

2022

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Recommended Citation

Ruiz, Marisol, and Lilia Chavez. 2022. "The Internal Power of Chican@/Latin@ Youth." *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 1 (44): DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55671/0160-4341.1163>

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The Internal Power of Chican@/Latin@ Youth

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Abstract

This is a qualitative study conducted by two researchers who engaged with Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). Researchers worked together to illuminate the process youth went through as they engaged in YPAR. Researchers uncovered that youth went through an external process (community awareness, discoveries, and creation) and internal process (internal conflict, discoveries, motivation) as they engaged in YPAR. This study documents how youth empower themselves by engaging in YPAR through the sharing of their *testimonio*, accessing/acknowledging a *nepantlá* state, and finding their internal power through *conocimiento* and reaching a holistic healing space.

Introduction: Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and *Testimonio*—*Sisters in the Struggle*

The era of Trump and its aftermath exacerbated an atmosphere of hate and self-doubt. The authors of this study thought it was pivotal to share their research because they wanted to remind students of their internal power and to never doubt who they are, and the power they carry within themselves.

The struggle for knowledge, understanding, and acceptance is often troubling for youth. This is especially true for youth who, because of their gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and/or spoken language identities, face erasure of their identity and dignity—of their being—as they try to accommodate themselves to the standards of an oppressive, racist, heteronormative society that favors privilege and power.

The researchers' interest in this qualitative study comes from their lived experience and connections with students. They collaborated with youth to complete this research project. The two authors of this paper have been working together as researchers and educators since the 1990s to support the facilitation of the youth's cultural wealth that highlight their agency (Yosso 2006) to act in their communities. The authors began collaborating

when they discovered their joint interest focused on social justice, and YPAR pedagogies that focused on guiding youth's self-empowerment. The study consisted of sixteen participants who were Chican@/Latin@ students, eight from a high school and eight from a community college. The researchers presented at their respective locations to encourage engagement. The participants self-selected to participate in these studies. As researchers we helped facilitate the dialogue/*testimonios* and worked with the youth as they questioned, challenged, and resisted their oppression. Through this denunciation process they identified the issues they wanted to begin to confront and deconstruct. The high school youth chose homophobia as a topic to address, while the community college students chose immigration issues. The researchers shared narratives with each other about the transformational acts of Chican@/Latin@ students based on the data collected. The researchers observed that as Chican@/Latin@ students progressed through the YPAR process, they experienced a complicated intellectual/spiritual experience.

The challenge for educators, therefore, is to understand the voices of youth. Who they are, where they come from, what are their dreams, necessities, aspirations, future goals, and what are the issues they face. From these questions, we were able to help them think of how to negotiate

their social milieu. Educators play a major role in encouraging youth to not give up on themselves and learn to identify inequalities. We helped raise their consciousness to make informed life decisions, to make a difference in themselves and their communities. In our work as educators—as their allies—we position youth as holders and producers of knowledge capable of making changes in society (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

The researchers believe the people in their communities including youth are certified organic intellectuals (Levins-Morales, 2001). They believe this because before they read about the process called YPAR, they were already utilizing this critical methodology when working with youth. In the researchers' own words:

YPAR, “felt right”—it was a way to truly acknowledge youths' agency and knowledge. Before we knew about *testimonios* and Chicana feminist theories, we were provided an understanding through Gloria Anzaldúa's nomenclature, we might have called the process “Organizing 101” or another name, yet we were using this genre of practice out of a sense of urgency.

The researchers facilitated and participated in YPAR in two locations, one in a Southern New Mexico high school, and the other in a Northern California Community College. Our purpose was to understand how the YPAR process empowers youth and leads to community transformation. *Testimonio* was used to help illuminate the experience of Chican@/Latin@ students as they engaged in YPAR. In our studies, the process began with youth sharing their *testimonies*, regarding homophobia and anti-immigration policies in hopes of creating healing spaces for the youth and their communities. As the process continued, youth were eventually able to name their world and heighten their voices through their experiences.

The process of youth coming to an understanding of themselves and how they fit in society is complicated. This achievement is made more difficult by digressions at various stages in their lives. By incorporating *testimonio* in the YPAR process, youth are able to express themselves and listen to others—hence, assimilating their agency of being an organic intellectual (Levins-Morales, 2001) and develop the types of political, cultural, and psychological consciousness necessary to thrive in their environments.

A number of scholars have extensively documented how YPAR has been utilized to transform and empower

communities, particularly when working with youth groups. Our study complements their work by documenting how youth empower themselves through the sharing of their *testimonio*, accessing/acknowledging a *nepantlá* state, and finding their internal power through *conocimiento*. We also aim to complement Anzaldúa's work by outlining, naming and documenting the stages youth experienced when engaged in YPAR and *testimonio* in order to enter the fourth space of holistic healing.

The Power of Youth *Testimonio* in Youth Participatory Action Research

To help illuminate the process Chican@/Latin@ students underwent as they engaged in YPAR, it is important to discuss the role of *testimonio*. The YPAR process began with youth sharing their *testimonios* in each of the YPAR settings. *Testimonios* allowing groups from the subaltern to share their stories of urgency, of struggle and passion are, therefore, political in nature (Beverly, 2005; Burciaga, 2007; Burciaga & Tavares, 2006; Cruz, 2006; Delgado Bernal, et al. 2009; Flores & Garcia 2009; Haig-Brown, 2003; Huber, 2009; Irizarry, 2005; Latina Feminist Group, 2001). In our study, the urgencies in youth *testimonios* were of wanting to heal themselves and their communities of homophobia (high school setting) and anti-immigration policies (community college setting).

