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Traversing the Borderlands: A Qualitative Exploration of Student Experiences

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Abstract

Immigration has been an integral part of the United States since its founding; yet, considerable debate surrounds immigration. A deeper, more empathetic understanding of immigration experiences is crucial for social work practitioners. As such, creating opportunities for students to witness the journey immigrants take to come to the US is paramount. This paper was based on an experiential project with social work students traveling to California's southern border. The students dropped off water in a desert area well known for border crossings and they helped fundraise, talked to day-laborers, and visited the border wall. Students were interviewed about their experiences during this trip. Three themes emerged: Things left behind, Walking in their shoes, and Emotional responses. Implications include the importance of experiential learning and the incorporation of human rights perspective into the classroom. Implications for social work education are discussed. Keywords: Immigration, border crossing, experiential learning, water dropping, undocumented immigrants

Immigration is woven into the fabric of the United States. Over the past 200 years, immigration has been at times controversial and at times unnoticed. Today, we live in an era with considerable debate surrounding

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immigration. By 2022, nearly 14% of the United States population was foreign-born, which approached a historic high at the end of the 19th century (Shenasi-Azari, et al., 2024). Currently, more than 45 million immigrants live in United States, the largest group of whom are of Mexican nationality; additionally, more than 24% are from other Latin American countries. In California, New Jersey, New York, and Florida, more than 20% of the population is foreign born; in every state, the share of foreign-born population has increased since 2010 (Shenasi-Azari, et al., 2024).

The Trump campaign promise in 2016 to build a wall across the entire southern border of the US was used to galvanize many white supremacists and a new wave of vigilantes guarding the borders (Srikaniah & Sinnar, 2019). Rather than portraying these immigrants as experiencing extreme poverty, fleeing from violence, and as people seeking protection of basic human rights, they were purely portrayed as criminals (Guzman, 2016). These migrants' plight in life, the circumstances they left behind, and their experiences of trauma during their journey to US have been villainized (Valera, 2020). Today, as a second Trump administration begins with increased efforts at deportation, a culture of fear has swept many migrant communities, even among those with legal documentation statuses.

Migration is a topic that is vital to the profession of social work field because of the inherent vulnerabilities people experience during their journey, and long after their arrival in the new country (Tuomisto & Roche, 2018). A deeper, more empathetic understanding of immigration experiences, especially those groups that are most vulnerable such as undocumented immigrants, is crucial for social work practitioners. As such, creating opportunities for students to witness the journey immigrants take is vital. Ortiz et al. (2012) argued that social work education must address immigration. Social workers are also called to practice in culturally competent ways both by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the National Association of Social Work (NASW). The CSWE competencies drive social work education. Competency two states that social workers should advocate for and engage in practices that advance human rights (CSWE, 2022).

According the NASW *Code of Ethics* (2021), social workers are to "help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to...the vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (p. 1). Furthermore, an emphasis on social justice and change aimed at eliminating "discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice" (NASW, 2021, p. 1) is required. Calling social workers to social and political action, the NASW emphasizes equal access to resources, employment, services, and opportunities that individuals and families require to meet their basic human needs.

Yet, immigration is a difficult concept to teach from a lens that brings out the realities of people impacted. One way to remedy this is by providing students with experiential learning opportunities. As one social work faculty from the University of Michigan reflected on taking students to the US Mexico border: "When we talk about policies as a classroom activity it's difficult to really get a handle on the reality of the effect of those policies on the ground...I go from the harshest aspects of the border to the responses of activists, social workers and community members who are trying to do something to make it better" (Puentes, 2017, p 1).

This paper was based on an experiential project done by California State University (CSU, 2020), Fresno. The trip involved volunteering for a local community activist and in partnership with Border Angels, an immigration agency doing water drops in the desert, meeting with day laborers, and visiting the border wall. Thirty-five social work students traveled to California's southern border from the Central Valley where the university is located. Here, many of the families social workers interact with are impacted by immigration policies and border issues. According to Fresno State's Office of Institutional Effectiveness, over 60% of the students at Fresno State (Fall 2024) are first generation, with many of the students having family members or someone they know being undocumented. Yet, many students have talked about how they don't know the true experience of their family and friends, as there is little discussion about the experiences. Students emphasized the importance of having a deeper understanding of these issues given the conflicting messages received from their communities, media, and politicians.

