

Bienestar and Mental Health: The Meaning Behind a Word

Bienestar y salud mental: el significado
detrás de una palabra

Bienestar e saúde mental: o significado
por trás de uma palavra

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Abstract

This paper is an autoethnographic reflection of the author's time spent in Bogotá, Colombia through a graduate study abroad program with the CUNY School of Professional Studies. Through the lens of mental health, the author reflects on the personal impact study abroad had on their own wellbeing, his experiences visiting the youth programs of Fundación Centro Internacional de Educación y Desarrollo Humano (CINDE), and the power of connecting with different communities. Describing their visit to one of CINDE's programs at Las Villas, the author reflects on how *bienestar* (wellbeing) is interwoven into the culture of the program and how the visit impacted her own *bienestar*. The idea that definitions of terms such as *bienestar* and mental health are specific to the cultures that use them is discussed throughout the autoethnographic reflection.

Resumen

Este escrito es una reflexión autoetnográfica de la experiencia de la autora vivida en Bogotá, Colombia, a través del programa de pregrado de estudios en el extranjero con la escuela de estudios profesionales de la CUNY. A través del lente de la salud mental, la autora reflexiona acerca del impacto personal que tuvo en su bienestar el haber estudiado en el extranjero, sus experiencias durante las visitas a los programas para jóvenes del Centro Internacional de Educación y Desarrollo Humano (CINDE), y el poder de conectarse con diferentes comunidades. A través de la descripción de la visita al programa de CINDE en Las Villas, la autora reflexiona acerca de cómo el bienestar está entretelado en la cultura del programa y cómo esta visita afectó su propio bienestar. A lo largo del texto, se discute la idea de que la definición de términos como bienestar y salud mental es específica a cada cultura que hace uso de estos.

Resumo

Este artigo é uma reflexão auto etnográfica do tempo do autor em Bogotá, Colômbia, por meio de um programa de pós-graduação no exterior com a Escola de Estudos Profissionais CUNY. Sob a ótica da saúde mental, o autor refletiu sobre o impacto do estudo pessoal no exterior sobre seu próprio bem-estar, suas experiências em visitar os programas para jovens da Fundação Centro Internacional de Educação e Desenvolvimento Humano (CINDE) e o poder de se conectar em diferentes comunidades. Ao descrever sua visita a um dos programas do CINDE em Las Villas, o autor refletiu sobre como o bem-estar se entrelaça na cultura do programa e como a visita afetou o bem-estar do autor. A ideia de que definições de termos como estrela biológica e saúde mental são específicas para as culturas que as utilizam é discutida ao longo da reflexão auto etnográfica.

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Palabras clave

salud mental; trabajo con jóvenes; bienestar; estudio en el extranjero; lenguaje.

Palavras-chave

saúde mental, trabalho com jovens, bem-estar, estudar no exterior, língua.

Introduction

Before the start of our transformative ten-day journey to Bogotá, Colombia our group of Youth Studies professionals met on a sunny summer weekend for a pre-travel workshop. Upon entering the classroom, we crowded around a set of small tables and began our journey of being the first group to study abroad with the CUNY SPS Youth Studies Program. We were to visit Bogotá, Colombia and be graciously hosted by the Fundación Centro Internacional de Educación y Desarrollo Humano (CINDE). CINDE is an organization that does peacebuilding, civic engagement, and participatory action research with young people in Colombia. We partnered with them to learn and exchange youth work practices.

Studying in Latin American countries can be transformative for someone like me, who was once an introvert. Having studied abroad in Latin America twice during my undergraduate years, I knew this trip would have a different impact on me than my previous visits to the region. I had spent four months in Buenos Aires, Argentina and four months in Heredia, Costa Rica during my junior year. Each experience provided me with personal growth, new knowledge, and self-awareness. As an introvert, my Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) test results attest to the impact these study-abroad experiences had on myself and my wellbeing. According to The Myers and Briggs Foundation website (2019), “the purpose of the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) personality inventory is to make the theory of psychological types described by C. G. Jung understandable and useful in people’s lives. The essence of the theory is

that much seemingly random variation in the behavior is actually quite orderly and consistent, being due to basic differences in the ways individuals prefer to use their perception and judgment.” (The Myers and Briggs Foundation, 2019, p. 1). The personality type I originally tested as before I studied abroad in 2011 was INFJ, which stands for Introverted, Intuitive, Feeling, and Judging, the keyword being *Introverted*. Then, after studying abroad during the 2011-2012 school year, my results shifted into an ENFJ personality, which stands for Extroverted, Intuitive, Feeling, and Judging. Clearly, my personality, wellbeing, and general mental health transformed as I went from being introverted to extroverted due to my time abroad. These experiences are now deeply woven into my identity.

Furthermore, study-abroad allowed me to gain a new perspective on life and myself. Challenging myself to be immersed in a city, culture, lifestyle, and use a language different than my own was a test that gave me a different outlook on life and helped develop confidence. I thank my various study-abroad experiences for providing me with opportunities for resiliency. I acquired new language skills and self-assurance to walk in this life with less fear and a yearning to embrace the unknown. Because my past study-abroad experiences had such a large impact on my own wellbeing and mental health, I decided to use the concept of *salud mental*, “mental health” to guide me through our Youth Studies trip to Bogotá, Colombia.

