you think about that?
>
> And how does it make you feel?

Although one can extensively study the benefits of reflexivity, it is important for scholars to apply it directly into their research projects to get a real sense of how this works and the challenges and insights one might gain in this approach. Hence, as a doctoral student I decided to document and reflect on my own journey and experience as I conducted my dissertation research among Maya mothers in Guatemala. I highlighted an array of dynamics I grappled with throughout this chapter in my life including my personal struggles, profound lessons in life, internal awakenings, and the overall messiness of conducting decolonial research while partaking in deep soul-searching to better understand myself and my voice as a scholar and foremost as a

human being.

Critical Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that has become widely embraced in the field of social sciences (Grant, 2023) and education (Marx et al., 2017). It is foremost a study that places the self for deeper examination and inquiry. Additionally, it bridges the individual and personal to the wider culture and social dynamics of society. According to Herrmann (2022), autoethnographic work can be better understood by breaking down the word into three general criteria of *auto*, *ethno-,* and *-graphy*. *Auto* refers to the unflinching critical approach to examine oneself (López & Tracy, 2020). An important element of autoethnography is the vulnerability and honesty in how scholar(s) bring themselves to the forefront of that exploration. The second criterion of *ethno-* consists of a vigorous examination of one's own place within the wider cultural and social systems that they are inevitably a part of. Hermann (2022) elucidates, "It includes questioning, critiquing, and interrogating one's culture and/or cultural discourses ("ethno") that the I of the autoethnography bumps up against" (p. 3-4). The third criterion of *-graphy* is the formal expression of this profound intersection of the self and culture. They describe "everyday life, which is always first person, deeply felt, rooted in our past, not always rational, and often messy" (Goodall, 2004, p. 188). Hence, autoethnographies typically do not follow the standard scientific writing format and instead encourage creative literary techniques such as short stories, vignettes, poems, and dialogues (Hermann, 2022).

Autoethnographies have also been utilized to promote social justice and resist systemic oppression. According to Denzen (2003), critical autoethnographies allows space to explore, examine, and critique how experiences and ways of knowing and being interplay with the sociocultural dynamics of oppression, privilege, and power. Examples include explorations of

wokeness among Black women scholars (Ashlee, Zamora, & Karikari, 2017), racial body politics in urban education (Ohito, 2019) and decolonial imaginings in higher education (Bell et al., 2020).

Current Study

This study using a critical autoethnographic approach examining my lived experience as I navigated my doctoral program from August 2017 until August 2023. My dissertation study explored how Maya women perceived and experienced womanhood and motherhood in Guatemala. As part of the effort to embrace decolonizing research practices, I intentionally engaged in the practice of reflexivity as I embarked on my research project while facing personal setbacks and challenges. This introspective work was done through reflective journaling, consistently engaging with my community partner in Guatemala to receive feedback and insights, and a mentorship with a scholar who had extensive experience in decolonial praxis and scholarship. The analysis was organized by examining each stage in my doctoral training including taking coursework, formation of research question, data collection, and analysis. This article critically organizes my experience within the broader discourse on decolonizing academia and more specifically family studies.

My Intention

It is within this premise that I begin my own journey to reflect, process, and express the adventure that I have been on these past 6 years as a doctoral student. My foremost intention when I entered the Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) doctoral program in August 2017 was to expand my worldview and develop new perspectives and insights. However, as I settled into the program, I began to experience deep insecurity and vulnerability. I felt many around me already had a clear sense of direction in their research program and well on their path

toward publications and conducting their dissertation research. I on the other hand felt completely lost. The initial research interests that I had did not feel right anymore. My entire professional experience up until that point centered on youth development and urban education. However, somewhere in my heart, I felt a powerful desire to explore a new direction. This became very clear during my first guidance committee meeting. In my journal I wrote,

> I was able to have my first doctoral guidance committee meeting. Despite getting overwhelmed during the meeting, it really challenged me to address some of the deeper issues I've been avoiding this entire first year. A big realization that I had was that I was struggling to identify my voice. I thought I had a good idea of where I stood in my research but as I settled into the doctoral program, I became more and more unsure, and this lack of confidence became super apparent during the committee meeting. It was uncomfortable but very powerful. I am entering a new chapter in my life and a part of that growth means discomfort and ambiguity. (May 18, 2018)

As I embraced this ambiguity, I grappled with profound tension between where I was and my environment. My heart longed to explore different academic disciplines to open my worldview and learn different perspectives. However, at the same time I felt the pressure as a doctoral student to narrow my interest, decide on my dissertation research agenda, and form my guidance committee.

It was made very clear during my first year that to be competitive in the academic job market, doctoral candidates needed to develop a clear scholarly identity and aim to publish in peer-reviewed journals specific to their area of interest. Lynch & Kuntz (2016) argue the politics of higher education promote normalized methods of inquiries that govern how scholars' approach and produce research. Additionally, within a neoliberal university, Cheek (2007)

elucidates the presence of colonizing forces that surveil research activity by external metrics such as impact factor of peer-reviewed journals, external funding status, and number of citations. This broad surveillance is also experienced by doctoral students. My first year proseminar course oriented me on how to navigate my PhD and to ensure to check every box on the milestones list the department provided so that I knew I was making adequate "progress" each academic year. These metrics included the number of conference presentations, peer-reviewed publications, and department service activities. Lynch & Kuntz (2016) echo this neoliberal politics of higher education in their own critical autoethnography stating "faculty researchers imply universal consensus so that students comply with class guidelines, methodologies, programs of study, and so on. Repeatedly the 'right of way' for stewards is encountered" (p. 12). Lawson (2009) posits that institutional gatekeepers who hold broad authority in the neoliberal university undermine creativity and innovation particularly among emerging scholars including doctoral students.

