

From New York City to Bogota: A Youth Worker Autoethnographic Reflection

De Nueva York a Bogotá: reflexión etnográfica de una trabajadora juvenil

De Nova York a Bogotá: reflexão etnográfica de uma jovem trabalhadora

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Abstract

This paper explores the autoethnographic journey of a graduate student learning about youth work in a global context in Bogotá, Colombia. The research questions posed focused on examining the structures in place to support youth in Bogotá and what knowledge could be taken back to New York City. I believed youth in Colombia would have more autonomy due to the implementation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child than the United States (who has not ratified the treaty). I discovered that youth work is done similarly in Colombia and in New York City, both equipped with passionate youth workers, government funding, and a need to do more.

Resumen

Este artículo explora el viaje etnográfico de una estudiante de pregrado para aprender sobre trabajo con jóvenes en un contexto global en Bogotá, Colombia. Las preguntas de interrogación se enfocaron en examinar las estructuras presentes para el apoyo a jóvenes en Bogotá y qué conocimiento podría llevar de regreso a Nueva York. Presumía que los jóvenes en Colombia tendrían más autonomía debido a la implementación de la convención de los derechos de los niños en comparación con los Estados Unidos, donde no se ha ratificado este tratado. Descubrí que el trabajo con jóvenes se realiza de manera similar en Colombia y en Nueva York, ambas con trabajadores apasionados, financiación del gobierno y la necesidad de hacer más.

Resumo

Este artigo explora a viagem etnográfica de uma estudante de graduação para aprender sobre como trabalhar com jovens em um contexto global em Bogotá, Colômbia. As perguntas da pesquisa se concentraram em examinar as estruturas presentes para o apoio dos jovens em Bogotá e que conhecimento poderia trazer de volta a Nova York. Ele presumiu que os jovens colombianos teriam mais autonomia devido à implementação da convenção de direitos das crianças em comparação com os Estados Unidos, onde esse tratado não foi ratificado. Descubri que o trabalho com jovens é feito de maneira semelhante na Colômbia e em Nova York, ambos com trabalhadores apaixonados, financiamento do governo e a necessidade de fazer mais.

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autoethnography, Colombia, global context, New York City, travel, self-discovery, youth development, youth work.

Palabras clave

autoetnografía; Colombia; contexto global; Nueva York; viaje; auto descubrimiento; desarrollo juvenil; trabajo juvenil

Palavras-chave

autoetnografia; Colômbia; contexto global; Nova York; viagem; auto-descoberta; desenvolvimento da juventude; trabalho com jovens.

Introduction

This trip is going to change me. I scribbled these words into my notebook during the last day of the pre-trip workshop for the study abroad trip to Bogotá, Colombia. As the last course needed to complete my Master of Arts degree in Youth Studies, I anticipated some changes, however, I could not have imagined how impactful this journey would be on a personal level. I visited a country, full of rich culture overshadowed by a painful history, in search of discovering the ways youth have autonomy in their community. In the process, I uncovered a part of myself that needs further excavation.

I never had the so-called “quintessential college experience” (dorm life, clubs, study abroad) and always felt like I had missed out on an important experience. I have regretted not taking full advantage of my education during my undergraduate experience. I, like many of the students I serve, had obligations to my family, like working a part-time job while studying full-time and my grades reflected that struggle. I made a promise to myself that I would make my graduate school education count. I took advantage of scholarships and grants, spent my commute to and from work and school reading books and articles, and had many sleepless nights working on papers to prove to myself that I can succeed. The Youth Studies program has allowed me to learn more about topics in the youth development field and has helped to give me a sense of accomplishment in knowing that my dedication has paid off and will continue to do so. Being selected to take the

study abroad course allowed me to fulfill my goal of having an international educational experience as well.