Keeping close at hand the discussion by various researchers (Beverly, 2005; Burciaga, 2007; Burciaga & Tavares 2006; Cruz 2006; Delgado Bernal, et al. 2009; Flores & Garcia 2009; Haig-Brown 2003; Huber 2009; Irizarry 2005; Latina Feminist Group 2001), *testimonio* is used in this study to document the journey students embarked on as they engaged in YPAR. The inquiry strategy of *testimonio* involved listening to the narration of youths' lives as they went through the YPAR process. In addition, the *testimonios* of the two researchers/adult allies were crucial in helping give names to the processes the youth experienced.

Garcia and Castro (2011) position *testimonios* as liberationist statements, as tools that further encourage *la lucha* (the struggle). Garcia and Castro also comment that *testimonios* are part of the oral history of the Latin@ culture and are a natural way for youth to search for their inner wisdom. The researchers used *testimonios* to document youth feelings and reflections throughout the YPAR

process. The researchers/adult allies realized that youth went through a complicated intellectual process as they engaged in YPAR. Through our grounded use of *testimonio* practice with youth, we have created what Levins-Morales (2001) calls “homemade theory.” Morales describes homemade theory this way:

The intellectual traditions I come from create theory out of shared lives instead of sending away for it. My thinking grew directly out of listening to my own discomforts, finding out who shared them, who validated them, and in exchanging stories about common experiences, finding patterns, systems, explanations of how and why things happened. This is the central process of consciousness raising, of collective *testimonio* (pp. 27-8).

As we embarked on our collective *testimonio* through YPAR, a community consciousness began to surface and we noticed the youth underwent a process in order to achieve their inner wisdom, from which their internal power is derived. Through *testimonio*, subaltern voices surfaced that began to find names in this process.

Youth Participatory Action Research and Chicana Feminist Epistemology

Youth Participatory Action Research, a research approach in which youth gather with their peers and begin to learn about structural oppression, begins with *testimoniari* (the act of testifying) by the youth about their experiences, dialoguing with one another, and reflecting upon their community and world—what Freire (1970) refers to as *concientizacion* and Anzaldúa (2002) as *conocimiento*. Youth then identify an issue arising from their stories that ties the youth in the group together, and once an issue is identified they begin to organize in an attempt to resolve the issue. As they are engaged in this process they are *testimoniando* (the act of testifying with others) about their experience in the social justice movement. In high school, youth decided to reach out to and educate middle school students about homophobia. In the community college, students began to educate their peers about immigrant policies and their rights. For instance, as high school youth engaged in action they reflected on their praxis and adjusted to improve their presentations at the different middle schools. They also reflected upon their overall experience each time they presented at the middle schools.

The YPAR process facilitated individuals coming together as a community, and it is through this process that youth began to experience what Anzaldúa (2002) referred to as *conocimiento*. In this context we engage Chicana feminist epistemology, which is key to understanding how we construct the viewpoint of this study and which guides us in understanding the YPAR process in general. Chicana feminist epistemology, for us, is framed by the discussion presented by Delgado Bernal and Elenes (2011) of Chicana feminist thought and its grounding in the work of Anzaldúa (1987; 2002). We find these concepts of Anzaldúa particularly important: *mestiza* (with its dual motion of the colonizer and the colonized); *nepantlá* (usually translated as “middle space,” or “space between”); *el choque* (shock, or cultural collision); and the path of *conocimiento* (spiritual activism) that leads to what is called the internal power of Chican@/Latin@s. The conceptual framework is derived from Chicana feminist thinking: borderland *concientizacion*, or consciousness-raising from being born/living on the border.

We describe the YPAR consciousness-raising process as having these components, which we will expand on later in the paper: community process, internal cycle, *nepantlá*, confronting *el choque*, and internal cycle of wisdom. These components are not hierarchically, sequentially, or causally ordered, nor are they prescriptive; they are, rather, names for transformative and empowering processes of activity we observed to be happening during the YPAR process. As we researchers clarified this process, we began to see how the activity helped the participants to search within themselves to find their own answers.

Here we briefly describe each component. The community process includes the elements of community awareness, community questioning, and community creation, and is where individuals experience community as they gather together with a common purpose. The internal cycle is composed of internal conflict, internal discoveries, and internal motivation. *El choque* and *nepantlá* are analytic terms we have carried over from Anzaldúa (1987), during which students experience paradigm shifts, liberation, and holistic healing, and the internal cycle of wisdom is when youth reach the ability to be free thinkers who are rooted in self and seekers of their own life’s passion. The internal cycle of wisdom serves as a revolutionary intervention wherein Chican@/Latin@ students recognize

their internal power to bring about change within the educational system and beyond.

In our view, the method of *testimonio* complements the YPAR process as a way of helping give youth the tools to change the oppressions they experience. As the Latina Feminist Group (2001) wrote, *testimoniar* is to *desahogarse* (to unburden oneself, to release one's pain, to let off steam) to sisters about their oppression. In YPAR, youth gather to tell their stories that have been silenced and feel a sense of relief and solidarity with their peers as they begin to listen to each other's stories. Through dialogue, reflection, and inquiry about their lives in the community, youth began to identify issues they believe must be addressed in order to resist and change oppressive systems such as the prison industrial complex, immigration, LGBTQ+ issues, and testing policies (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade, 2008; Ginwright, 2008; Akom, 2009).