Ultimately, as I grappled with the politics of higher education, I reaffirmed my purpose and intention. From the beginning of my academic journey, success and external recognition have never been major sources of motivation. I detested the academic culture centered on extrinsic elitist rewards such as honor roll, Dean's List, GPA ranking, etc. Grande (2015) posits that these metrics serve as a "cycle of individualized inducements [building on Wolfe's (1999) original work]—particularly, the awards, appointments, and grants that require complicity or allegiance to institutions that continue to oppress and dispossess" (p.61). In other words, much of academic culture is rooted in extrinsic motivational factors to "self-promote, to brand one's work and body" as a fundamental mechanism to preserve the modern/colonial logic of academia (Grande, 2015, p. 61). That said, my motivations have always been fueled by intrinsic reasons such as a powerful curiosity to explore the complex world that we live in, expanding my

worldview, and tapping into a deeper authenticity. While I struggled with the politics of higher education when I entered the doctoral program, I felt deeply protected as my advisors did not enforce that agenda to narrow my interests prematurely. Rather, they wholeheartedly encouraged my exploration and actively connected me to different scholars in disciplines outside of HDFS. It was within this protected space that I was able to allow my curious mind to wander and branch out. Hence, during my first two and a half years in the program, I took various courses in sociology, cultural anthropology, education, community psychology, social work, international development, and sustainable development. Although there was a wide range of perspectives and knowledge, I also noticed profound interconnectedness between these disciplines. My academic exploration deeply heightened my passion to continue to learn and grow as a human being and scholar and to discover my own voice and direction on how I wanted to contribute to humanity.

Discovering Decoloniality

It was during this period of exploration in Spring 2019 that I was introduced to decolonizing research practices. It was a reading requirement for a course called Methods for Social Change that was offered in the area of community psychology. As we discussed and engaged in this literature, I felt a deep resonance with this theoretical and practical approach as it validated my frequent inner conflict I experienced between the normalized modes of inquiry and my desire for more liberatory community-guided research. It was during this semester when I became more aware of the colonizing influences in academia. In particular, reading Dutta's (2018) work on decolonizing community and her objective “to disrupt dominant modes of knowledge production and imagine nonhierarchical epistemic possibilities” (p. 273) opened my eyes to reimagine the possibility of research and my commitment to be an active participant in this transformative movement. This was an important shift for me because it inspired me to forge

my own path to greater self-realization and not allow my PhD journey to be characterized by institutional conformity and suppression. This desire to learn more about decolonizing research was further reinforced when I attended an academic conference on qualitative inquiry, and I met other scholars who were actively applying decolonial lens to their research projects. I finally felt a sense of community in academia.

As I began to familiarize myself in this field of inquiry, I secured a predissertation research grant so that I could begin formally planning my dissertation research in Guatemala. Prior to arriving in Guatemala, I felt enormous pressure to be decisive and have a clear idea of my dissertation research by the time I returned to the states. The tension I felt during my first year reappeared. I felt I needed to "figure everything out." As I grappled with this pressure, it felt natural to revert to my professional expertise and background in youth development and so when I arrived in Guatemala, I began to reach out and connect with youth mentoring and educational programs in the area. A part of me thought the most conventional path was to partner with a non-profit organization and pursue a yearlong ethnography as my dissertation research site. It was during this thought process that my inner voice returned. Somewhere in my heart I longed for something different. Why was I so afraid to trust this intuition? Although I felt unsure about my path, I also felt a deep sense of security in my life. This ambivalence continued until the end of my trip. I wrote,

> My research study in Guatemala is also still not very clear and I am about to leave Lake Atitlan in two days. I should be freaking out right now but I am profoundly at peace. Am I going crazy? I have no idea what I am experiencing right now... my left logical brain has also released its grip and I am entering a very new territory where I just feel truly happy, open, and yet deeply grounded and purposeful... Life is truly so mystic and

> incomprehensible... I have no idea how this Guatemala trip is going to end. (August 14, 2019)

Ultimately, I did not establish a formal partnership with an NPO. Instead, I befriended a young woman named Milsa at the very end of my trip who graciously introduced me to her family and village and her Maya cultural roots. It was a beautiful and heartfelt encounter, and I asked if she'd be open to collaborating with me on a future research project, which she wholeheartedly agreed to support.

Although I was comforted knowing I had a community partner, I still felt a bit uneasy not having a formal organization to collaborate with. In a way, I felt this made my dissertation less legitimate and appropriate for a dissertation project. The imaginary academic surveillance police psychologically took a hold of me. As I grappled with this feeling of illegitimacy, I struggled to understand what steps I should take next. Coincidently it was around this time that I happened to share about my research interest in Guatemala during an anthropology class when one of my classmates encouraged me to connect with a professor in the Teachers Education department, Dr. Alexandra Allweiss. This introduction was the start of an important phase in my dissertation journey. In my journal I wrote,

> I had a major breakthrough at the end of October when I was able to set up a meeting with Dr. Allweiss, a new professor in the Teacher Ed department who has done extensive ethnographic research with Indigenous youth in Guatemala. I truly believe that she will become such a critical mentor for me as I transition into my dissertation phase in 2020. (November 15, 2019)

A significant realization that I had when it came to decolonizing research practice was that one cannot do it in an isolated space. Part of the journey of reflexivity is to have a strong support

system that can challenge you, guide you, and help you facilitate deeper reflections and insights. In addition, a decolonizing agenda means being led by partnership and community. It requires a deep and intentional effort to listen, reflect, and contemplate. Freire (1970) eloquently shared, "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry [people] pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (p. 72). In other words, liberatory learning emerges from the dialectic process of authentic human engagement. It is not transactional nor a unidimensional process. Rather a decolonizing agenda is an enduring journey that Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) describes as ocean tides consisting of the ebbs and flows of four processes: decolonization, healing, transformation, and mobilization. These "tides represent movement, change, process, life, inward and outward flows of ideas, reflections, and actions" (p.120). The foremost emphasis is placed on collaboration and community, which Staikidis (2020) posit is particularly difficult for Western scholars as this often entails unlearning the desire for control and premeditated agenda that characterized much of Western science.