Border Trip to California's Southern Border

This experiential engagement was part of the Department of Social Work Education's efforts to internationalize and diversify the program. The project originated when students watched a video of law school students volunteering at Migrant Jails. Further discussions ensued in their diversity classes when students were shown a video of migrants crossing the US/Mexico border. Following the video, students discussed the importance of experiential learning and the value an experiential learning-based trip to California's southern border would bring.

Based on student interest and encouragement, two faculty started planning the trip to San Diego by contacting faculty who had connections in the area, and students assisted in identifying immigrant agencies that would partner with us. Faculty received support from former and current faculty at San Diego State University to create connections. The organization process took about seven months. Because of the risks posed by crossing the border, university guidelines prohibited taking students into Mexico; therefore, all activities remained on the US side of the border.

The initial planning identified a grassroots community activist Birdie Gutierrez and a local non-profit Border Angels as two key partners. Once the activities were finalized, the faculty applied for a university grant to take students. The funding was not sufficient to support the entire trip, so we applied for NASW, CA partnership funding for the project and received it. The trip lasted three days. Planning for the event also included fundraising for essential goods for the Ms. Gutierrez and Border Angels. The students were active in fundraising beyond the Department. An overwhelming number of community members and agencies donated goods.

Students volunteered with Birdie Gutierrez for migrant services by participating in a community fundraiser for Bridge of Love Across the Border in San Diego. This allowed the students to learn how fundraising is done for an issue like this, and students were able to hear stories from families who had undergone hardships or separations due to the immigration process. Other specific activities included volunteering for Border Angels to leave water in the desert along high-traffic migrant paths. Many migrants have died of dehydration while attempting to cross into the US ([Border Angels, n.d.](#)). It was hoped that through this process our students will learn about the challenges in crossing the border through the desert. Additionally, the agency was able to provide an opportunity to communicate with day-laborers in San Diego. Finally, faculty were able to take students to the border and speak with border officers, and students observed family communication between the two countries at the border.

Methods

Qualitative data collection allows for a deep exploration of experiences, providing rich data about a specific event such as the border trip. This study utilized phenomenological analysis ([Moustakas, 1994](#)). This technique was selected because of the large sample of participants who were interviewed, and it allowed us to adapt interviews as more data were gathered. By interviewing students several months after the event, we hoped to capture the most salient memories of the trip and the things they derived the most meaning from while at the border. Furthermore, by waiting for the interviews, most of the students had graduated from the program. The study was approved by the institutional review board at CSU, Fresno.

Participants

In the summer following the trip, all 35 students who went on to the border were contacted via email to ask if they would be willing to participate in interviews to explore their experiences during the trip with 25 agreeing. Most of the interviews were conducted by the student researcher on our team; however, a handful of the interviews were also conducted by faculty members. Interviews were all conducted online via zoom and were recorded. The recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The interview guide was kept minimal to allow the students to go where their memory took them. They were asked what stood out to them about the trip and their experience. The authors also asked students about how the experience compared to classroom experiences and if they felt the trip had influenced their roles as future social workers. The length of the interviews was dictated by the students with most lasting 30 to 60 minutes.

Rigor and triangulation

Analysis of the data was conducted by members of the research team. We read the first three transcripts, each coding them individually. After coding the transcripts, we met to discuss our initial thoughts and to compare our coding. From these meetings, we developed a coding scheme for the remaining transcripts. The team also discussed areas where

more probing and follow up questions might be asked during the interviews as we began to see specific events stand out in many memories. While we did not add any questions to the interview guide, we did plan for more follow up questions that might explore certain experiences.

Over several months, the analysis team met several times to discuss on-going coding and interviews and to check bias as we collected and analyze data. Because we had also been on the trip, we discussed our own experiences as part of the analysis so that we could identify our own biases about the experience and the meaning of what we remembered. This involved the memories that stood out to us and why we felt those were important to us. The team wanted to ensure that during interviews, we were not bringing up our memories, and that during analysis, we were not replacing student recollections with our own. This bracketing allows for analysis to focus on the recollections of the participants.

Results

The study had 25 students respond to requests for interviews. Females accounted for 20 of the 25 participants. Sixteen of the participants were undergraduate students at the time of the trip while nine of them were graduate students. Two of the male and seven of the female participants were graduate students with the others being undergraduate. All student names have been changed to protect privacy. The analysis of the data presented three themes: 1) Things they left behind, 2) Walking in their shoes, and 3) Emotional responses.