YPAR connects with *testimonio* because youth voices and experiences are at the center of the education—and resistance—work. Youth begin to listen to each other's stories, they begin to raise their consciousness because they are learning from each other's experience, ideas are beginning to flourish, and they begin to identify the issues tying them together.

This consciousness-raising does not occur by accident, rather it happens to the listeners as they become witnesses to the *testimonios* of their peers. As youth congregate to listen and speak, their consciousness begins to awaken and expand. As they listen to each other a communal *testimonio* takes shape, and youth begin to realize that what they felt and experienced is also experienced by others, a consciousness-expanding realization that they are not the only ones who have been discriminated against for being LGBTQ+ or the only ones fearful because they lack proper immigration documents. Youth then begin to learn from each other on how to deal with the different oppressions they face.

Testimonio gives people who have been marginalized or segregated a voice to document their experiences in a country or community, so they have the power to also produce knowledge. When one gives a *testimonio* the listener creates a relationship with the speaker and this relationship becomes one of denouncer and witness to the urgent "telling to live." *Testimonios* begin to tell a counter-story (Yosso 2006) to the hegemonic documentation of their

history, an experience where those "faces at the bottom of the well" (Bell 1992) can begin to create knowledge from the bottom up (Huber 2009). In our research, during the YPAR process youth began to testify, to denounce their oppression with stories that, although not recalling exact dates of how and when they experienced homophobia or immigrant status of second-class citizenship, were plainly stories of how they *experienced* discrimination. Rigoberta Menchú's (1983) *testimonio* called attention to the ongoing massacre of indigenous people in Guatemala. The youth in our studies called attention to the homophobic and racist experiences they were subjected to because they were Chican@/Latin@ immigrants, and/or part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Anzaldúa's *Conocimiento*

In this study we documented the *testimonio* process that youth went through as they engaged in YPAR. Anzaldúa's (2002) discussion of *conocimiento*, a seven-stage process individuals encounter as they experience mind, body, and spirit of consciousness or awareness, was important in understanding the process youth went through. Anzaldúa (2002) wrote:

The first stages of *conocimiento* illustrate the four directions (south, west, north, east), the next, below and above, and the seventh, the center. They symbolize los siete "ojos de luz" or seven chakras of the energetic dreambody, spirit body (counterpart of the physical body) the seven planes of reality, the stages of alchemical process (negredo, albedo, and rebedo), and the four elements: air, fire, water, and earth (545).

In Anzaldúa's view, the process of *conocimiento* is not linear, and, as we mentioned earlier, the same applies to the youth experience of YPAR and reaching their internal wisdom. Anzaldúa described the process of *conocimiento* as having seven stages:

Together, the seven stages open the senses and enlarge the breadth and depth of consciousness, causing internal shifts and external changes. All seven are present within each stage and they occur concurrently, chronologically or not. Zigzagging from ignorance (*desconocimiento*) to awareness (*conocimiento*), in a day's time you may go through all seven stages though you may dwell in one for months. You are never only in one space (545).

Analyzing the youth *testimonios*, we arrived at the conclusion best described as Anzaldúa's seventh stage, which she names spiritual activism. We saw that youth experienced stages similar to Anzaldúa's *conocimiento*, and crucial for our understanding of the YPAR process for youth were her concepts of *el choque* and *nepantlá*.

Anzaldúa described the seven-stage process as an individual, female, and adult process. The first stage is *el arrebato*, or earthquake, which is an experience so shocking that one becomes open to change. For youth in our studies, this might be the experience of oppression because of their perceived identity. Being open to change, one arrives at the second stage, called *nepantlá*, where one is in transition, in between stories, without anchor, and open to many different possibilities. For the youth, practically, they became in many cases "without a home" either at school or home. But *nepantlá* leads to the third stage, the *Coatlicue* (an Aztec goddess of birth and death) state, during which one experiences, as Anzaldúa said, the paralyzing "Coatlicue depths of despair, self-loathing, and hopelessness" (545), a common experience for youth, but one which may lead them to come together for support. The fourth stage is *el compromiso*, where one overcomes despair and is prepared to act. Here is the point at which the researchers found the youth in our study ready to begin their *testimonio* and the remaining following stages are clearly marked out in our description of the *conocimiento* process. These stages include the fifth, named *Coyolxauhqui*, where one puts oneself back together again, moving from "passivity into agency" (563) and creating the counter-story. The sixth stage Anzaldúa called the "blow up," which is where a new knowledge is created being a *nepantlerá* (which means one is comfortable being in the unknown, in between). The seventh stage is spiritual activism, where one is engaged with others working together in dialogue and reflection in order to transform oneself and others.

Delgado Bernal and Elenes (2011) wrote about how educators theorize Chicana feminist pedagogies and how educators understand Anzaldúa's work. In our case, we also use Anzaldúa's work to better understand youth experiences as they engage in the YPAR process. YPAR facilitates the process of individuals coming together as a community and it is through community that the individuals began to experience some of the stages that Anzaldúa calls *conocimiento*. Dialoguing is part of the process

that helped youth voice what they were experiencing in YPAR. Although we have relied on Anzaldúa's conception of *conocimiento*, we have also used our own nomenclature in naming and documenting the stages youth experienced.