Decolonizing My Mind

Although I was settling deeply into this space of intention, contemplation, and soul-searching, I soon faced a situation where my patience and purpose were severely tested. The emergence of the global pandemic in spring 2020 was a curveball no one was expecting. Prior to the shutdown, I was preparing to do my comprehensive exams with the plan to do a one-year ethnography in Guatemala. As I was close to finalizing this timeline, the university-wide and subsequent state-wide (and global) shutdown took place. I temporarily went back to my parents' house in Illinois to quarantine and support them with daily errands. In my journal during this time, I wrote the following entry,

> I have no idea where to begin... life has completely unraveled these past 3 weeks... As soon as February ended, the global pandemic took over every aspect of our lives. I am still in disbelief that this is our current reality. I am back home in Bartlett now as I try to regroup from all of the changes that have taken place. Illinois is under a stay-at-home order and so my parents and I are hunkering down doing the best we can during these incredibly uncertain times. Everything is up in the air. My comprehensive exam... my dissertation in Guatemala... SGI activities... our collective well-being...
>
> All-in-all, I feel deeply anchored. I know everything will fundamentally move in the most value-creating way as long as I continue to fight and make causes based on my great vow. I have profound conviction in this. I am kind of shocked at my own groundedness... my baseline life condition has transformed so much since 2010... I am left with so much gratitude for this practice and my mentor for continuously guiding me on this journey. Time to keep fighting. (March 26, 2020)

While grappling with profound uncertainty, what grounded me was my Buddhist practice. Buddhist cosmology and worldview have been an integral piece to my journey of decoloniality and facilitating greater self-awareness. A passage that I continuously returned to was, "The Buddha wrote that one should become the master of one's mind rather than let one's mind master oneself" (Soka Gakkai, 1999, p. 390). From a Buddhist perspective, there is a clear distinction between human intellect and one's inherent Buddha nature (i.e., enlightened self). To reveal one's enlightened self means to master's one mind and to perceive the inherent truth in one's circumstances and subsequently take courageous action that is not influenced by one's doubt, insecurity, and/or fear but instead by one's compassion and fundamental belief in self and others. Buddhism teaches this process as the development of one's wisdom, which all living beings

possess regardless of one's educational background. Buddhist thinker, Daisaku Ikeda (as cited in SGI Quarterly, 2003) elucidated this point, "To be master of one's mind means to cultivate the wisdom that resides in the inner recesses of our lives, and which wells forth in inexhaustible profusion only when we are moved by a compassionate determination to serve humankind, to serve people." No matter how impossible a situation may seem, Buddhism teaches that a path forward always exists only if we choose to elevate our inner life state and awaken to our vast infinite potential. This transformational process is what is termed human revolution in the Soka Gakkai International (SGI), the lay Buddhist organization I am a part of. It cannot be understated the monumental role Buddhism and eastern philosophy played as I applied a decolonial lens to my PhD journey. The consistent and intentional space I created for myself to chant/meditate and sit with my thoughts, feelings, ways of being, and purpose allowed for powerful centeredness and groundedness that intellectualizing and analyzing would not be able to replicate.

During this time of shutdown, I wholeheartedly delved into my Buddhist practice and actively chanted 2 to 3 hours every day to cultivate wisdom and identify next steps. This process was not a linear process though. At times I felt grounded and other times I felt deeply unsure of who I was and what I was doing with my life. I wrote,

> My life condition is not super high this week. I am feeling a mix of various emotions including fatigue, sadness, frustration, confusion... what am I doing? What is my mission? Why can't I break through this struggle? It has been nearly 3 years since this battle began and I am still feeling extremely unsure about my life direction. I keep telling myself to be patient but I am feeling my breaking point. What is my purpose? What is it that I am fighting for? (May 28, 2020)

Since I began my PhD journey, I struggled constantly with a feeling of uncertainty and ambiguity. I could not see a clear end goal. In other words, I had no idea what I was striving to attain in my life. In the same vein, I did not know with certainty what my topic was going to be for my dissertation research. What became very clear during the pandemic was that international research travel was indefinitely postponed and my original plan to conduct a yearlong ethnography became highly doubtful.

It was during this time that I contemplated picking a more convenient topic. Perhaps a research study that I could do over Zoom and in the U.S. so that recruitment and logistics would be much easier to manage. If my priority was to finish my PhD as soon as possible then I knew that route would make the most logical sense. As I struggled to find direction, I decided in July 2020 that I would spend the whole day chanting to elevate my life state and penetrate my own doubt and insecurity. I knew if I tapped into a more enlightened state, I could make a decision based on wisdom that I would not regret. I described this spiritual process in my journal,

> I started off this month by doing a 10-hour toso *[10 hours of chanting]* with my fellow SGI members. It was so powerful, purposeful, and joyful. It really set the tone for the month as I continued to fight to advance in my research and in my SGI leadership responsibility. A huge moment of clarity came after I received guidance from Hiroyo-san and chanted to enter a deeper place in my life. From that cause, my decision to recommit to my dissertation plan in Guatemala emerged. I am not going to compromise my mission to learn more about the Indigenous families' lived experiences in Guatemala. I have no idea how this will all unfold in 2021 but everything starts with my prayer and conviction. I won't allow myself to keep getting swayed by the uncertainties of everything. (July 20, 2020)

After I made this decision, I began formulating a new research study that I could conduct in Guatemala with the support of my community partner, Milsa. She shared with me how much the Covid lockdown was gravely affecting Maya families' ability to generate an income. She welcomed this research opportunity to financially support herself and her family. Given Milsa's passion for women's rights, we initially decided on a research topic that focused on the role of mentoring in fostering Maya women's leadership. After I received the approval from my guidance committee, I formally took part in my comprehensive exams in Fall 2020. After I successfully passed, another major curveball entered my life.