Theme one: Things They Left Behind

Theme one introduces the experiences of the students as they walked through the desert and found objects or reminders of things that were left behind by those who had crossed the border, or things that were found in the desert. Mario summarized this theme well: *"Like you actually get to see like those things that are left behind, like you can tell that people were walking through there."* This theme is organized under several subthemes: Personal Items, Bullets, Pondering the Reasons, and Making It Real.

Personal Items

While walking in the desert, many of the students commented on the things that they found that had been left behind by those who travelled through the area. Naomi said they found *"clothes that were completely ripped, shoes that were like, just tore up."* Many of the students noted seeing items for babies like bibs and bottles. Casey reacted, *"So it was just so it made me feel like, wow, people are risking their lives, their babies' lives to come to here."* Monica talked about personal items like toothbrushes. Diana said, *"I will never forget when we found a Teddy Bear...sort of, kind of hidden under a bush."* Monica commented on seeing *"a little toy."* The toys were mentioned by many students, surprised to see such items in the desert. Amanda commented that seeing such items made the experience real life to her.

Unexpectedly, many students found different types of medication in the desert. Adrian and Carolina both commented on finding pill bottles. Esmeralda commented on many of the things found in the desert, saying:

I remember seeing like a pill bottle or something, um, and some like lingerie or some, I don't remember it laundry or underwear, but just basically seeing like people had to like leave some stuff behind....we found this in the desert, it was various medications, underwear and toothbrushes. We also found kids' toys.

Students like Brittany, Elizabeth, and Mario talked about the everyday items they found made them consider what could happen to make someone leave things like clothing, toothbrushes, and medicine behind. Casey thought about why stuff was left at all:

[The migrants] can only bring a few items with them. So they're leaving those items behind is because they don't have to use anymore or only have second or third to hide. So it made me think about like the, the reasons why they might have left those items behind.

Bullets

For many students including Natalia, finding bullets and shells made them wonder, *"Why are they there? why are they in the desert?"* Ivan was familiar with the ammunition casings and recognized them as casings from assault rifles, long rifle rounds. He added:

It stuck with me the most and it made me just kind of paint this picture in my head. What could be a reason that these shell casings would be this close to the border and what people might have to endure to come to the land of opportunity to

pursue the American dream. It just painted a very I guess a real picture of, of the hardship that people face... You know, we know what the president says about people coming over rapists murderers. So it just that's really that polarization, that polarized viewpoint is what stuck with me the most... I mean, I don't know if the people are doing target practice or what's going on, but I couldn't put together in my head a rational reason for thousands and thousands of shell casings being on the floor.

Cesar said he didn't know what the gun shells were shot at, but that he didn't *"think they were used for a good purpose."* Other students mentioned the holes they saw on the water bottles. As Diana expressed, *"I was just in shock, I could just imagine so many things of why that was left like that. So I think that was the most challenging for me."* Elizabeth wondered if it was civilians doing shooting the water bottles of border patrol agents, as this was a remote part of the desert. During their walk, George shared that:

I saw a water bottle underneath a big rock where it could be like someone is laying in there and then the water bottle like, I don't know if it was shot or something else, not a bullet or something but it looks like someone should wear a bullet hole in there... this one thing that might keep like, people crossing alive, but then someone intentionally like destroyed it so that they couldn't make it.

Border Angels shared that people will intentionally destroy the water bottles they leave to stop migrants from using them. Many of the students expressed disgust at this. Ana mentioned, *"I was holding the evidence, and it just made me so upset and angry that people came in with those malicious intentions."* Adrian said that seeing them *"made it more real."*

Pondering the Reasons

Many imaginative scenarios were painted in students' minds after their walk in the desert as to why they saw certain things left behind. Ana talked about *"having to travel with everything"* but leaving it behind *"because you have to run."* As Sam described:

It really makes you wonder what the person who did have to leave their things there. Like what had happened, did they, you know, get spotted and get taken to a detention center? Did they just have to drop stuff because they couldn't carry it anymore? It really just made you wonder what happened.