El Choque and Nepantlá

Specific to our naming are Anzaldúa's concepts of *el choque* and *nepantlá*. *El choque* is defined as an internal cultural collision whereby three cultures and their value systems collide, creating, in Anzaldúa's (1987) words, *el choque de un alma atrapado entre el mundo del espíritu y el mundo de la técnica a veces la deja entullada* (the shock of a soul caught between the spirit world and the world of technique sometimes leaves one trapped as in a net). Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, and an inner war. Like all people we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision (p. 78).

Youth in our two study areas were enmeshed in an intricate *choque* defined by self, *familia*, school, community, social and cultural heritage, added to which was the tremendous weight of the judgment of the dominant heteronormative culture with its strong xenophobic tendencies.

Nepantlá, which Anzaldúa (1987, 79) calls the third space, is how Chican@s/Latin@s, can remedy their internal conflict. In Nahuatl, the Aztec language, *nepantlá* means being in between or in the middle space and is encountered by individuals when they discover their unique *choque*. *Nepantlá* is a unique space where change can occur for Chican@/Latin@ students. *Nepantlá* spirituality is the overlapping of our old and new ways, the embodiment of the ambiguity of our *mestizaje*: a place where the internal borderlands within us collide, creating a cultural collision. This collision represents chaos and tension in the physical world. In contemporary terms, *nepantlá* is the encounter of multiple divergent worldviews also known as transculturation. It is the in-between state of traveling from the present identity into a new identity, but is also a way of preserving one's culture while encountering other cultures. *Nepantlá* is a critical investment of both inherited

and disinherited traditions of thought and knowledge. For populations impacted by the historical trauma of colonialism and what some have termed spiritual conquest, one strategy of cultural survival, or decolonization, is the process of transculturation, which in many ways means resisting the mainstream while reinterpreting and redefining cultural difference as a place of power. For many Chican@/Latin@ students, this occurs as they discover the creativity of *nepantlá*.

Once the tensions of *nepantlá* are understood and confronted, the native self is recovered and continuously healed. *Nepantlá* being the place where marginalized populations transform and liberate themselves, it specifically becomes the space where Chican@s/Latin@s make meaning psychologically, spiritually, and politically, so they become agents of change, deciding what works for their culture and negating limited thinking and confusion. They travel through their internal borderlands and consciously make choices about what nurtures their *mestizaje*. As a result, they return to their core that is cradled by their soul and spirit, where they reclaim their inherited power to make decisions for themselves.

We use *nepantlá* as a term to describe how endangered people, cultures, and/or genders engage in resistance strategies of survival due to invasion, conquest, marginalization, or forced acculturation. *In this use nepantlá* describes the larger cultural spaces where psychological congruency happens. The new middle becomes the post-modern paradigm or consciousness rooted in creativity of *nepantlá* whose intent is to heal the open wounds of colonial occupation. Fundamentally, *nepantlá* is the process of developing political, cultural and psychological consciousness as a means to create spaces where individuals and communities can thrive.

An Intellectual and Spiritual Process

Chican@/Latin@ students began the YPAR process as individuals who entered into a community process. This community process was based on respect and communication, was set in motion by mutual membership in a YPAR group. Everyone in the YPAR groups agreed that they wanted to do something to better their community, which they collectively identified as being the greater Chican@/Latin@ community within education (the community college students) and the LGBTQ+

Chican@/Latin@ community (the high school students). They further identified specific local issues that needed to be addressed and developed avenues to focus on them. In the sections that follow, we have organized our data around the several components and we demonstrate how the *testimonios* and actions of youth are part of an ongoing process. The process begins with youth confronting *el choque*, being comfortable, and beginning the process of *nepantlá*. Once youth are engaged in YPAR, they begin the process of *nepantlá*, where they engage in a paradigm shift, liberation and holistic healing. As students engage in YPAR they go through an external (community awareness, discoveries, and creation) and internal process (internal conflict, discoveries, motivation) which leads to a state of holistic healing. Below we explain the process in more detail.

Confronting *El Choque*

The cultural collision is followed by a destruction of dreams or aspirations, which leave the demoralized beings in shock. This creates an overlapping of factors that connect the internal borderlands, i.e., school, home, and society; psychological, spiritual, and political; American, Mexican, and Indigenous. The cultural collision is followed by a destruction of aspirations in which the demoralized being goes into shock because of misconceptions those around them hold about their cultural reality. In the high school and community college settings, youth spoke about the conflicts they were facing between school,

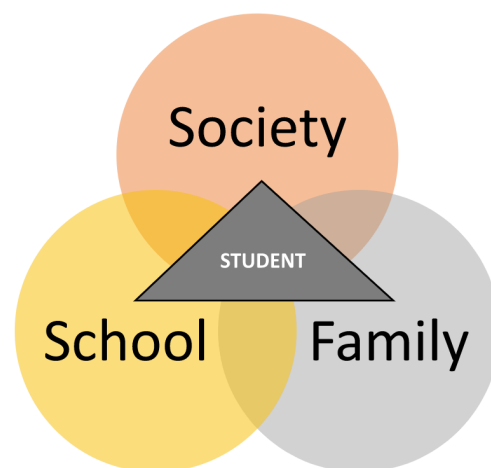


Figure 1

home, church, and societal demands. At school, many students were reprimanded by teachers for not doing their homework. At home, school demands become secondary due to the *familia* role. Students had to share family responsibilities in taking care of younger siblings and sometimes of their ill parents. However, even when school and home were on a collision course students took on their *familia* role with pride, internally aware of the conflict but also internally motivated to be there for their family. For example, Fabiola, a high school sophomore, was expected to take on a *familia* role as her father's caretaker. She noted that after she came home from school she was required to care for her father, who had been disabled in an accident at work. Many times, she had to stay up late with her father when he was in severe pain, which often left her unable to complete schoolwork.

