
GENEALOGICAL-PHOTOTHERAPY AS A TOOL FOR INTEGRATING MY MAYAN AND SPANISH ORIGINS

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**ABSTRACT**

The over simplification of being visibly ethnic (person of color) only continues to support the misunderstanding of the self and the other. By dividing the other and the self as either being light-skinned/ white or brown/ darker-skinned creates profound psychological divisions. The implications may be numerous. To receive active instruction from one’s parents increases the likelihood of a person making sense of one’s ethnic family history.

An approach to understanding oneself and the other may benefit from an integration of the explicit and implicit parts of one’s ethnic history and experiences. There may be familial circumstances and beliefs that impede a true known family history. Ascertain the actual family of origin history and the influence on one’s ethnic identity may be blocked by parental figures and then consequently continued by oneself into adulthood.

The present paper identifies the elements that opened the door to an expanded self-understanding and deeper appreciation for the complexities of integrating a diverse historical background. The utilization of photographs, historical texts, and genealogical research provided the essential motivation to accept the invitation for the cathartic process.

*Key-words: integrating, history, psychohistory, genealogical-phototherapy, Sephardic Jews, Yucatec Mayan, relational psychoanalysis, photoanalysis*
INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzes the multidimensional factors that have influenced and shaped my development as an individual and as a person of color. I believe that an actual understanding and analysis of oneself needs to be contextualized with historical knowledge as well as genealogical analysis. As a clinician it is imperative that a thorough self-understanding be undertaken in order to develop the clinical skills to ethically and competently serve clients. As the call for serving diverse communities continues to increase in the field of mental health we are left essentially to our best intellectual guess as to how to apply one of the dominant theories to diverse populations. Often we implore our students to identify a theoretical model without simultaneously cautioning them to make a conscious selection and one not just based on how enticing the theory appears. To engage in a decision-making process that identifies a theory that a clinician integrates into their world view and value system is a sensitive first step in developing one’s professional identity as a clinician (Ingram, 2011). Finding one’s preferred approach may be informed by our willingness to reach beyond the traditional theoretical models and into expressive modalities of self-awareness (Akeret, 1973; Weiser, 2004).

It has been both helpful and important to allow for creative-expressive tools such as psychodrama, dance, photography, and creative interventions to be part of the healing process (Moreno, 1940; Musicant, 1994; Cosden & Reynolds, 1982; Lowenstein, 2010). For decade’s researchers and clinicians have addressed the value of integrating the photograph into the therapeutic process. Anderson and Malloy (1976) addressed the role of the family photograph in discovering family intergenerational themes. One is able to uncover the family roles and dynamics by using the image to begin a process of self-awareness both individually and within the family context. Weister (1999) has developed a strategy for employing the use of images in a clinical relationship. Her efforts have shown that phototherapy does serve as an intervention with strong potential for contributing towards a person’s healing process. The search for using visual stimuli to be used in understanding the human experience continues to grow and become an appreciated form of intervention.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Photo elicitation provides the opportunity to learn about an individual’s emotional states, thoughts, memories that are related to a person responding to a photograph (Collier, 1957; 1986). Harper (1986) found that using the image in the process of facilitating disclosure to be useful. Rosenwald and Ochberg

(1992) in the process of creating and telling one’s narrative whether by conscious or unconscious awareness we include and exclude information about our experiences which in turn also shape our identities. Wang, Yi, Tao, and Carovano (1998) developed participatory action research as means for making and subsequently discussing photographs for initiating change with regards to health needs at the personal and community levels. The utilization of current and historical images provided the framework for seeing oneself which provided the setting for constructing self in a social context has been found be useful (Harper, 2002).

Reavy (2012) calls for a deeper emotional appreciation of the narrative created by an individual by incorporating visual interventions. The use of the photographs during a research project is to create an opportunity for the individual to actively select which images will help convey possibly a richer narrative and recounting of one’s experience (Radley, 2009). While the image itself may not hold the clients “truth” it is very possible that by incorporating images into the process of discovery and subsequently in the sharing of one’s story may give a voice to the client’s words, thoughts, and/or emotions.

2. STORYTELLING DEVELOPMENT AND SELF

In storytelling we incorporate and contextualize the meaning of an experience and the role of emotions, thoughts, and one’s actions. Woodley-Baker (2002) discusses the use of the photographs and auto-photography in creating a narrative is a powerful methodological tool in exploring and identifying the important developmental markers which influence one’s identity. DeLeon (2010) shares that the utilization of autoethnography which provides a researcher with a tool for connecting social factors relevant to understanding one’s identity development.