The possibility of children's presence in the desert caused Victoria to get *"very emotional because you're like, 'well, this toy belongs probably to a baby.' You're thinking like, what is a baby doing here? You know, crossing the border."* Diana mentioned picturing *"kids, families hiding under that bush or hiding their things to not be seen. And now when I look at it, it gets me really sad because I don't know if they made it."* Monica remembered being heartbroken. Diana also described a scene in the desert:

I don't know, by the way it looked, it looked like they were caught and they were found, you know, there was bullets all around like, like nearby. So now when I look at it, I, it just, it gives me really sad because I say, did they make it? I'm always thinking, like, did they make it, why were they hiding?

We often found empty water bottles. Many of the students took this as signs that our work was important and kept people alive. Brittany said, *"the signs of life to me was like, dang, this is real, this isn't just, you know, something we're doing to be nice. Like people are relying on this... So it was a little bit heart wrenching."* Esmeralda stated simply, *"I guess just realizing that, you know, this it's very real."*

Making It Real

This subtheme arises from the students' discussions about being in the desert and seeing things left behind making the migrant experience come alive for them as opposed to something abstract in the media. Ashley called the experience *"very emotional"* to walk through that path. Diana discussed *"catching a glimpse into what individuals experience when immigrating to America and all of the risks that they take like their physical health and leaving behind loved ones."* Adrian said elaborated on how seeing things left behind opened her eyes to their plight:

That really hit hard because it just, you know, you don't, you don't think about it and you hear about it on the news. People are crossing, stuff like that, but until you're actually in the desert and you actually see, see the stuff left behind or see the stuff left for the people that are crossing over, it's just, you know, that, that really opened my eyes a lot more.

While the objects discovered in the desert brought the migrant journey into sharper emotional and psychological focus, the act of walking through that same harsh terrain added another layer of understanding. As students physically

navigated the landscape, they began to internalize not just what was left behind, but what it might feel like to be the ones leaving it behind. This embodied experience laid the groundwork for the second theme.

Theme 2 Walking in their shoes

The idea of walking in the shoes of the migrants took hold as we took the paths that they often take through the desert. Two subthemes also emerged: Physicality and Danger. Diana put it succinctly: *"Sometimes it requires you to walk in their shoes for a little while, you know, it's better learning."* Valerie focused on the idea that we were doing this as a group of friends while migrants crossing may be completely alone when she said:

Walking in the desert was a humble experience. And then especially doing it with friends, I don't know, like something about that, like as a group, we did it together and it just stood out because of this is like sometimes people cross alone. So I could just imagine the fear they have crossing alone...

Physicality

The physical nature of the journey was a powerful reminder to many of the students about how hard and dangerous this trip can be for those crossing the border. The students frequently spoke about this. The difficult terrain stood out for many of the students. Carolina said, *"It's not just that land, you know, it's climbing hills, it's climbing mountains overall."* Diana called our path *"physically exhausting"* and couldn't imagine going longer. Cesar called the terrain the biggest challenge, describing it as *"really harsh"* and *"uncomfortable."* Victoria added more details about the terrain:

So knowing that they walked through these... through the desert... it was literally covered in what, like bushes or branches, a lot of stuff, you know, it wasn't like a nice green grass because it isn't...it's rocks, dirt bugs, like a lot of things.

Students also recognized how challenging it was to carry things with them as they travelled. Naomi said, *"So I had a gallon in my bag and then I had two on, in my hand. And I just remember it being really heavy."*

The heat of the desert was also a consistent topic regarding the physicality of the trip. Lucy stated, *"Walking in the hot sun and everything, it's like, it just humbles you."* Elizabeth added that *"we have that firsthand experience walking on, like the dirt, the desert area and seeing like how hot it is."* Brittany recalled that one of our students was not able to complete the walk because of the heat. *"It was hot. Someone got really sick [and one of the professors] stayed back with [the student]."* As students thought about their time in the desert, they also considered how short our time was compared to migrants. Esmeralda said:

It was really hard during that trek. And I remember being pretty exhausted and uh, thinking to myself, I can't believe somebody did this for, you know, seven days, um, you know, with little food, little water supply. Um, yeah, it was hard just being there for like 45 minutes or the hour that we were there and walking around. Um, so I know a lot of it was uphill too, so it was, it was physically strenuous.