Frida, a community college student, told of her experience of taking on a parent role, which affected both her home and school worlds. At home, because her parents were working, she was responsible for taking care of her younger sister, while she was also expected to serve as the advocate for her younger sister at school. In addition, due to her parent's language barriers, Frida was responsible for attending school meetings and discussing with teachers her sister's academic progress.

In both examples, the youth experienced conflict between home, school, and societal demands. However, in both examples, the internal discoveries allowed students to take on their *familia* role with internal motivation, even when it became evident that schools seem indifferent to the *familia* roles of students. Fabiola's internal motivation moved her to learn about massage, medicinal herbs, and western medicine in order to help her father with pain control. On the other hand, Frida learned parenting skills, including how to navigate the education system in order to advocate for her sister's needs.

Schools—and by extension, societal institutions at large—contributed to the cultural contradictions between the expectations of school, home, and society by not valuing the skills and assets these young women were acquiring. However, the young women's internal motivation helped them manage the contradictions with pride. Many times schoolwork had to wait, but they were committed to helping family to move ahead together, not individually. Fabiola and Frida were motivated to move themselves

ahead educationally when *familia* needs were met. For Fabiola her father was the most important person in her life. Many times she was stressed, but the reality in capitalism is that poor, disabled people cannot afford a twenty-four-hour nurse. Undocumented youth are often paid below poverty level, so families cannot afford a babysitter. Economic hardship is the root cause of Fabiola and Frida having to take on the *familia* roles. The youth were aware of the economic hardship and in a kin family they took on the role with motivation, and understanding the priority to move as a group.

This is important to understand because youth are often unable to identify *el choque* until they undergo a reflective process such as that found in YPAR. Collectively, the youth naturally become part of the complex intellectual and spiritual process of achieving the internal cycle of wisdom. In the course of these studies, the internal cycle of wisdom was achieved as students developed their voice and named the overlapping factors of the silent internal borderlands that produced *el choque*. Unveiling and confronting *el choque* led the students into what Anzaldúa called the third space, *nepantlá*.

Nepantlá

Youth at the high school and community college level became a part of the *nepantlá* process by (a) having a paradigm shift, (b) liberating themselves, and (c) holistic healing of themselves.

Paradigm Shift

Paradigm shift occurs because individuals discover where their identity and cultures intersect or where their identity sometimes clashes with the dominant culture. This discovery then liberates the individual. The paradigm shift makes one not only aware but also comfortable living within the third space, *nepantlá*.

Liberation

Liberation requires individuals to reflect and trust themselves to gain knowledge. By facing oneself and utilizing one's internal power to take action, change occurs. This allows individuals to acquire wisdom. Through this experience of liberation, of awakening, individuals reclaim their spiritual true self, and this reclaiming allows healing to take place.

Holistic Healing

Holistic healing encourages work to begin from the outside in, in order to find one's individual self. This complex intellectual and spiritual process goes deep to the core of the individual's soul of existence, thereby finding the healing space where enlightenment unveils itself while hope emerges in the individual's life. After this complex intellectual and spiritual process that the high school and community college youth experienced, they began to move to a fourth space, a space beyond *nepantlá*, a space of radical transformation we call the internal cycle of wisdom. Once students complete the YPAR process they will have the tools to transform themselves and society where they will be able to create ways where their communities can thrive we call this the fourth space of holistic healing. Below we explain community awareness and the internal conflict process where youth must engage in order to achieve the fourth space of holistic healing. In figure 2, we show the process youth go through when engaged in YPAR in order to achieve a holistic healing space where they are creating spaces for individuals and communities to thrive.



Figure 2

Community Process

In the community process, Rendón's (1994, 2002) validation theory is crucial. Validation is the process by which youth are being supported and confirmed within and outside of schools. Youth felt validated by coming

together to take action. Their peers validated their feelings. As youth heard the *testimonios* of their peers they realized they were not alone, as was discovered when women in the Latina Feminist Group (2001) gathered together to *desahogarse*.

This sense of validation felt by the youth helped them move forward into action. Validation is an important process for youth because they move from individuals to community. The youth, beginning to work together and hearing each other's *testimonios*, began keeping community in mind and as they gathered to work together, they became questioners and creators hoping to transform their communities. Hearing *testimonios* of oppression, the youth wanted to do something to stop it. They asked, "What can we do to change it?" and "How can we change what people think or help people be more open minded?" and came to the conclusion the only way to change or help people understand was through education. The youth, therefore, decided to educate their peers on immigrant and LGBTQ+ fact and myth.

Initially there was little hope for change as they believed that no one would listen. However, because the youth in YPAR were in community, they were constantly *testimoniando* with each other about their thoughts. This constant reflection of thought helped youth support each other to go beyond their fear and immobilization to action. For instance, Luna said, "Why are we doing this, they are not even going to listen to us. Some people are just going to think what they are going to think." Chuy responded, "How do you know? We have to do something before we can say something is useless. We do not really know what will happen." Kata said, "I am scared but I am going to do it. You have to do something in order to know if something works or not." Gabriela said, "I get nervous but we have to do something" (Ruiz 2007a). It was through the *testimonio* of thought that allowed youth to reflect on and rethink their own thoughts. This reflection and action gave youth courage to conduct presentations even though they might be met with hate towards LGBTQ+ and immigrant community.