Decolonizing My Beliefs

At the height of Covid cases and fatalities in Winter 2020-2021, my mother became seriously ill. She suffered from multiple infections while also becoming activated on the kidney transplant list, which she had been on for the past 5 years. My father worked 10 to 11 hours every day and could not coordinate my mother's care. These series of events compelled me to make the decision to relocate to Illinois so that I could be my mother's primary caregiver. Our central focus was to help her recover and prepare for a kidney transplant. During the Spring 2021 semester, my mother was admitted to an acute rehabilitation facility where she ended up contracting Covid. Miraculously, she only experienced a mild case of pneumonia. After her three-and-a-half-month admission, she returned home but significantly weak. During this time, I completely lost my motivation to focus on my dissertation proposal. I could not find the strength and energy to sit down and formally write. I describe this time in my journal as following,

> It's been a few weeks now since my mom came home. Although she had a medical issue that came up last week and was hospitalized for a couple of days, overall, her recovery has been making progress. The main goal is to help her regain her strength so that she can

> undergo a kidney transplant this summer. It is a daily challenge to support her and keep moving forward in my PhD. In all honesty, my motivation has been extremely low when it comes to writing. I am trying so hard to break through this inertia. I won't give up nor allow the negativity to consume me. I know I have a mission. I will give my all to win in my daily life and truly move forward. Now or never. (April 12, 2021)

Every week, I remember feeling so guilty and inadequate. Fortunately, throughout this time, I regularly checked-in with Alex to process and reflect on the challenges I was dealing with. One particular conversation stood out to me:

> M: I'm so sorry, Alex. I couldn't make any progress on my proposal this week.
>
> A: Why are you apologizing? Instead, what were you doing? You were taking care of your mom and supporting your family. Don't minimize that. In decolonial thought and practice, there is this idea of taking pauses (Patel, 2016) in life to focus on other critical priorities that we experience as human beings.

It was during this conversation that I realized how much more value I was placing on my work as a PhD student as opposed to my efforts as a daughter. Despite managing my mother's healthcare and insurance claims in the midst of a global pandemic, I was beating myself up every day because I was not doing "real" work, meaning my research. In other words, I subconsciously internalized this belief that my efforts to support my parents did not really count toward my idea of success. Desierto & Maio (2020) argue the profound psychological and emotional toll neoliberalism can have in higher education. They posit that institutions reconceptualize students as human capital and consumers of education which further creates an institutional culture where education becomes a form of economic transaction. By committing oneself to academic training, the expectation is that one will be in an advantageous position to secure a fulfilling job upon

graduation. Under this logic, to not focus one's energy on this academic preparation means one is falling behind and risking one's potential career opportunities. It was exactly this sentiment that I deeply struggled with during this time of caregiving. A part of me believed success was contingent on my progress as a doctoral student. The reality was that I would not consider putting "caregiver for my parents" in my CV despite it requiring significant skills in healthcare research and coordination. The more caregiving took over my life, the more I felt I was falling behind compared to my peers who were finishing their PhDs and entering the job market.

This feeling of inadequacy made me much more self-aware of how colonizing and dehumanizing this thought was and how problematic it was to internalize what society deemed as important, productive, and valuable. Ultimately, the hegemonic idea of success is framed within the modern/colonial logic. In other words, unless it is contributing to the overall economic development, other forms of labor are often viewed as inferior and insignificant. Reflecting on my own experience, I also noticed parallels to the macro dynamics that were taking place as we figured out collectively how to move forward during the global pandemic. I paused and reflected on this moment,

> Although this curveball was challenging for me to process, I made clear intentions in early 2021 to pause and sit meaningfully with this ambiguity. That said, the process was at times messy, challenging, and profound. Patel (2016) argues the power of pauses in our work as academics particularly when externally or internally we experience the pressure to produce in the competitive world of deadlines and external metrics. Although I did not feel any immediate outside pressure, I kept grappling with an internal belief that I was not making progress because my dissertation proposal was sidelined while I supported my mother as her primary caregiver. During quiet moments, I reflected deeply on why I felt

> this way and noticed on a macro level a similar dynamic was taking place. Rather than pausing to protect and ensure the collective health and well-being of the community, the pressure to reopen and go back to normal was felt among many leaders and decision-makers in our institutions. This tension made me question deeply on humanity's current state. At the end of the day, what are we striving towards? Is it the never-ending pursuit toward economic growth and prosperity? Or are we as a humanity losing sight of something more intangible yet so necessary for our very survival and the planet's sustainability? What tools and visions do we need toward cultivating a more humane and sustainable future? So much emphasis is made on technological advancement and economic policies, but I wonder if the answer is more internal than external. It is these enduring questions that propel me as I write my dissertation proposal. (11/28/2021)

An important realization that I had was how gendered this process was. Labor that was traditionally viewed as feminine (e.g., caregiving, parenting) has never been respected and dignified in the way that it should be. Instead, labor contributing to the formal labor market (i.e., employment) has been viewed as more superior and important. This heightened economic emphasis underpins the equity discourses taking place in higher education where it is contextualized within the logics of the market (Davies and Saltmarsh, 2007). Burke (2020) argues, "in such misframings, universities are positioned as competing in the global market of higher education for "world-class" students, staff, and resources, based on the "quality" of their institutional profile in relation to research and teaching" (p. 72). Tools measuring such performativity are forms of surveillance that reinforce academic staff and students' sense of worth to the institution (Gill, 2014). This has a more detrimental effect on female academics as they often contend with multiple responsibilities inside and outside academia including family

and caregiver roles (Morley, 2014). As I struggled with my own sense of value, this gendered colonizing process became the forefront of my soul-searching journey as I worked on my dissertation proposal.