Several of the students remarked that our journey was only a few hours in one day, while the migrants who take that path travelled for days or weeks or even longer. They don't know when they will be able to stop or have a comfortable and safe place to sleep. In the end, many students made comments similar to Victoria: *"I was huffing and puffing on my way there...[Migrants] walk literally thousands of miles versus myself, maybe less than half a mile when I was like, I'm tired, I need a water."*

Danger

The difficulty in walking through the terrain and heat resulted in many students discussing the dangers of crossing the border. Carolina said, *"They're basically risking their lives and they experience something eye opening."* Naomi recalled stepping on something and almost injuring a foot, thinking about what a migrant would do without good shoes and no one there to assist them if it had happened to them. Several of the students focused on the dangers of running out of water. Elizabeth added, *"[Migrants] are crossing the desert and who knows? Maybe they need that last drink so that they're not dehydrated and without it, like they can die too from dehydration."* Valerie said:

So I finished my 32 ounces of water within a couple hours. So that's that out to me because, you know, some people they cross for weeks, then they can't carry so much water, so they have to make it worthwhile. But I feel like me, like thinking, Oh, there's more water on the bus or I'll get water. Like I could finish my water since I'm gonna get more water later.

Students also discussed other dangers inherent in crossing. Victoria discussed that people don't decide to leave their home countries on a whim because they know it will be dangerous. Victoria said, *"A lot of people leave because they*

have to, they have no other choice.... and sometimes there's a lot of cases where the individual who is leading them or walking them through the border can sexually assault women." Brittany continued this idea, saying, "But I can't imagine running away from not running away, but I guess risking your life doing that. I just realized it's such a huge risk." Ivan discussed the experience thusly:

Just going through and looking through the fragments of what the story of the land was telling. And again, it just painted another disturbing picture of a younger person probably trying to cross and...[who] got into the wrong hands or maybe someone misled them... and again, it just creates that similar narrative. This is not a safe process and, and it's very dangerous. And the narrative put out to the mainstream public is, you know, that these people are criminals, that they're horrible for doing everything they're doing when you know, it really seems like they're willing to risk it all to, to have the opportunity to have an opportunity. And I think that's what stuck with me.

As students reflected on the physical demands and dangers of the journey, many began to articulate a deeper emotional reckoning with what they had witnessed. The bodily experience of walking migrant paths did more than inform their understanding—it stirred powerful emotional responses. These feelings of empathy, fear, sadness, and even a call to action form the basis of the next theme: emotional responses.

Theme 3: Emotional responses

Theme three focuses on the emotional responses of the students ranging from empathy to fear to anger to compassion to activism. Diana called the trip a "powerful experience" while several students used the phrase "eye-opening" to describe the experience. Casey said the trip "gave perspective...seeing the actual border that immigrants were brought through when they walked through the desert to get to America." Victoria said:

You get all these emotions, like a rush of them...I felt so many emotions all at once, you know, fear, happiness and all of those combined because obviously the scary part of actually walking through the border is not knowing what's going to happen. [Migrants] probably went through a lot of trials and tribulations through the process of walking the border...you don't know what path they walked through. You don't know the stuff that they've been through.

Feelings of empathy and compassion

Many students discussed how the experience of the trip allowed them to empathize with those who border cross. Naomi said simply it was an experience she would remember. Monica talked about people in the country without documentation and that social workers have a role in making them feel safe. Natalia recalled the time we spent talking to day laborers at Home Depot.

I remember when we talked to the workers that were waiting, to get picked up, to go to work and listening to their stories, listening to their background, where they're coming from... And, sometimes they are afraid to ask for help and us learning about the stigma behind all that can help build a better relationship with them. And, you know, they're courageous sharing those experiences.

Several students talked about the compassion they felt for those who cross the border. Carolina talked about the need for change in our system:

I feel like I see hope. I see hope one day and that's calming. But at the same time, there was so much there was so much like desperation from the other people on the other side. So I'm, I'm hoping that one day, I mean, one day, hopefully, you know, there's an amnesty or something for people who actually want to come work and do their best here.

Multiple students recalled the experiences of their family members, and did not know much about their journeys. Lucy said:

My family immigrated my mom, especially, she would always tell me stories of her crossing the desert...So it was a very like humbling experience just because when you hear it, it's not the same...I know we walked the desert a couple of hours, but just being able to really open my eyes to like, wow, like this is crazy that people are really... go through all this to have better chances in life.