During our trip, we partnered with La Fundación Centro Internacional de Educación y Desarrollo Humano, or CINDE, a research and development center. As stated on the CINDE website, “its main focal point is on promoting the creation of an appropriate environment for the integral development of children and youth living in conditions of vulnerability in Colombia, Latin America and the world, through the work with families, communities and educational institutions.” (“Quiénes somos”, n.d.) Prior to the trip, we met with some of the leadership of CINDE via Skype and they were just as excited as we were to engage in this cultural exchange. To engage in this type of work in my career is a once in a lifetime opportunity and I wanted to make every moment count. I promised myself I would give it my all; how amazing would it be to say that my last class was a study abroad experience? There is also another layer to this all. I have a (self-imposed) responsibility of being a positive role model for my family, specifically my nephews and nieces. I am a first generation college student, so the idea of going to college and having a career has been instilled in me since childhood. My parents came to New York, leaving everything they ever knew, unfamiliar with English, and lacking education to make a better life for themselves and their family. The completion of my master’s degree would be my *thank you* to them.

The pre-workshop and readings allowed me to become more familiar with the type of research we were conducting: autoeth-

nography, which is "...an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (EllisAdams, & Bochner, 2010, p.4). I reveled in having more freedom with this type of research; it did not have to be purely "academic" in nature. I love the idea of portraiture being "the ability to document the beautiful/ugly experience that are so much a part of the texture of human development..." (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 9). When I think of academic writing, I picture white men in white coats that would scoff at the notion of creativity. After learning more about research and reading articles focusing on youth development, it showed me that topics and ideas in the social sciences can take many shapes and forms. Knowing that I was not confined to my previous connotations and having majored in creative writing during my undergraduate education, allowed my mind to run wild with ideas on how to be more creative.

During the pre-trip workshop, we brainstormed ideas to frame our focus during the trip and I had many potential research questions such as:

- 1) How does the current political climate affect how youth work is done in Bogotá?
- 2) What economic structures are in place to support youth in Bogotá?
- 3) How can youth work in Bogotá influence how youth work is done in the United States?
- 4) What structures are in place to allow youth to have power to organize (locally, regionally, nationally) and what obstacles, if any, affect how it is achieved?

I decided to focus on youth power due to Article 15 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), a human rights treaty for children. Article 15 is part of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) stating "children's right to meet together and to join groups and organizations, as long as this does not stop other people from enjoying their rights" ("Article 15 & the CRC, n.d). This added another research question to my expanding list: How different does youth engagement and participation manifest in Colombia compared to the United States since the U.S. has not ratified the treaty?



Different, Yet Familiar

Colors fly by,
My eyes are unable to fully capture.
Creativity through the pain,
What ears will not hear, eyes cannot avoid.

Our plane ride and initial arrival to Bogotá was smooth. The weather reminded me of a cool, crisp fall day. As we drove to the hotel, I was mesmerized by the street art surrounding the city. Bright colors lit up dull roadways and illustrated a freedom of expression. My classmates and I quickly agreed that a graffiti tour would be the best way to learn more about its significance.

The tour took us to the Candelaria historic district in Bogotá and led us down many streets filled with beautiful artwork. Most of the graffiti we saw was politically charged. I saw "Uribe = fascism" written many times along storefronts and walls of Bogotá. Álvaro

Uribe was President of Colombia from 2002-2010 and his time in office was riddled with corruption and violations of human rights (Silva, ,2017). Our tour guide, Jeff, did a great job sharing the facts about the corruption in politics such as killing innocent homeless people, known as "false positives," to show the military's influence on controlling the guerillas. Flyers plastered along scaffolding displayed the newly elected President, Iván Duque, as a puppet controlled by Uribe. Duque was elected despite having no experience in government and politics. Colombia and the United States, while distant, have more in common than I thought. The busy streets and divided country made me feel right at home. It was empowering to see the vulnerability and truth in all of the artists' work. I also thought about my initial research question about power, and wondered how many young people could have been involved in creating such powerful works of art.

Communication and Miscommunication

Uno, dos, tres,
Un sistema de gestión de conocimiento
Wait...
¿Qué?

Our first real day of class began with an early wakeup call and travel to the CINDE headquarters. While on the car ride, I thought about the best way to document my journey. I settled on journaling whenever possible: during car rides to and from visits, to in class note taking during guest presentations. I also needed visual documentation so utilizing the camera feature on my cell phone was vital. I also made note of the computer station in our hotel and promised myself that I would type out my notes as repetition is one of the best ways I retain information. It would also provide a space to process my thoughts after the exposure to this new culture.