Decolonizing Self

As I wrote my proposal, I shifted my focus on Maya women leadership to family adaption and resilience after speaking with Milsa who provided me with insights on how Maya families were adjusting during Covid. Although this change took place, I still felt an internal conflict in how I was writing my proposal. It lacked focus and specificity. This was the primary feedback that I received from my committee after presenting my desired dissertation idea. Although I presented on Maya family adaptation and resilience, what specifically would I be examining? As I grappled with this question, I reached out to Milsa and the more I listened to her and her family's experience, I realized the significant and beautiful impact that Milsa had as a mother, partner, sister, and daughter in her family. It dawned on me during this conversation that this research project could be a powerful way to amplify the voices and experiences of Maya mothers like Milsa and how they experience womanhood and motherhood within their family and community structures. Although this idea showed great promise, I could not help but feel ambivalence somewhere in my heart. Why was I struggling to embrace this idea? As I contemplated, I became painfully aware of my own biases and preconceived notions. Ultimately, the root cause was my own internalized misogyny and the discomfort and fear that I had embracing my own sense of womanhood.

For most of my adulthood, I have prioritized being an independent, ambitious, and purposeful woman. I wanted to have confidence in myself and pursue a career that was promoting social justice. These desires were profoundly rooted in my own childhood experience

of being bullied by peers in a predominantly white community. My bully was a white male student who targeted me frequently in middle school and freshmen year of high school and harassed me relentlessly as the "Asian girl who can't talk." His powerful presence and sense of control made me feel so vulnerable and powerless. Despite how humiliated I was, I never found the courage to stand up to him nor seek help from my parents or teachers. Instead, I silently endured it and went to school every day afraid I would be targeted and be laughed at by my peers. This experience left a profound mark on my identity and voice as a teenage girl, which eventually transformed into a desire as an adult to work in a profession where I could support those who were vulnerable and at risk of being marginalized at school. Hence, working at an alternative high school as a guidance counselor brought me immense meaning and fulfillment. However, as I was entering my 30s, my inner voice seeking change became louder. As much as I found great satisfaction in my work with my students, I began experiencing a desire to evolve as a human being in two ways: professionally and personally. The institutional culture of the public school system that I was working in deeply troubled me as I directly observed the traumatizing and demoralizing incidents students were facing in their classrooms. I felt a profound need to step away and make sense of what I was feeling and experiencing. On a personal level, I had been so career-centered for much of my adulthood and my ambition led me to professional opportunities in California, Japan, and Boston. Despite the excitement of moving to new places, I felt a deep desire to settle down and consider starting a family.

Although I was not fully aware of it, my doctoral journey has been my own evolution as a woman. Slowly but surely discovering new layers in my identity and expanding my worldview. Although I had this desire to settle down, I wrestled with a deep feeling of inner conflict and ambivalence toward this desire. In my journal I wrote,

> I experienced a major shift in my life this month. After really struggling with my dissertation proposal and feeling super lost, I had a moment of awakening when I realized that I was not truly living authentically to myself. This was all centered on my identity as a woman. I realized that in many ways I was not 100% embracing my feelings and desires centered on my womanhood. Certain parts of myself were still brushing off my deep desire to marry and start a family as "stupid girly girl dreams." I was not truly respecting and dignifying it as I would if I had a major career goal. In other words, internally I realized I was making really harsh judgments that career goals were more worthy and noble whereas marriage was secondary or inferior to that. I really had to look at myself in the most honest way and ask why I was so harsh on certain parts of my identity as a woman. (June 27, 2022)

I believe this judgement was rooted in my bullying experience and how violated I felt during those formative years of my development. My sense of womanhood has been inextricably linked to men and the patriarchal culture that I grew up in. Due to the bullying experience, I struggled with trusting myself to be vulnerable with male partners, and so I generally avoided this and instead focused on uplifting and mentoring fellow young women in my profession and the SGI Buddhist organization. However, during this journey, ironically, I realized I subconsciously began to harbor a deep sense of misogyny. I tended to respect and admire women who were challenging gender norms and viewed as trailblazers in their professions. On the other hand, I realized I held powerful bias toward women who instead pursued more traditional gender roles and were less ambitious professionally. I perceived them as weak, subordinate, and cowardly. But now I realized this perspective was profoundly rooted in my own harsh judgement to that 13-

year-old self who did not stand up to her bully. There was so much shame and disgust associated with that experience.

In addition, the bullying experience generated a deep desire within me to prove my worth to society. For much of my young adulthood, I was always very decisive, motivated, and ambitious. I was singularly focused on proving to myself that I can become an independent, unapologetic, and strong woman, the qualities I longed to have during my adolescence. However, this powerful need to prove my worth dissipated and became less significant as I entered the doctoral program. Somewhere in my heart I felt I was telling the 13-year-old self that everything was alright now, and I was ready to move forward and embrace changes. I did not have to prove anything to anyone. Instead of being consumed by the idea of personal empowerment and achievement, I longed to radically heal mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. I believe this was the reason I heavily gravitated toward the ideologies of healing and radical imagination that decolonial feminist theory embraced as opposed to the neoliberal institutional culture of performativity. My spiritual mentor, Daisaku Ikeda (1974), writes,

> Never for an instant forget the effort to renew your life, to build yourself anew. Creativity means to push open the heavy, groaning doorway of life itself. This is not an easy task. Indeed, it may be the most severely challenging struggle there is. For opening the door to your own life is in the end more difficult than opening the door to all the mysteries of the universe. (p. 1)

I realized that decolonizing research begins foremost by decolonizing oneself. Inevitably, we are a product of the system we grew up in. To fully liberate ourselves, we must painstakingly reflect on our own identities, who we are, and why we think the way we think. This emergence of a new self was a part of my own process of decolonial dreaming and reimagining (Bell et al., 2020).