Feelings of fear, unwantedness, and intimidation

Students also recalled the experience of the border patrol watching us while we left water in the desert and the fear expressed by some of the day workers when we arrived at Home Depot. Mario felt it was obvious the border patrol didn't want us there and were attempting to intimidate us. Sam said:

We were actually like dropping off the waters, you know, border patrol pulled up a couple times and you know, I know they have their jobs to do, but it definitely added another aspect to us being out there as volunteers. It, we, I definitely felt like, you know, we were unwanted there.

Victoria recalled being at a gas station just before we reached the desert drop off point and the experience of feeling unwanted there. "People were pulling up and looking at us and asking why we were there and who we were with and what were going to do." When talking with day workers at Home Depot, Elizabeth commented that some of them "would walk away from us because they were scared. They were scared that we weren't really trying to help, that we were like spies, like government spies, trying to like get information off of them."

Sad and Heartbreaking

Students talked about the profound sadness they felt as they walked through the desert and visited other places at the border. Adrian talked about feel lucky to having been born in the United States and not having to migrate here like his parents did. He couldn't imagine having to do that with children. George also commented on the experience:

I would say that is really sad. Like we just want to help, like no one wants to come to the US just to commit a crime, things like that. They want to come here for better opportunity and they want to come here for better life.

On the beach at the border wall, a park crosses from San Diego into Tijuana. In a small fenced in area, people can gather on both sides of the border wall and talk to each other. Adrian talked about seeing people meet at the fence, saying, "Family got to talk to each other through the border fence or the wall or whatever you call it. That that was a trip too." Elizabeth described the juxtaposition of the beauty of the area with the pain that occurs at the border park:

Half the beach area and then the other half the border fencing area. And then I took the picture where there's like a heart on the other side, but there were so many people on the Mexican border... And it was just crazy because it's such a beautiful place, but for so many people it's so sad because they could only see their family members for like, I don't know, like, I don't know how long we were allowed to be at the fence for like 15 or 20 minutes. And that's all they get and it's heartbreaking. Like the situation is heartbreaking, but the surrounding area is so pretty.

Felt called into activism

Students also felt called into activism after the experience. On the first day at the border, they met Birdie Gutierrez, a local activist who helped provide necessary supplies to migrants waiting in Tijuana. Naomi said she felt this experience of talking with Birdie made her want to work in immigration after she finished college. Sam described talking to Birdie as "very emotional and moving" to hear how she created all this assistance just because she saw the need and wanted to help. Victoria noted that Birdie talked about being exhausted by it all, but she is motivated by doing what she knows is right. Diana talked about how Birdie changed her.

[Hearing Birdie speak] ignited passion to advocate for people and do my part to advocate as best as I can. So like, not only in working with individuals, but like in policy and like when I vote that what leaders are standing up for the same values that I have and protecting immigrants and...how I advocate for the immigrant population.

The emotional responses shared by students, ranging from grief and compassion to fear and a newfound sense of advocacy, highlight the depth of impact this experiential learning opportunity had on their personal and professional development. These reflections offer more than anecdotal insight; they point to a critical pedagogical moment where theory, lived experience, and ethical responsibility converge.

Discussion

This project underscored the importance of experiential learning and human rights approach to education. The primary finding of the research supports that the border trip had a profound impact on student perceptions. Students were able to go beyond a purely theoretical understanding of immigration to see the lived experiences of people who border cross. Students identified things that were left behind in the desert that made significant connections to lived realities. The opportunity to walk in migrant shoes gave students emotional reactions.

Few studies have been written about an experiential project such as this on immigration issues and their impact on the students. Recent literature on service learning in social work education has focused on healthcare broadly (see: Chiva et al., 2021; Palma et al., 2020) or related topics such as intellectual disabilities (Aesha, 2024), caregivers (Chan et al., 2023), youth homelessness (Aguiniga & Bowers, 2018), or dementia patients (Washington, 2018). Two recent

studies looked at migrant populations. Cuadra et al. (2024) discussed a service-learning project to address the needs of Ukrainian refugees while Cotton and Thompson (2017) discussed a service-learning trip to Guatemala and its connections to migration.

A study project by Puente (2017) also talked about similar impacts on students. Experiential projects such as these go well beyond the classroom and connects students to the reality of their experiences in a more realistic and deep manner by giving them snippet of the overall experience being undocumented. Trips such as these allow students to connect broader policies to their impacts on individuals and see firsthand the implications and intended or unintended consequences of these policies.