As adult allies, one of the things the researchers stressed most was unity. It is through unity and solidarity that they would feel courageous when speaking to people who disagree with people being LGBTQ+ or immigrants. One needs courage to be able to engage people

who use hateful and hurtful words to refer to who you are as a human being. Hence, it was through them uniting that helped youth overcome hateful attacks, and instead of becoming angry they engaged people in a dialogue for change and acceptance.

Community Awareness

Community awareness begins with *testimonios*, in which youth talk about themselves to the group. We conducted *testimonios* by having youth tell their stories of the struggles and oppressions they had faced thus far in life and school, which helped to humanize each member of the group. Connections and solutions came later after they heard each other's stories. In this first part of community awareness, through sharing negative and positive experiences, students were able to create community and solidarity with each other. They began to be able to name similar challenges of oppression they faced or had faced, such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia and through this find the thread that connected all of them whether they defined themselves as women, men, straight, gay, or Chican@/Latin@. As they began to name their viewpoints from which they experienced their oppression, they began to question each other and research history and current events to honor their shared truth.

Community Questioning

Youth began to deconstruct their oppression through engaging in questioning, after which they began to make connections to history, current events, and other peoples' struggles throughout the country and the world. They also began to question themselves and how they had accepted what others believed of them. In the high school, some LGBTQ+ students shared their experiences of being gay and experiencing homophobia. Not all of the students were openly out in the group. Gabriela, after listening to her peers, said, "Wow, I thought I was the only one who had to deal with my mom telling me it is a sin to be gay. After hearing all of you I don't think it is. I never thought it was because I would always ask myself how could it be if we are told God loves everyone." Kata remembered middle school being tough years and being prone to believing the myths that are told about being gay: "Middle school was tough 'cause you want to be like everyone else but you are not 'cause you begin to have feelings for your same sex,

but you are scared to say anything because everyone else at least openly says it is gross to be gay." Others, like Chuy, remember, "In middle school they would call me '*joto*,' but then others questioned it because I was tough, I did not back down from a fight. And plus, I hung out with girls, and boys always want to be your friend to get to the girls. I didn't really care" (Ruiz 2007b).

As a result of the youths' middle school experiences, they decided to do presentations at the middle school in order to reach out to gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth who might be silenced and suppress their feelings in order to fit in. However, they all said that they would not present to high school students, their peers, because they found them less open-minded than middle school students. Luna said, "When you are in middle school you are a little more open minded but here [at high school] they are ignorant. They will not listen to us." (Ruiz 2007c). The youth would not even consider other high schools in the area because it was in those spaces that they experienced most of the harassment. Gabriela remembers "Last year [at the regular high school], when I was with my girlfriend, they would call us 'fuckin' lesbians.' I would just ignore it, but my girlfriend would get mad, but I did not really care, I just ignored it. I mostly feared for her 'cause she would get mad and tell them off, and you never know if the person might do something" (Ruiz 2007c). It was these uncomfortable memories that made youth want to stay away from the high schools as part of their work, but middle school memories were of finding themselves and still figuring out what to think.

Youth also began to deconstruct the micro-aggressions they were faced with on a day-to-day basis. We use here the formulation of Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2001), who define microaggressions as subtle acts of racism. For instance, when the researchers and youth discussed "I am a culture not a costume," youth began with questions like, "It is Halloween, people are just having fun, aren't they?" and "Why are some people so sensitive?" Discussion elaborated these questions to the point where youth began to ask more pointed questions: "How do you feel when people dress with a Mexican sombrero and a tequila bottle? What image are we receiving of what it means to be Mexican? How do these images affect us? What about how indigenous people are portrayed?" The youth began to see and discuss how these images helped perpetuate a negative view of Chican@s/Latin@s. Then they made

other connections, for example, to being followed in stores. “Why are we followed in stores?” “Why is that such a common story?” It was initially difficult for the youth to recognize these as significant, but by making connections with each other’s lives and with past and current events, students were able to identify microaggressions that prevented them from expressing their realities. They gained a better understanding of immigration and LGBTQ+ policies. Through this process of reflection, youth were able to connect their collective lived experiences. Collectively, they were able to unveil the hidden inequities they had all experienced. And, through questioning each other, they helped solidify and challenge their own as well as other people’s beliefs and values. This created a collective paradigm shift toward shared values and beliefs.

Community Creation

In this stage of the process youth became active community creators. In the process of finding new questions and answers about the world, they were redefining who they were, their belief system and the implications of their thoughts. As a result, they were able to engage with others in dialogical conversations, not debate. According to Copeland (2005), there is a difference between the two. He noted that in a debate there are shared assumptions of truth, right versus wrong and good versus evil, and that there must always be a winner (47). Yet in dialogical conversation there is a respectful engagement where one does not engage the other in an argument to see who is the stronger debater; rather, one engages the other in dialogue to understand why each defends certain ideas and beliefs. Similarly, Freire (1970) believed that thinking is an action, and rethinking recreates a paradigm shift within the self and collectively.

Youth in the community college and high school were engaged in actions of rethinking, but, importantly, also became creatively active in applying their solutions. The high school YPAR group in the Southwest decided to create a Gay/Straight Alliance and give presentations to the local middle schools on homophobia, while the community college students presented to their community college peers, local high school and community on immigrant rights, focusing on AB 540, a California state law that allowed qualified undocumented students to pay in-state tuition instead of out of state tuition, thus

helping make the tuition affordable for working people. Both groups confronted micro- and macro-aggressions to engage in critical dialogues with their respective communities without applying the oppressive mechanisms of debate. Their efforts to initiate dialogue created a transformative change in their communities.