As I processed these insights and realizations, I gained clarity on how I wanted to proceed with my dissertation, and I knew I could approach this research study with genuine openness and curiosity as opposed to my biases, judgement, and preconceived ideas. Although this was not my intention, it was through this dissertation proposal writing process that all these personal feelings, thoughts, and experiences collided in a powerful way and helped me see the tremendous insight and value of applying a decolonial lens to my research. By decolonizing my sense of self, I was able to authentically listen to my community partner and decide on a meaningful and important research topic.

New Imaginings and Possibilities

The data collection took place primarily led by Milsa due to her established trust with the Maya mothers in her community. After the interviews were conducted, I was able to travel to Guatemala to begin formal discussions on the data and identify emergent codes and themes together with Milsa. An important takeaway from the interviews was the power of connections and healing. Milsa shared a beautiful anecdote of one of the mothers she interviewed. As the mother spoke about the immense challenges she experienced in her life, deep emotions and tears appeared which in turn provoked emotions in Milsa. Milsa described how important it was for these mothers to have spaces to connect with one another and to share their journeys. Through these connections, Milsa experienced a profound therapeutic moment of healing and gratitude and an inspiration to develop more ways to support the fellow mothers in her community. Listening to her insights also deeply moved me and it made me reflect on my PhD journey. In my journal I wrote,

> Since arriving in Guatemala, I noticed the symbol of a butterfly in the two places I've been spending the most time: my Airbnb apartment and Santa Catarina Palopó. In

Santa Catarina, the village is known for their beautiful paintings on the exterior of their houses. The butterfly in particular symbolizes a woman's freedom. It just so happened that the primary painting above my bed at my Airbnb rental was also of a woman and butterflies.

In so many ways, my PhD journey has felt like I was in a chrysalis, a state of transition and deep internal growth and changes. At times I felt uncomfortable because I didn't know who I was or was becoming. Instead of suppressing my insecurity and returning to a more recognizable and comfortable place, my Buddhist practice propelled me to fully embrace and sit with this ambiguity and discomfort.

Also, my faculty mentors played a monumental role in providing a safe and protected space for me to take my time and patiently allow myself to develop first and foremost as a human being. Considering the mechanical grind that is common in academia, I truly feel so, so grateful. My PhD experience in so many ways has been so awakening and liberating.

Now as I enter the final stage of the research process and work together with my incredible friend, Milsa, to discuss and contemplate our data, I feel like I am truly emerging from my chrysalis with a new worldview, identity, vision and ultimately an expansive sense of freedom. Life is truly so beautiful. (January 29, 2023)

The trip to Guatemala was profound and beautiful on many levels. By the end of it, I remember sharing with Alex that the research study has inspired so many new ideas and directions that Milsa and I would love to continue to build in the future. This partnership was rooted deeply in friendship and sisterhood as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) emphasizes, "Respectful, reciprocal, genuine relationships lie at the heart of the community life and community development"

(p.125). The dissertation as an academic requirement felt secondary to the experience Milsa and I had together. In addition, I personally have undergone tremendous changes as I worked on my PhD while caregiving for my parents during the last three years of my doctoral journey. In the end, these different roles and identities interplayed with one another, and it created a beautiful and profound liberatory experience. In other words, my growth as a daughter helped me become a more thoughtful researcher and likewise my growth as a researcher helped me become a more thoughtful friend and human being. To say that I learned and grew a lot as a doctoral student is a massive understatement. It has truly been one of the most transformative and liberating chapters of my life thus far.

Implications for Practice and Policy

As higher education institutions continue to embrace neoliberal policies, an honest discussion needs to take place on what is the purpose of higher education. The constant surveillance and metrics of performativity among faculty and students are colonizing forces that dehumanize and isolate the very people academic leaders supposedly say they serve. In a 2019 survey among doctoral students, nearly 35% reported seeking professional help for mental health issues including severe anxiety and clinical depression, which they report were exacerbated due to their research responsibilities (Woolston, 2019). Another survey among faculty members found that more than half were considering a career change or an early retirement due to the stress they were experiencing at their universities (Gewin, 2021). Given these alarming trends, a pedagogical shift is imperative if the purpose of higher education is to uplift and create humanizing spaces so that faculty and students can conduct transformational work.

In addition, given the constant rhetoric among academic leaders espousing their commitment to social justice, diversity, and inclusion, it is critical to re-evaluate what that

practically and substantively means especially in the field of family studies. As family studies research frequently adopt interventionist approaches (e.g., improving parenting programs, promoting family resilience), applying a decolonial lens is critical particularly when conducting studies with families in marginalized communities. An intentional and purposeful effort to center, honor, and dignify their experiences, perspectives, and wisdom must be a starting point in any research endeavor. Additionally, family researchers are inevitably situated within the neoliberal university context, which means a constant process of critical reflexivity is paramount to prevent biases, assumptions, and judgements to skew how studies are conducted.

