

IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award 2016 Report

“¿Qué tiene?” Experiences of mental illness and perspectives from providers, patients, and caregivers in Mexico

Alyssa M. Ramírez Stege

With funding of the Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS) Summer Fieldwork Award, over six weeks in May and June of 2016 I did fieldwork at an outpatient psychiatric clinic in Puebla, Mexico. I interviewed Mexican psychiatrists, patients, and their caregivers to understand their explanatory models of mental illness –how they make sense of the onset and course of illness– and how these influence treatment expectations. Explanatory models of illness are grounded in the culture of society (Kleinman, 1988; Wampold, 2001) and reflect indigenous ways of knowing and making sense of illness experiences. The explanatory models evolve over time and experiences, and are ideographic in that they vary even within communities or families (Kleinman, Eisenberg, & Good, 2006). Consequently, understanding the explanatory models of mental illness of key stakeholders could help reduce incompatibilities among patients and providers, promote collaborative working alliances, increase treatment acceptability, and improve overall treatment outcomes.

I believe a key factor in the success of this experience was the development and maintenance of good working relationships with collaborators on site. This research was an extension of a previous project I had been involved in at the same site in 2014 with collaborators from the U.S. and Mexico. Therefore, during the first two weeks on site, I re-connected with previous collaborators and spent time re-building relationships to become familiar with changes that had happened in the last two years. Before starting the interviews, I spent time on site introducing myself to mental health providers and introducing my research endeavors. The last four weeks in Mexico were spent collecting data and providing training for new collaborators joining the research team.

In my research process it was important to consider the nature of the study, the characteristics of the site, and my ability to gain access to the population I wanted to interview. The site is one of few outpatient psychiatric services in the whole state of Puebla. Therefore, providers' time on site is scarce as they have many patients to serve. As a researcher, it was important for me to be flexible in my own time to gain access to interview providers when they had small gaps of time. Additionally, I relied on colleagues on site to maintain safety and accountability when working with a vulnerable population that included individuals experiencing mental illness. Finally, it was my experience that many of the patients and their caregivers were highly motivated to be interviewed on their experience and had had little opportunities to provide a complex account of their stories to mental health providers.

Overall, I consider it is essential to be mindful of how we do research with disenfranchised communities or communities of color, particularly abroad. Individuals who experience mental illness are a vulnerable population, therefore, researchers must be intentional in how they frame their research activities. The population I worked with in Mexico were not familiar with research and I was intentional in distinguishing my role as a researcher from other mental health providers on site, and addressing their expectations of our interaction. Having the IRIS award allowed me to provide participants with appropriate compensation for their time. Often disenfranchised communities' experiences are gathered and used by researchers without much benefits for them. Thus, a next step will be to return to the site with results of my research to inform mental health providers' practices in the hopes of improving patient care and providing additional support to their caregivers.