Before we traveled to Colombia, I reflected on my career trajectory in youth work. I started in the field as an actual camp par-

ticipant when I was a child. At the age of seventeen I utilized all of the strong youth development practices that were modeled for me as a participant when I became a youth worker myself at the YMCA in 2008. By the time I left for our trip to Colombia, I had ten years of career experience in youth development under my belt. At this moment, I thought I was in the exact place I wanted to be. I was a youth worker at Global Kids, which is a non-profit organization in New York City that promotes global learning and youth development on a social justice platform and I also completed my first semester in the Youth Studies Master's program. However, I did not know at the time just how transformative my experience in Bogotá would be and how I would return to the United States with new inspiration, new goals, and new accomplishments to be achieved.

Meaning Behind a Word: *Bienestar y Salud Mental*

I studied Latin American Studies and Spanish in my undergraduate years, so this trip was very special to me because my two passions finally merged: youth work and Latin American culture. I always had a love for the Spanish language. I find the different dialects of Spanish, it's roots, origins, and the meanings behind words to be so intriguing and I always find myself wanting to learn more. Each visit to Latin America expanded my vocabulary and I continue to learn the significance behind the different words, idioms, style, and slang with each country I visit. From adapting my ear and tongue to *Castellano o Rioplatense* in Argentina, to the more neutral accent in Costa Rica, I was eager to hear and speak the Spanish of Colombia. I remember my Venezuelan friends who lived in Buenos Aires told me that the Colombian accent is like a song. Although I realize that each region of the country probably has a different accent or style, I will never forget when my friends said that, so I was excited to hear it for myself. While in Bogotá, Colombia, I had my ears peeled for the differences in dialect, word-meanings, and the song-like accent.

As my focus for this trip was *salud mental*, I quickly realized the meaning behind the word mental health was interpreted differently in Colombia than how we use it in the United States. For me, the term mental health aligns with the World Health Organization's (2014, p. 1) definition as follows: "Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully,

and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” WHO (2014) also states that war has such a large impact on mental health and well-being that it doubles the rates of mental disorder in impacted communities. Knowing Colombia endured 50 years of war and conflict and only recently signed a peace agreement in 2016, the mental health and wellbeing of the impacted communities must be significant (Casey, 2016).

As we were trying to explore what kind of mental health work CINDE does with conflict-impacted communities in Colombia, we realized that our definitions of *salud mental* did not align, which pointed to a cultural difference in how the term mental health is used in our varying regions of the world. CINDE said the term in Colombia refers only to the clinical and psychological side of the term, so the organization focuses on peacebuilding through the arts and youth development programs. The term that better expressed what us *extranjeros* were asking about was actually *bienestar*, or wellbeing. Although they do not specifically focus on the clinical side of mental health and trauma, we found that CINDE’s programs work in a more holistic way to better the *bienestar* of their young people, their families, and their communities.

Bienestar in Action: Un Ejemplo

One of our visits took us to the town of Soacha, south of Bogotá. We learned right away that many of the residents of Soacha were displaced civilians heavily affected by the 50-year conflict. It was a dreary drizzly day and we pulled up to a school called Las Villas in our trusty van after a much-

needed nap. I am not sure if any of us knew what to expect as we walked in through the gates. We were told not to take photos since the young people were in the age group of adolescence, which is categorized as 6-17 years old in Colombia. As we entered the secured gates of the school, it seemed we had interrupted gym time. As *extranjeros*, we walked through the middle of the court while the young people paused their games. We were met with some timid, yet curious smiles on their faces as we walked by. Some were welcoming us and saying “hola”, which calmed my nerves quite a bit because I did not know what their expectations were, and they seemed to welcome us with open arms. I was immediately joyful to meet the young people. I have worked in schools for ten years and this setting has become a comfort zone for me. In fact, I am more comfortable conversing with young people than with adults! My own sense of *bienestar* deepened amongst the presence of the young people we met that day.

As we shuffled into the library, we were welcomed by a group of young people in light blue and navy school uniforms sitting at a large circle of desks. Eagerness and anticipation radiated on their faces and I am sure our expressions reflected the same feelings. I sat down next to two young girls who were staring at me while whispering and giggling to each other. I silently waved at them and smiled back before observing the space around me. It was filled with artwork of all forms. There were 3D sculptures, drawings, paintings and more.

Once the young people started sharing their experiences about CINDE, I got to know

a little more about the program and how *bienestar* is weaved into the culture and the walls of this organization. Many of the stories shared were very positive and the participants were thankful to CINDE and the program for helping them grow and become confident in themselves. At one point during the exchange, I turned my name tag around and the giggling girls' faces lit up next to me. I had the same name as one of their mothers and we began conversing in Spanish, which immediately attributed to my *bienestar* in that moment and beyond. I love speaking Spanish, but sometimes I am afraid to do so because it is nowhere near perfect. The young people of Las Villas created a sense of safety and acceptance when it came to my broken Spanish, which enabled me to have a special connection that I will never forget.