Conclusion

Although my doctoral journey is just one example, I realized through this experience the re-imagined possibilities of learning and research in the field of family studies. The major lessons I learned while applying a decolonial lens to my dissertation were the importance of intention, seeking out support and community, and courageously looking inward to grow and expand one's own worldview and perspective. Reflecting on my experiences, decolonizing research practice means to be intentional in dignifying, awakening, and revealing our own humanity and sense of self as human beings before our roles as researchers. By centering ourselves in a way that is more intrinsically motivated, the more expansive, meaningful, and ethical our research can become. Additionally, by having a clear intention or purpose, during the moments of uncertainty and fear that inevitably arise, it can become a guiding principle that one can always return to. Therefore, as doctoral students and emerging scholars, it is imperative to always have a clear "Why" for all our research endeavors.

That said, the reality is that we are settled in systems that often can be counter to these intentions. It is during those moments of tensions and ambivalence that it is necessary to seek

support and guidance from those in our academic communities and outside community partners. Decolonizing research is not done in a vacuum. It is a constant and dynamic process of collaboration, support, connection, and humility. By intentionally listening to our communities, wisdom and direction will manifest, and it can uplift us with greater purpose, commitment, and importantly confidence. I cannot understate the pivotal role that my advisors and committee members had in my own doctoral journey. Not once did I feel belittled or pressured when I voiced my struggles or felt lost. Their kindness, grace, and care uplifted me during moments when I truly wanted to give up and leave the program. Even within the neoliberal institution, my professors created a protected and healing space for me and for that I will be eternally grateful.

The final takeaway as a scholar is to always seek to learn and grow. Ironically as a scholar I often felt the pressure to have things figured out or be at risk of being perceived as incapable and incompetent. However, to be truly open to identifying one's own biases, assumptions, and ignorance, one must be genuinely seeking to expand one's own worldview and perspective. An enormous part of that journey requires the courageous leap into the unknown. To change inevitably means to be vulnerable and insecure. Our growth hinges on how we respond during those moments of uncertainties. In a time when there is so much human suffering and confusion, innovative ideas and critical thinking are much more needed in the field of family studies and beyond. My greatest hope is that my doctoral journey can provide insights and a sense of hope to those who also dream and reimagine the possibilities of research and learning.

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CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

As I near the end of my doctoral journey, I recall the words of the conversation I had with David at the park in Quetzaltenango and his parting words, “Well, hope you don’t sell your soul...” Life in many ways consists of the ebbs and flows of stagnation, contemplation, redirection, and ultimately changes. My dissertation embodies the messiness yet profundity of human development and its possibilities. It was an intentional adventure as I applied a decolonial lens to my research, which resulted in the multidimensional experience of not only generating insights into womanhood and motherhood among Maya women but also a renewed sense of self of my own identity as a woman, scholar, and human being. My doctoral journey was a relentless cycle of searching, revealing, and affirming my soul and sense of humanity. Additionally, it became a critical life chapter where I could make sense of my previous professional experiences in Boston and develop new skills, perspectives, and a worldview to prepare as I leave the bubble of a student and re-enter society. The modern/colonial capitalistic system of power is an enduring structure that affects every aspect of our world including academia. This dissertation was my first step in my journey to challenge the modern/colonial logic and create space for reimagined futurities.

The concluding chapter of my dissertation highlights the significant insights gained from these studies including the multifaceted ways womanhood emerged within the experiences of Maya mothers and the insights and challenges of applying a decolonial lens to research. In addition, it argues how imperative it is for scholars who are committed to decoloniality to engage in critical reflexivity in every stage of their research projects. The chapter further describes how these studies have contributed important contextual literature to the decolonial scholarship by providing insights to a decolonial reimagining of womanhood and motherhood particularly

among Maya women in Guatemala. Furthermore, this chapter provides implications for practice and policy for institutions who are committed to social justice and decoloniality. Lastly it offers considerations for future research in decolonial studies among Maya families in Guatemala and for scholars who are passionate about embarking on their own journey toward self-decoloniality.

Findings and Contribution to Literature

My first study explored the ways womanhood and motherhood were experienced by Maya women in Guatemala. The findings challenged the modern/colonial system of gender that characterizes women in Guatemala as submissive and dependent nurturers within their family structures. The study revealed that Maya womanhood is an active process centered on agency, self-determination, and impetus to fight and support their families particularly their children. Although colonial structure of machismo certainly was a prevalent aspect of their experiences, the Maya mothers revealed their own resistance and agency to forge their own paths amidst external adversities and setbacks. Instead of viewing womanhood and motherhood as a detriment to their development, many expressed the strength and pride they held to be a woman and a mother in their community and their aspiration to cultivate a better life not only for their children but for other women in their communities.

In addition to challenging the stereotypes of gender submissiveness and dependence, the study highlighted the multidimensional and powerful role that motherhood played in the identities and experiences of Maya women. For these participants, mothering became a central part of who they were and their commitment to raise their children and provide greater opportunities. Being a mother brought them a renewed sense of purpose and meaning to their lives. From a modern/colonial logic, motherhood is not viewed as an empowering mechanism. Rather, education and career opportunities are frequently used as the measurements of progress

and empowerment within the coloniality of power and gender. The experiences of these mothers highlight a decolonial narrative about what it means to live with intention and meaningfulness and a sense of self that is not dictated by market logic of success and achievements but rather fueled by one's unwavering love for family and will to forge their own paths. A related notion of motherhood as an identity of resistance was articulated by Velez (2019) in her study with migrant mothers where she argues motherhood, "as a movement committed to challenging educational and civic institutions… The mothers stressed that reconceiving motherhood must continue to honor mothers and their relentless struggle for their children and families in a patriarchal society" (p.183).