While a more traditional quantitative approach to research may yield greater acceptance within the field of mental health we are challenged as clinicians to continue the process of finding methods for enhanced self-understanding. Finding where to begin discussing, and even more importantly identifying and understanding one’s family’s country of origin history, immigration history and ultimately one’s autobiography is a daunting task. A positive outcome that brings into consciousness greater understanding and integration of those unknown parts oneself may lead in part to enhanced authenticity (Rogers, 2012).
3. METHOD AND PROCESS

During the span of the last twenty years I have analyzed the multidimensional factors (psychological, political, social, and economic) that have influenced and shaped my development. I believe that an actual understanding and analysis of oneself needs to be informed by historical knowledge as well as genealogical analysis. The parts that I needed to integrate have been present in my life, but I had created a wall between myself and other parts of myself. To find an opening that provides access to one’s history was more difficult than I had imagined. I avoided this vulnerability and ignored the signs to give attention to all parts of me.

I have wondered often about my actual ethnic background. From a young age I understood that my skin was brown. By age six I knew that I am a Mexican in the United States. I recall being about ten-years-old when I read *Call Me Bronko* (1972) a children’s book by Rosa Kohler Eichelberger. The story is of a boy, Bronislaw Jadewski, who is separated from his mother during World War II in Poland. The boy daringly escapes the vicious persecutors and eventually reunites with his mother in New York City after the war. I continue to cherish my connection to the book and keep it on my bookshelf today. It has only been recently that I have pondered what my fascination and connection has been with the book. I related in part that I was about Bronko’s age when I read the book and in particular to his Americanizing process. I could relate to Bronko’s wanting to be accepted by his new peers and his community, but perhaps also, unknowingly in some part, to his longing for his mother.

4. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Once I left my childhood home for college and throughout my graduate school years I gave little attention to my parent-child history, Mayan history, and much less to my disowned Spanish family history. I am a direct descendent of Mr. Pedro Canul and Ms. Mona Hau both Mayans, who were married in 1748. My paternal ancestry extends to this post-Spanish conquest land grant, Tekanto-Tepakan, located in Yucatan, Mexico (Garcia Bernal, 1978).

The image of Mayan home picture below is where my father was born and raised. I made this photograph during my late adolescence. The land where this specific home was built has been part of the family Canul for at least five generations. The name of this paternal hometown is Tekanto located in Yucatan, Mexico.
Becoming a parent in my late twenties challenged me to strive to impart a genuine sense of ethnic identity to our children. I felt a need to give our daughters both an awareness and knowledge about our diverse (paternal and maternal) family histories. In 1998, a family summer vacation to Yucatan ignited something inside of me that has kept me exploring, understanding, and embracing up to the present my Mayan roots. The image below is of the Tekanto train station. As a very young child when visiting my

paternal grandparents during our usual summer vacations I recall arriving at this station. The memories of the train ride and of reuniting with my paternal grandparents have in some way maintained my interest in my paternal family history.

Our children know about their maternal Russian Jewish roots. However, it has been only recently that I have submitted to the fact that there is a Spanish side to my own roots. Throughout my childhood most summers we frequently traveled to my parent’s hometown of Yucatan, Mexico from our home in Los Angeles, CA. We would spend a few days in the city of Merida, the city which of after the Spanish

![Merida City Street](image.jpg)

FIGURE 3: Merida City Street. Photo: Canul, 1998

conquest became predominately populated by the descendants of the Spanish conquistadors, other Spanish immigrants, and to a significantly lesser extent Mayans. The time in the city meant spending time with my maternal extended family members. They all had Spanish surnames. In sum, it was good to be around my maternal grandmother, but she lamented often if only I was not so dark.

My Mayan roots where reinforced and given greater importance than the maternal Spanish side of my history by my father. During my adolescence the implicit message I received was to give the Mayan partial attention and redirected away from exploring any Spanish family history. I always had questions. Historically and contemporarily the more ethnically visibly you are in Mexico determines the degree of prejudice you will experience in the community and within your family (LaCadena, 2001). I strived to learn more about my paternal grandparents and their Mayan language, culture, and customs. I shared a similar skin color (brown) with them. Their unconditional affection was hungrily welcomed by me.

![Figure 4: Paternal Grandfather Elueterio Canul Uicab. Photo: Gamboa, 1967](image)

Most strikingly, I never once heard any comment about my being too dark or why it was I was not whiter. My paternal grandparents and in particular my grandfather Mr. Elueterio Canul provided a strong source of love, caring, and acceptance that was not contingent on my skin color.

5. **CREATING PHOTOGRAPHS AND THE UNKNOWN SELF**

During the last two decades I have made hundreds of photographs: negatives, prints, and digital images in which I found patterns and repetitive images. I found a connection between my photographs and my

ethnic identity and including parent-child history. Pictures of crumbling homes, crumbling buildings, blocked doors and opened doors are numerous.