Another aspect, different from the use of artwork that added to the *bienestar* of the young people in this program, was the level of family engagement. The CINDE program in this school was created not only for the youth, but for the entire family to learn and participate together. The relationships built there are between the school, community, and family. I saw a lot of similarities from this program to the work we do at Global Kids, but the biggest difference was a higher level of parent and family involvement at Las Villas. The instructors spoke about the intergenerational work CINDE does and how they create the space for dialogue and participation between people of all ages. Everyone has something to learn and teach. It seemed that this bettered the *bienestar* of everyone involved. It was inspiring and I believe the work we do in our Youth Studies program strives to do that as well. We believe that acknowledging the strengths in our young people is necessary and adults can also learn through youth-adult partnerships.

At the CINDE Las Villas program, the importance of *bienestar* existed in many ways. The program space was a safe one, where they could grow and flourish, and ultimately be themselves. There was a certain blossoming that happened in this program. The space provided an outlet, where the young people could express themselves freely through art, creation, and caring for the environment. Personally, I also use art as an outlet to calm my anxious mind and express my emotions. I use it as a tool to say what I cannot put into words.

A few stories stood out to me as we learned how the program has helped the *bienestar* of the participants. One testimony was from the young girl sitting next to me. She described how she could be herself

in the space and began to finally understand her teenage sister, showing how the organization cultivates *bienestar* even within the participants' families. Another testimony that really spoke to me was from a mother who had a child with autism. She began tearing up as she spoke about how her child had developed social skills and discovered hobbies he was passionate about through the program. Finally, a student of the program spoke about her own sense of *bienestar* and how the change she witnessed in her mom actually had the biggest impact on her. This visit gave me inspiration to incorporate more family involvement in my work at Global Kids because I could visibly see the *salud mental* at work since the healing between family members is important for the *bienestar* of the individuals.

At the end of the visit, the two girls I was sitting next to eagerly wanted a picture with me on their camera, which I gladly obliged. I overheard them saying they have proof they met an obvious American, which made me chuckle. I was so satisfied with this site visit and was ready to take on the next day as my own *bienestar* was in a warm, fuzzy, and reflective state. I did not want to forget the amazing feeling I had at that school when we got to spend time with the young people at Las Villas. I left there wanting to learn more about Soacha, the people displaced due to the conflict, and the history of the neighborhood. I wished we had more time for interactive work with the participants, but it was clear that the Las Villas program in Soacha was a place that strengthened self-concept, recognized capacity in the participants, and inspired personal trans-

formation, which definitely attributes to the *bienestar* of their young people and their families.

Reflection

Spending those ten days in Colombia was truly transformative. The air in Bogotá seemed filled with a spirit of resistance, resiliency, protection, pride, and a sort of *tristeza*. The final day a few of us went on a graffiti tour, which tied everything we had learned throughout the week together through words and street art. We learned about the horrifying scandal of the "false positives", who were civilians unknowingly taken into the fields, dressed as guerrilla fighters, and assassinated in cold blood by the military for body count money. My research upon returning to New York City found that many of these false positives were from Soacha, a place I now have in my heart from the brief visit to the Las Villas school. I also had the chance to speak with our amazing translator Claudia at our visit to City Hall about her experience living in Colombia during the years of conflict. She said it was so frightening and told me about an Avianca flight that was bombed down in 1989. I later found out this too happened in Soacha.

Learning all of this after the visit to the school altered my *bienestar* about the trip in an indescribable way. My heart has become heavier, but also more eager to return to Colombia and learn more, be more intentional, and less ignorant of my surroundings. Colombia now has a piece of my soul just like Argentina and Costa Rica. There is something to be said about traveling with purpose.

There is a different connection one makes with the people and the country when traveling this way rather than just vacationing.

We had several more site visits on our ten-day trip with CINDE, but I decided to reflect on the Las Villas school for the sake of my own *bienestar*. I got my first glance at youth work and peacebuilding being done in Bogotá when we visited Las Villas. It was also a place where I felt most comfortable and found the most similarities to the work I do in afterschool programs. What I experienced in the days that followed was also so impactful and life-changing, but I am going to keep those experiences for myself at this present time. What I can share with you is a song that we created together with young women and the facilitators on another site visit. The song below sums up our trip to Bogotá and will forever be imprinted on my heart.

I'll be there for you
Eres mi inspiración
Eres el amor
I'll be there for you
Cuando hablo de amor
Eres tu mi pasión

I mentioned at the beginning of this piece that my life would alter upon returning from Bogotá. I believe this experience added to the immediate personal growth that took place a few days after I returned to New York. I moved into an incredible apartment in the city and was offered a promotion to be a Program Manager of an afterschool program that same day. There has been a blossoming in my *bienestar* since our visit to Bogotá. The power of connecting with international communities is apparent in my own life and has since created a ripple effect. Connecting with the young people and CINDE provided a healing to my *bienestar*. I believe that every experience in my life has a purpose and our visit with CINDE was just the beginning of a new chapter.

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