Through conducting this study with Maya mothers, I learned how imperative it is for scholars who are committed to decoloniality to engage in critical reflexivity in every stage of their research projects. A huge factor that led me to this research question was when I realized my own internalized misogyny. I had to critically unpack my deep held biases, assumptions, and judgements, particularly toward my own understanding of womanhood and motherhood. Being a part of a neoliberal institution that continues to perpetuate the modern/colonial system of gender, I realized on multiple levels, the profound tensions that exist that shape how we identify, perceive, and perform gender especially for women in higher education. My doctoral journey was in many ways about challenging my own internalized coloniality of gender and opening my life to a reimagined possibility. It was a deeply uncomfortable, ambiguous, and messy journey, but by tapping into this space of vulnerability, my worldview shifted in transformative ways. In his introduction to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy* of the Oppressed, *Richard Shaull* eloquently stated,

> Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it

> becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (p.34)

Through my doctoral training, I reaffirmed and dignified who I was as a person. By exploring both the lived experiences of Maya women and my own, this dissertation brought forth new insights to the decolonial literature by providing a decolonial imagining of womanhood and motherhood among Maya women and in academic institutions.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings from this dissertation offered important decolonial narratives and perspectives of Maya women in Guatemala. Their profound insights and wisdom on how they carry themselves with dignity, purpose, and daily intentions must be honored especially by those who say are working to serve Maya communities in Guatemala. Any form of policies that pertain to the lives of Maya people must be generated with the absolute participation and authorization of the Indigenous community members themselves. For far too long the modern/colonial logic of development has silenced and othered Maya people and imposed colonizing values and beliefs in the name of progress and empowerment. To truly foster a liberatory and decolonial praxis, much greater and thorough effort must be made to decolonize the very notion of family, education, and community themselves and allow the voices, experiences, and wisdom of Maya families to be at the center of any form of social change and movement.

In addition, scholars who are committed to decolonial praxis must continue to reimagine the possibilities of research and knowledge production. Many disciplines in academia actively voice their commitment to fighting social justice and supporting marginalized families and communities while at the same time conforming to the modern/colonial logic. Similarly, scholars

identify as proponents of human equality and social equity while at the same time centering their scholarly endeavors and identity under the beliefs of elitism (e.g., top-tiered journals, prestigious grants, ranked programs). These contradictions must be wholeheartedly examined with unflinching honesty, integrity, and humility regardless of how uncomfortable and messy the process may be. In the same vein, for academic institutional leaders who are genuinely committed to social justice, inclusivity, and equity, there must be an honest and critical re-evaluation of what it means to embrace and promote higher education learning. This unbending agenda to commercialize education under the modern/colonial logic has resulted in the constant academic surveillance and dehumanization of the very people institutions supposedly say they serve. Ultimately without substantive action and commitment, institutions who continue to prioritize short-term external recognition (e.g., university rankings, prestige) and revenue over the well-being and dignity of the people will not lead to any form of sustainable, liberating, and humane outcomes.

Future Considerations

Future research in decolonizing studies among Maya families in Guatemala should explore more deeply the modern/colonial system of gender. Specifically, in addition to examining how womanhood is experienced by Maya women who do not have children, it would be insightful to explore how manhood and fatherhood are perceived and experienced by Maya men as machismo continues to have a widespread presence within Maya communities in Guatemala. Furthermore, for Western scholars who plan to conduct research studies in Guatemala, decoloniality and critical reflexivity are crucial components in any research design. Without this intentional and introspective work, it could lead to risks that may perpetuate the colonization of Maya communities and people and other marginalized populations. In addition to

the social sciences, it may be beneficial for students in different academic fields to apply a decolonial lens to expand the literature on how graduate students can critically and intentionally navigate their neoliberal institutions and their doctoral training. The coloniality of power pervades every sector in any academic institution, hence decolonial praxis can be embraced not only by students but also faculty, staff, and institutional leaders.

Concluding Thoughts

When I reflect on these past six years, I am deeply heartened knowing that I will be leaving my doctoral training with a much stronger sense of purpose, optimism, and conviction. Although my path forward is still to be determined, the biggest lesson I learned during my PhD experience was that there are many things that I cannot control, but the guiding principle is to always lead with clear intentions and to relentlessly strive for authenticity. By having faith in a deeper spiritual purpose, it allowed me to transcend my ego and enter a space of creativity and possibility. My eternal mentor and Buddhist philosopher, Daisaku Ikeda (1973 as cited in Soka Gakkai, 2023), states,

> The cultivation of creativity must be rooted in the soil of a rich spirituality. This in turn points to the vital importance of maintaining spiritual freedom. Independent thought and creative work are impossible when the human spirit is subjected to restraining or distorting pressures. Inexhaustible fonts of creative thinking can only be tapped where mind and spirit can roam freely exploring all perspectives and possibilities.
>
> But spiritual freedom does not mean spiritual license. It does not mean thinking and acting in a willful, arbitrary manner. True development can take place only in the presence of both expansive liberty and a high degree of self-discipline. In my view this means the opportunity to grow by sharing ideas through dialogue, provoking and

> catalyzing each other toward an expanded field of vision and ultimately to profound and encompassing insight into the nature of things.

What has always drawn me to Buddhist philosophy is the particular emphasis it has on interconnectedness as opposed to the hegemonic modern/colonial logic that centers on dualities such as good vs. evil, success vs. failure, positive vs. negative. The principle of the Middle Way in Buddhism teaches the interconnectivity of the self, environment, and the totality of life itself and that wisdom emerges when one perceives this interrelatedness within all phenomena (Soka Gakkai, 2023). In a world that continues to be ever more fragmented where loneliness is now considered an epidemic (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023), a collective and systemic movement promoting life-to-life connectivity and soulful healing is that much more critical especially in educational settings. Although I do not know where my life will take me, the awakening and transformation that I experienced in my doctoral journey will serve as an invaluable foundation for the work that I will embark on.

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