Internal Cycle

In this section, we will discuss the internal cycle and how it affected the youth. In our observations we noted the following three sub-themes: (a) the internal conflict, (b) the internal discoveries, and (c) the internal motivation.

Internal Conflict

We define internal conflict as the connection to the various internalized messages identified through the external cycle. The participants identified, recognized, and understood the internal conflict, which challenged them to look deeper within themselves. In this phase of the cycle, the individual discovers his or her internal strengths.

All the participants reported realizing that they had internalized many messages received from school, family, church, and society (including about immigration policy). These messages created an internal conflict in the participants’ lives. As they reflected upon their experience they explained how various aspects of both school and family expectations have affected their academic success, and they shared their experiences and the messages that they had internalized.

The youth shared a number of experiences that revealed the sense of disempowerment, noting that this was a direct result of the societal messages of inadequacy that shaped the way they thought and felt about themselves through their experiences. Through multiple dialogues, the participants shared messages they had internalized from their school and family experiences, reporting feeling overwhelmed and hopeless since the difficulties they faced were out of their control to change. They expressed feelings of not fitting in, of convincing themselves that in order to be accepted in this society they must behave in a certain way. For instance, in community college, Marcos explained that because of the way you look people judge you, including family and the police department. “I look like a gangbanger. I used to have friends who looked like that too; I got pulled over three times in one week. At

home my parents criticize my hair. They tell me “You look like a pothead; you look like this and that” (Chavez 2010:123).

In high school, youth at first began to doubt if they were truly sinning by being gay. The most common criticisms they received from peers at school and home were religious based. Malin said, “At home I am taken to church to get the lesbian out of me and at school I have to hear God made Adam and Eve not Eve and Eve” (Ruiz 2007c). Youth reported that no criticism made them stop having feelings for girls, but it did profoundly impact their self-worth.

Furthermore, the participants saw that the problems they encountered as Chican@s/Latin@s were often compounded by strong messages from the surrounding society that Chican@s/Latin@s as a community should conform to and accept what is given to them. However, the participants challenged this internalized message, reporting that they understood that by not asking questions or challenging the educational system, they reaped no benefit and their needs were not met; they became excluded and merely existed.

All the participants, whether LGBTQ+ or straight, reported feeling pressure to act differently in order to be accepted. This created an internal conflict or, in Spanish, *un choque*. The participants noted that this internal conflict made them feel as if they were living a split life between their school and family environments. They reported that the internal conflict affected their self-esteem and significantly influenced their emotional lives.

Internal Discoveries

All the participants reported having multiple discoveries at this stage in the process. Understanding the conflict between their school and their family opened their eyes. Participants began to say that they had internal discoveries about themselves. In the community college, Cuatlicue discovered her fears and how to reflect upon them. She stated, “Like the culture here instills fear in you and it tells you that you are wrong. Like when you assert something you know the problem. You know the point front and back.” Zapata agreed and added that from this experience he discovered that, “we are better analyzers; I had an epiphany, but I believe it was a metamorphosis” (Chavez, 2010:127).

In high school, youth began to realize, as Chuy said, “Nothing that my parents or peers at school say or do can take the gay out of me.” Malin said, “My dad kept taking me to church thinking I would change and for the longest I believed I needed to change but now I realize he is the ignorant one that needs to change, not me.” Kata added: “We are surrounded by ignorant people.” (Ruiz 2007d). The students realized that they did not have to change but the people around them did. Those who were intolerant needed to learn to see the beauty in who they were as Chican@/Latin@ youth.

This internal search guided the participants to develop voices of a more heightened consciousness. More significantly, this is where the participants became liberated; they reported feeling empowered to advocate for themselves as well as others. The internal discoveries led the participants to find their internal motivation that helped them continue on their paths and not give up on their dreams.

Internal Motivation

All the participants reported having different situations in their lives that motivated them to continue on their educational journeys. The participants reported that as they better understood the conflict, they were able to shift to their personal internal discoveries. This, in turn, led to a more profound unveiling of the situations in their lives that motivated them to succeed. The internal motivations emerged once the participants shifted from their internal discoveries where they developed voice and consciousness and became liberated. The naming of their internal motivations kept them inspired as they continued to face school and family challenges. Their experiences, feelings and identifying their internal motivations enabled the participants to change.

In the community college group, youth stated what motivated them. Zapata said, “Being undocumented motivated me to continue, because it is the only way to get up the ladder.” Tonantzin noted that her motivation came from “the whole family and traditional roles. I am only seeing these factors because that is pretty much what I am having an issue with.” Frida stated that family does influence her, sometimes in negative ways, but her motivation specifically to stay in school came from her own desire to be a role model to her younger sibling (Chavez 2010:129).

In high school, youth were motivated by their family and dreams. Chuy was motivated by family—specifically his mom—who supported him for who he was. Kata and Luna were motivated by the dream of becoming entrepreneurs of a disco or bar where everyone is allowed. They were motivated by the dream of being together forever. Malin was motivated by being who she was no matter what anyone said, so she worked, went to school, and lived on her own. High school youth were motivated by confronting the dream of the future with “*ganas*” (drive or ambition to achieve a goal). All the high school youth said that although they did not know what they would study, they knew that they needed to go to college; they did have a dream. But they were ready to confront it head on, comfortable in their own skin, proud of being Chican@/Latin@ gay students of the future. This experience of internal motivation resulted in a paradigm shift that enabled the participants to create change.