At CINDE, I was introduced to translation devices for the first time. Having some knowledge of the Spanish language, I was not sure if I would need the device, but took one anyway. After hearing big words in Spanish that I did not understand, I frantically turned on the device; I knew less than I thought. I feverishly took notes, so much that my right hand began to ache, and I got a headache because I used only one earplug with the English translation while the other ear freely listened to Spanish. My brain was on overload! There were moments that I turned off the device because I could comprehend. Other times, I did not understand a speaker's accent, so I depended on the translation. Other students who are not Latino spoke better Spanish than me and I felt ashamed. Not having a firm grasp on the language made me anxious to interact with others. The language barrier holds me back when interacting with my family, friends, and at work.

There was a plethora of information to process from CINDE. I was surprised to learn their age range for youth: 18-28, while in the U.S., it ranges from 14-24. There are more than 12 million youth in Colombia and they face many issues including: access to education and health, unemployment, motorcycle accidents, suicide, pregnancy, and lack of investments in technology (similar to NYC and other urban cities around the world). During the most recent election, 50 percent of youth who could vote (18 and older) did not participate. There is a need for youth to be more involved. What holds them back? Could it be the corruption

and lack of resources that makes this population distrust? What contributes to young voters not voting in NYC?

CINDE also shared all the Human Development initiatives they are currently focusing on and the gender-based initiative learning stuck out to me. My initial thought was that they separated youth and focused on gender-based learning such as traditional gender norms. I asked for more clarity and was given some context. CINDE has programs to empower young girls to counter gender-based violence. Traditional gender roles are very embedded into the culture of Colombia, so to counter that, they implement a curriculum to help young girls learn about Science, Technology, Engineering, Math (STEM) fields. Another component allows the young women to become mentors to younger girls. Unfortunately, I did not get to see this particular work in action during the trip. I was interested in seeing the young girls learning more about different career paths available instead of conforming to the traditional gender norms that are bombarded by culture, society, and the media, as a woman who has not gone down the traditional path of marriage and motherhood known in many Latino cultures, the importance of knowing all the options available is vital.

CINDE partners with other non-governmental organizations (NGO) to get the work done and we were able to see it first hand by visiting the town of Soacha on the edge of the city, visiting the Las Villas program. We met with the youth in the program there and learned about their positive experiences focusing on initiatives for a cleaner environment and learning to become more social through art. It reminded me that youth flour-

ish when they have the proper and adequate support. During the presentation, I noticed a few students were distracted by their cell phones. I am sure the facilitator did too, but she did not reprimand them, yet they were still engaged which is different than my experience working with youth. What is their secret? Adults were not exerting their power in order to reprimand the students, rather, the students looked at their phones for a few minutes, giggled and then became reengaged. I wanted to ask, but the language barrier held me back.

On the ride home, I sulked in disappointment. Not understanding as much Spanish as I thought bothered me more than I had originally anticipated. I felt like others were getting more out of the trip; their side conversations with the presenters proved worthwhile to my classmates. I am so quiet in Spanish; I become meek, a shell of myself. It reminded me of my father, who struggles with the English language, but comes alive once Spanish flows from his mouth.

High Impact, High Reward

Art is power,
Spontaneous.
The street is the backdrop
Of their story.



I woke up at 4:45am and could not go back to sleep. The hour long drive filled with bumps and steep hills mimicked my sentiment. We approached a gated entryway of the Family Welfare Institute and once inside we were greeted by cheers by young girls with French braids wearing red long-sleeved shirts, blue sweatpants, and black sneakers – their uniforms. They seemed happy and while we met with the coordinators, they prayed and shouted *buenos dias* to each other. Henry, our guide, made it seem as if we were going to be in danger, but in retrospect, it seems that his message of caution was for the protection of the participants, ages 6 -17. Many were there because of family issues, substance abuse, and/or sexual abuse. The average length of stay is three months, but some can stay for up to six months or longer.

The day's workshop focused on hip-hop led by the Ayara Family. They implement a high impact methodology which emphasizes inclusive participation while building life skills. Three facilitators divided the group into three sections: break dancing, graffiti, and rap. I, not wanting to leave my comfort zone, ended up in the graffiti group, the largest and safest of the three.