Human rights as social work practice

A fundamental aspect of social work is its connection to advocacy for human rights and social justice. Androff (2015) and Mapp et al. (2019) call social work a human rights profession; despite this, macro-level advocacy and policy work is seldom pursued by practitioners (Salsberg, 2018). According to Gatenio Gabel and Mapp (2020), most social work programs emphasize social justice but have little concentration on human rights. They found that social problems are presented as social justice, which presents issues as equity rather than violations of human rights. Their findings supported that few social work programs in the United States had any courses with a focus on human rights, with most reporting that human rights were covered as it came up throughout the semester in any given course. This may strengthen the argument of Mapp et al. (2019) to concentrate on human rights language and framing in social work education.

Nuss (2024) suggested framing the social work curriculum around a global perspective of human rights. Although this trip occurred within the U.S., the testimonies of students connected their learning to transnational struggles and helped contextualize migration as a global phenomenon linked to systemic injustices. In doing so, it exemplifies the pedagogical shift advocated by Ortiz et al. (2012), who assert that immigration must be central to social work curricula. By using a global framework, social work educators can increase student awareness of human rights abuses that are connected to social problems through a social justice lens. Multiple social work education researchers have argued for such framing and centering of human rights (see: Androff & Mathis, 2021; Mapp & Gatenio Gabel, 2021; Schmitz & Gatenio Gabel, 2023c). Social workers must actively oppose violations of human rights and the oppression of the vulnerable (Schmitz & Gatenio Gabel, 2023a; Schmitz & Gatenio Gabel, 2023b).

Lessons learned

As social educators, we learned valuable lessons from this service-learning experience and our follow-up with students afterwards. Providing students with opportunities to engage in real-life situations enhanced their learning in ways that classroom experience cannot. As Androff and Mathis (2021) reported, giving students the ability to connect the problems to actual people gives them a sense of reality. We also found that the trip humbled many students from the difficulty of the journey. The trip helped to break down pre-conceived ideas about what migration to the U.S. was like. Kiehne and Androff (2021) discuss the importance of combatting those negative stereotypes and imagery through our education in and out of the classroom. This trip aligned with the work of Salsberg et al (2018) in their call to make immigration more explicit in social work education.

While we knew the experience was likely to be long-lasting and something not easily replicated in the classroom, we were not prepared for the profound impact that it had on many students and ourselves. The violence of border crossings was made real by the shell casings and bullet holes in bottles. The perilous, physicality of the journey is hard to comprehend in abstract, but after walking for an hour in the desert, it felt all too real. Many of the students discussed pushing through because they knew the comfort of our hotel awaited them when they got back.

While we had not planned to have formal debriefings with students, we found that we needed to because of the strong emotional response we all had to the water drop and the unexpected meeting with the border patrol. Some students were upset that we were even open to talking to the border patrol and thought we should have rebuffed them. Others were glad we were able to hear from them. Many of us (faculty and students alike) were overwhelmed at the gravity of what we experienced on the trip and needed time to reflect and talk in smaller groups.

We have taken this trip again since the qualitative data collection. On subsequent trips, we have had other encounters with border patrol, although none as prolonged as the first meeting. We have also begun to visit the Museum of US exhibition documenting deaths in the desert of people crossing into the United States. We prepare students for this in

advance because the experience is challenging to consider the enormity in the loss of life represented by thousands of toe tags on a map hung on the wall.

Limitations

This study is hindered by its qualitative design which may limit the generalizability of the findings. We interviewed only some of the students who went on the border trip with us, which restricts our ability to understand the experiences of every student. Students may also have held back some of their feelings as they were interviewed by a fellow student for this project. Despite these limitations, what we gain by exploring the narrative experiences of the students outweighs any limitations of the study design. Future research can further explore the ways in which students construct meaning from experiential learning opportunities like this one.

Going forward

For a field such as social work, immigration issues cannot be avoided. When students live in a border state such as California, and a county such as Fresno that has a significant number of immigrants from central and South America, issues of immigration become vitally important to understand. Despite a strong mandate to help immigrant populations, a call to advocate on behalf of our vulnerable clients, and to fight against unjust policies, social workers often take a minimalist role when working with immigrant populations, providing primarily mental health services and case management connecting to resources. By centering human rights and involving students in service-learning experiences that incorporate the lived experiences of migrant populations, we can help prepare students to be advocates for the vulnerable immigrant communities that are integral parts of the Central Valley region.

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