With this awareness came youths’ abilities to make connections between the different oppressions they experience simultaneously. Beneath their varied experiences with family, school, and society at large (policies directed toward them, peoples’ attitudes toward them in daily life), they were constantly going through an internal process that included the (a) internal conflict (b) internal discoveries (c) internal motivation. The internal process equipped them to be part of the internal cycle of wisdom

Internal Cycle of Wisdom

This is the space of transformation where Chican@/Latin@ youth become free thinkers and have a rooted sense of self while finding their life’s passions. The participants in this study were able to achieve this cycle by going through the complex intellectual and spiritual process of the external and internal cycle, understanding *el choque*, finding *nepantlá*, and finally having the internal cycle of wisdom to freely think for oneself, become rooted in self and begin to find their life’s calling.

When youth began the process of YPAR it was hard for them to think and question. They were accustomed to being told what to do and to follow orders. They also reported feeling invisible in the education system because their voices and the knowledge they had already accrued from the hard tasks of living were not valued or acknowledged. They were not accustomed to being asked

to contribute their thoughts or engage in dialogue. It was through the collective dialogue in the YPAR process that youth began to find their voices and learned to question. The process of *testimonio*, dialogue, reflection, and action helped youth become free thinkers. As free thinkers, they were engaged in dialogue not only with the collective YPAR group but also with family, community, and non-community members.

Youth became rooted in self because they felt comfortable in their own skin. Through the YPAR process and finding *nepantlá*, they were encouraged to decolonize their minds, understand the inequities they confront in institutions, and reclaim their internal borderlands and spirits. As they reclaimed themselves, they redefined the borderlands within themselves with acceptance of their transnational selves. Finally they began to see themselves as change agents who were able to contribute solutions in the very institutions that doubted their capabilities to even successfully contribute, not to mention create sustainable change.

Conclusion

Through the complex intellectual and spiritual process of YPAR, youth were able to dissolve their fears and take risks. They took risks by being honest with themselves and with the process. This enabled them to create action plans to solve the injustices that Chican@/Latin@ youth faced. By developing action plans and taking leadership roles, youth demonstrated compassion for others and passion for their work, revealing to themselves new possibilities for their lives’ paths.

For example, the high school students all reported being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. They experienced homophobic *choques* between home, school, society, and church. Through the process of coming out and being comfortable in their own skin they began to no longer care if school, church, society, or home accepted them. They were able to reclaim themselves as gay, lesbian, and bisexual human beings. Through the collective process of humanizing themselves they became comfortable and confident. As a result, they consciously decided that no one would take their spirituality away. Therefore, they would continue to participate in church youth programs and events. They changed their belief from questioning if they were the problem to understanding that the problem was the

homophobic society. They began to advocate that if church is a place of God, then it would have to accept them because God loved everyone, not just straight people. The high school students took back their right to choose and make decisions for themselves as freethinkers, rooted in self, and found their passion to advocate for gay youth.

At the community college level, three of the students were labeled as AB 540 students due to their immigrant undocumented status. These students experienced *choques* between school, society, and the legal system, but they collectively agreed on and understood the importance of their education. Although excluded from resources such as financial aid because of the AB 540 classification, they decided among themselves that they would not allow this label to deter them from accomplishing their goals and graduating from college. Through the process they were able to face their fear by disclosing their legal status and so were able to create and implement a social network to help each other with books, sharing of information, and other support resources. This allowed the students to become freethinkers, rooted in self, and find their passion to advocate for the immigrant community to create these same social networks they were developing at the community college.

Chican@ /Latin@ youth attain the level of the internal cycle of wisdom when they apply the knowledge they have learned within the complex intellectual and spiritual process of YPAR. Overall, both high school and community college students concluded that the collective process shifted their world paradigm from being invisible to being visible. They noted that because of this process they were now able to recognize the *choque* between the institutions they were a part of. They realized that they were in the middle of institutions that do not communicate to or with one another. They also asserted that they developed solidarity and trust, which enabled them to find their collective voice and their individual life's passion. Collectively, they faced many fears, and this helped them realize they were not alone. This created a sense of struggle whereby the students were no longer afraid to stand up and fight back for their human dignity and being. This process taught them the various levels they must go through before change can occur; it also taught them to be true to themselves. They noted that they left this metamorphosis process with *esperanza* (hope), as visible human beings with the voice

and power to make a difference for future generations of Chican@/Latin@ youth.

Given that we believe that people in communities are certified organic intellectuals, meaning that they are aware that mind, body, and soul operate together and not as separate entities, we especially see that youths' awareness that mind, body, and soul are interconnected enabled them to conduct a more in-depth reflective process in order to transform and heal their communities. YPAR is about youth healing themselves and their communities. Youth engaged in YPAR had as their main purpose to engage their communities. YPAR is a return to ancestral practices that are part of our organic knowledge that we carry inside us. In YPAR, youth are being validated every step of the way as they attempt to heal their communities. Throughout YPAR we shared our *testimonios* with urgency and purpose in order to heal. The *testimonios* helped to validate youth knowledge and work. The validation helped move us forward with a sense that we knew as organic intellectuals what we needed to do in order to heal ourselves and others. This process helped inspire youth to find their internal wisdom. The internal wisdom became their power to continue working endlessly to heal themselves and their community.

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