We were taken with the young girls to the cafeteria and our facilitator, Alex, led us through a project that began with scribbling on a sheet of paper with our eyes closed. Giggles enveloped the room as we all felt a little silly completing the task. Then we switched papers with a partner and repeated the scribbles, however, Alex wanted us to release the stress that we had. Some girls scribbled so hard that they broke their papers. We were then asked to switch papers one last time, but instead of scribbling, we were asked to look for hidden images within the paper. I was able to find hearts, stars, clouds, and even a person's face. I never expected to find anything in the mess; there is so much beauty in chaos. Some girls were worried that they could not find images on their papers. "*Debes ver las cosas de diferentes maneras,*" Alex responded and told us to turn the paper sideways and upside down. I began to understand why the young girls engaged in this activity. Some have been through difficult times with hardly any way to express themselves creatively. Art is everywhere if we look close enough.

After the image search, we created a personal mural which then led to combining our work together to create a group mural using actual spray paint. We all were excited to get our hands on the spray paint. I have a new-found respect for this art form because there are so many ways to manipulate the spray can to achieve the stroke and velocity of the paint. Some of the girls thought they were not artistic. Alex reinforced that art

could be found anywhere and that it could even be a career. I used my limited Spanish to tell the girls in my group that their artwork was pretty. *Es muy bonito*. My attempt was returned with silence. In fact, most of the girls seemed shy, perhaps engaging in an icebreaker would have helped the girls open up. Afterwards, all the groups rejoined in a large, open space and presented their final work. One group performed a dance routine, the other group bravely rapped about their lives, and we presented our graffiti piece. It was a great team building experience as everyone was very supportive of one another. On our way back, classmates shared stories about their interactions with the young girls. How I wished I could have done the same.

Internal Dilemma

Running from the truth,
It met me face on.
A problem I could no longer avoid,
by hiding from the mirror

I FINALLY SPOKE SPANISH. *Me llamo Chanira, soy una estudiante de CUNY. Es un placer estar con ustedes hoy*. Yes, it was basic, but not worrying about making a mistake allowed me to become more comfortable with Spanish and gave me confidence. Our group visited the Universidad Javeriana and learned about Misión Paz Colombia, an organization of young college students who do voluntary missionary work all throughout the country. A video highlighting their goals and accomplishments expanded on an initiative focused on the elderly. They visit local grandparents in the area and while interacting with them, the grandparents share their histories with the young volunteers. My eyes

welled up as I thought of my *abuela*, Confesora, who I barely speak with because of lack of communication. She is 83 and lives with her older brother in a small house in Camuy, Puerto Rico. She must have so many stories about life that I may never come to know.

The video also made me think about culture. The people of Colombia are so proud of their culture, and it reminded me that I have a culture that I need to discover. I am aware that I do not look like a stereotypical Latina. I am pale, redheaded, and have freckles, but what does it mean to be Latina? I have struggled with this my entire life. As a child, while out shopping with my mom, a woman approached us and asked if she was my mother. My dad has called me *gringa*, or white girl, since childhood, however it has become a term of endearment. I was teased in school for not looking traditionally Latina - brown hair and tan skin- and for struggling to speak Spanish. This continues to haunt me.

After the video, the group explained how they implement their service. They begin by training all of the volunteers and then do research on which communities are in need and work with local leaders to determine ways to engage the community. Who knows the community better than the people living in it daily? It is also easier for an outside organization to build rapport with the locals if they are asking what the issues are as opposed to telling the community what issues they face. It allows the community the ownership of change.

The young missionaries also shared a saying that resonated with me, *sé lo mejor para el mundo, no lo mejor del mundo* which means, "be the best for the world, not the

best of the world.” For youth to become empowered, the adults in their life must be whole in order to help support them. While perfection is impossible, in order to be effective, youth workers have to come to terms with who they are so that the focus can be working with the youth. However, in that moment I felt like something was holding me back. On our ride back to CINDE for the second half of the day, I took the time to reflect on why I felt that way. Sometimes, I do not feel whole in myself and I believe it stems from this internal conflict I have with my identity.