![Figure 5 and 6: Doors. Photo: Canul, 2004](image)

The photographs that seemed to have been the most unnerving to me were the ones that captured the injustice and burden of living as indentured slaves (Mayan, Mexicans, Koreans) in haciendas (between 1880s-1920s) throughout Yucatan, Mexico. The subjugation, discrimination, and silencing by the abusing hacienda owners and cruel indifference by the Mexican government left me feeling frustrated, angry, and sad. The hacienda below is an image I made when I finally stood where many of my ancestors had lived and worked in the early 1900s.

![Figure 7: Hacienda Tzanatah. Photo: Canul, 1998](image)
The reality is that I avoided for years understanding the meaning of these Yucatan photographs. This avoidance led me to spend time in Spain and Poland. During these European explorations I felt compelled to learn about the Jewish experience in both countries. The experience in Poland significantly opened the option to think, but more importantly to allow myself to experience intense emotions. While searching and visiting different towns near Bialystok, Poland I felt an emotion of deep sadness. The sadness was in part due to being physically present and standing on land where inhuman atrocities had occurred. I made a connection with my unrecognized and inconsolable grief that I had suppressed when I stood before the hacienda homes of my ancestors in Yucatan. But rather than being fully open to the emotions, I needed to feel I propelled myself further away into another country to explore, Spain. In Sevilla and while walking in solitude through the narrow streets I began to give space to the feelings related to being a person of color and the messages I received during my childhood from family members. To be identified by skin color and then have negativity attached to the assessment interconnected with the persecuted Muslims and Jews of Sevilla.

FIGURE 8: Hacienda Homes. Photo: Canul, 2001

Walking in what had been in the Middle Ages the Jewish district awakened new questions for me about my identity and family history. Did the Sephardic Jews that were expelled by the Catholic monarchs end

up living in Mexico and more specifically Yucatan, Mexico? The likelihood is strong that many Judeo-conversos (Jewish converts) migrated legally once they adopted the Roman Catholic faith or illegally migrated (Ortiz, 1978). What is even more likely is that visible signs and cues that one has any connected to practicing Judaism is erased, hidden, and/or forgotten for the sake of survival. While the Inquisition was more damaging, violent, and persecuting in Europe people in the “new world” understood the ever present threat of the catholic church.

I noticed that the home of descendants of the Spanish who lived along my Mayan ancestors in the haciendas often had two large doors that included to smaller doors – like windows that allows one to see who is at the door. I have taken these photographs as clues to the past, but also to what I may be an opportunity to be more authentic with myself by experiencing my emotions. Furthermore, to have factual knowledge of the true history of my Spanish ancestors is unlikely to become known regardless of my research efforts.

![FIGURE 9: Puertas y Postigos. Photo: Canul, 2007](image)
6. ACKNOWLEDGING THE POSSIBILITY

With 500 years of Catholicism, I felt certain that finding any trace of a Jewish heritage in my own family would be a futile process. Furthermore, any subtle questions about possible knowledge regarding Spanish ancestors posed to family members came across as an affront to the core belief of being a Mexican and a Roman Catholic. If there has been any element passed on from generation to generation of a Sephardic heritage, it is mostly likely out of awareness to my entire family.

![Figure 10 Arches. Photo: Canul, 1999](image)

The photograph of the arches of this hacienda in Yucatan likely holds architectural meaning. The influence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism on medieval religious structures of Southern Spain is well studied (Menocal, 2009). I wonder why would Spanish immigrant go to such a remote town like the one where my Mayan ancestors were born and lived in, to be so far removed from their known Spanish community members.

![Figure 11: Town within a town. Photo: Canul, 1999](image)

The Spanish, in their quest to convert and maintain a Catholic dominance, made it a quest to document every life event. In a short while of conducting genealogical research in 2016 I came upon numerous maternal ancestors and one paternal ancestor with Sephardic last names. The father of my paternal grandmother had a Sephardic last name. His occupation was that of a barber and jeweler. In the Middle Ages in Spain most barbers were Jewish. Their predominant healing task was bloodletting and haircuts (Chuchiak, 2012). The majority of my maternal Spanish ancestors who almost all had Sephardic last names worked in the English-owned silver mines located in Guanajuato, Mexico in the 1800s.

**SEARCHING FOR AN ABSOLUTE ANSWER**

The photographs, I believe, are connected to my childhood experiences and history. It is a history that may feel like a burden, I carry, but in discovering the meaning to the different roots I am connected to there is a sense of enhanced awareness.

![Figure 12: Tomas Canul Matu. Photo: Canul, 1999](image)

I related to the history of those who have been oppressed and hurt at a sensory, emotional, and cognitive level to my own psychological experiences (Jordan, 2010). The longing that has existed for a caring, loving, and understanding for the child inside of me had been unknowingly silenced until now. I began this journey with curiosity. Along this unknown path I often ask myself, What has taken place here? What has happened to others and to me as an individual? I am mostly curious as to the relationship between my questions and the photographs I have made that shine a gentle light on self and the other.

References:


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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