Growing up in a neighborhood that lost the battle of gentrification, white people took over my neighborhood, forcing rents to skyrocket and the Puerto Ricans to move elsewhere. Growing up, I was never white enough for the white people, but never Latina enough for the Latinos. I am always looking for someone to validate me, to tell me that I matter, that I am enough. No one is perfect but I think if I am confident in myself and my culture and identity, I would not have to worry about how I am perceived by others. I would be allowed to be my authentic self without the fear of rejection.

Exhausted by my emotional reflection, I struggled during the afternoon session. A female lawyer and a male representative from the Legion of Affection spoke to us about the work they do with youth in Egypt and Paz, very poor communities with lack of resources. We drove past those communities earlier during our trip and saw dirt roads, garbage, stray dogs, people searching for recyclable materials, and run down housing. The organization emphasizes social work processes, so youth can discover their potential. However, it was hard to focus and I began to drift off and wanted to release the tension that was building from earlier. I did not know the toll this day’s experience would take on me. I wanted to cry because I had not had the time to truly process everything. It was overwhelming and I felt guilty that I had left all this time go by without spending more time with my grandmother. Additionally, I get to see the beautiful relationship my own mother has with her own grandchildren and I cannot help but feel like I have missed out on an integral relationship in my life.

It was 6:20 pm when we returned to our hotel. I went straight to the gym and got on the elliptical machine to work out my aggression. I also spoke to my sister, Yvette, who understands my issues with culture and identity. I did not share how I felt during the phone call to my mom. It seemed like a conversation to have in-person; I promised myself that I would speak to my mother when I got home.

A New Day

Finally realizing what I lacked,
 Put me back on track.
 A renewed focus,
 Ignited a fire within.

Processing all of the emotions this experience was providing was a lot to take in such a short amount of time. Other students, myself included, were experiencing burn out, so we reflected as a group and it allowed us to be more critical about our experience. A representative from Colombia Joven, an entity of the Administrative Department of the President, which conducts youth participation in formal spaces spoke to us about how they conduct youth work. It seemed that they didn't involve youth voice as much as I would have hoped. One of the ways they engage youth is through *fútbol*. However, the first goal must be made by a woman, as if that helps the gender disparity plagued in Colombia. It seemed condescending. I could see that my colleagues shared the same sentiment by the looks we shared with one another. How is that giving women power? They do not need your pity; they need actual change. Another comment was made that the LGBTQ youth do not need any extra protections. Again, I looked around the room and felt the tension. Thoughts raced through my mind: *Did I hear him correctly? You have to challenge him! No, don't do it. Go for it, you got this!*

Working with LGBTQ youth, I have seen the need for extra supports because of the additional hurdles they face due to discrimination. How dare a man not acknowledge the obstacles people go through in the journey to be authentically themselves!? I nervously

raised my hand and asked for clarification. I was apprehensive because I did not want the presenter to think I was rude or did not value his time and presentation, so before I spoke, I wrote my statement in my notebook many times. After I spoke, he backpedaled. I was proud of myself for taking a small step because I had become more quiet throughout the trip due to the language barrier and sadness over the lack of relationship with my *abuela*. However, I realized that not speaking up does more damage on self-esteem.

Before the reflection period with the entire group, people may have been afraid to be critical because CINDE and the other organizations took the time out of their busy schedules for us. I also did not want them to think, *here come the Americans, always thinking they know better*. According to locals, Bogotá is considered to be the most accepting of the LGBTQ lifestyle in all of Colombia (Avery, 2018). This was a wonderful revelation and shows promise for the future.

Bogotá and NYC Forever

Parting is such sweet sorrow.
 But it isn't goodbye,
 If you say,
 See you later.

Our final day of our study abroad program led us to downtown Bogotá to the Mayor's office. While taking in breathtaking views of the tall city buildings contrasting the mountains in the distance, we learned about how the government is implementing youth initiatives by going directly to the youth. President Duque could make drastic changes to government initiatives and the speaker acknowledged that it could hurt the progress

that they are making. I felt uneasy as I thought about how the current U.S. President could eliminate programs for youth, as he is not fond of afterschool programs and claims that there is no added benefit despite all the research that states otherwise. As youth workers, we see the positive outcome the services we provide have on students. How can we better show politicians this outcome?

Our final group activity showed us that every person is vital to a group's success. We worked in teams, intertwining elastics bands in small groups, eventually joining together as one large group. The facilitator allowed us to see how the group dynamic changes if just one person leaves. No matter how big or small a person's contribution, it leaves a lasting effect on us.

The lasting effect that this trip has had, I will take with me forever. The hospitality CINDE showed us was unparalleled. During the reception, we danced to traditional Colombian music, as well as jammed to Jay-Z. Two groups became one. I am grateful for the staff at CINDE for opening their doors to us and allowing us to get a glimpse of the impactful work they are doing in Colombia to help youth to have agency, voice, and representation.

The Splendor that Surrounds Us

Clouds cascade across
The green mountain tops
Peaks of the city down below
And the possibilities seem endless

Even though our time at CINDE was over, we still had a day to do some cultural visits. I, along with a group of classmates, went to *Monte Monserrate*, a mountain with a church atop and breathtaking views. Breathing became an Olympic sport as the high altitude made me question my current fitness regime, or lack thereof.

A sense of peace radiated the mountain top upon arrival. Religious statues depicting scenes leading up to Jesus' crucifixion lined the pathways while speakers adorned throughout allowed the church service to be audible for all. I entered the church at the end of the service as folks ran to the front of the altar to be blessed with holy water as if it were their last lifeline. Droplets of holy water landed on my jacket as we walked by and I bowed my head in gratitude and respect. Religion is very important to the people of Colombia, many practicing Catholi-

cism. The people were not afraid to get on their knees and worship, ask for prayers, or seek forgiveness in the confessional booths.



We also viewed international art and pre-Colombian gold at the *Museo de Botero* and the *Museo del Oro*. Whenever I travel, I love to learn as much as I can about the culture I am visiting and it always allows me to reflect on my own. There is power in seeing where you are in life, not being content, and changing. I hope that youth globally will take their rightful place when coming to understand this and advocate for themselves. Learning the history of your people, your culture, will cause you not to repeat the same mistakes again.

Conclusion

The journey ends,
A new one forms,
Its destination unknown,
The ride is the best part.

During our last day in Bogotá, Colombia, I woke up early to pack and have breakfast alone. I needed that time to myself (introverts can only take so much outside

stimulation) to prepare for the day of travel ahead. I ended up back in the hotel lobby, on the same computer I used many times throughout the trip to organize my field notes, and cried tears of gratitude. In the search of youth power, I was forced to face deep realizations of my own identity and saw that the missing pieces of myself affected how I work with youth. There are moments when I feel like I am holding back when facilitating workshops and the feelings of not being enough begin to surface. For youth to find their power, the adults they engage with must be vulnerable, which I struggle with but am slowly working towards accepting myself, flaws and all. It is my hope that the youth can, too.

I hope to never forget this feeling of gratitude. In the moments when the paperwork for federal funding seems too daunting, when I feel tired and do not want to recruit for programs, when a student needs help and my thoughts are plagued over the next deadline instead of focusing on them, when I do not feel in control. I hope to never forget how indebted I am to Colombia for showing me that the connection to culture and family truly matter.

I did not know I would be on a journey of self-discovery during my time on this trip; claiming my power as an individual, Latina, and youth worker. On the plane home, I began reading, *War Against All Puerto Ricans: Revolution and Terror in America's Colony* by Nelson Antonio Denis so I could brush up on the colonization of the island. After I got home, I spoke to my mother about reconnecting with my *abuela* and we are going to plan a trip to Puerto Rico so I can hear all of her stories and write a book

so she can live on forever. I am also looking into taking Spanish lessons so my mother does not have to translate. I am gaining my power.

When thinking about my original research questions regarding youth power, some organizations did a better job at engaging youth than others. The organizations visited in Bogotá varied in levels of participation, from seeking out youth in their local communities to building life skills, impactful volunteer work to acknowledging youth voice. I thought I would experience more youth led organizing, independent from adults but that has not been my experience in Bogotá. I did discover that intentionality and passion were important. Many of the youth workers I met during this trip were invested in building a rapport and working with young people. They embodied compassion, confidence, and knowledge in their work. These components are the foundation for a strong youth worker and this trip made me realize that I embody those same qualities, I just have to believe it and never take it for granted. Youth workers must never take their roles for granted; their impact on the youth will inform and impact future generations forever.

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