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# The *AltaVoces* project: A digital narrative approach to anti-oppressive social work research with Latino youth

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## Abstract

Although digital narrative methods lend themselves well to participatory, action-oriented inquiry, these relatively new methods also raise questions about potential risks involved in using digital technologies to engage marginalized groups in social work research. This article examines the feasibility, challenges, and opportunities of using digital narrative methods in anti-oppressive social work research (AOSWR) by providing empirical insights from the *AltaVoces* project—an AOSWR project that used digital narrative methods to engage Latino youth. This case study demonstrates the compatibility and feasibility of digital narrative methods in AOSWR by examining to what extent the *AltaVoces* project: (1) used methods that center the contexts, voices, and experiences of oppressed peoples, recognizing the social construction of knowledge and the politics inherent in knowledge creation, (2) critically interrogated power arrangements within research relationships and made efforts to form authentic, collaborative relationships and share power with co-researchers, and (3) acknowledged oppressive systems and institutions and reflected a commitment to transforming, dismantling, or abolishing them through the research purpose, process, and products. We found that digital tools offered new possibilities for centering the voices of Latino youth, rebalancing power in research relationships, and connecting knowledge to action through digital products, in alignment with AOSWR, but also introduced new power hierarchies and risks related to producing digital material. The *AltaVoces* project provides one example of how digital narrative research may be implemented and evaluated using the integrative AOSWR framework, exposing several aspects of digital narrative research that warrant specific attention and presenting practical strategies for doing so.

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## Keywords

digital methods, digital technology, narrative, anti-oppressive social work research, Latino youth

Using digital technologies to capture stories is an increasing trend in social work research. Digital technologies enable an array of data collection tools, analytic possibilities, and distribution outlets that afford narrative researchers new possibilities for telling, interpreting, and sharing stories in digital (Miller Scarnato, 2017). The use of digital technologies in social work research is considered an innovative method (Broadhurst, 2016) that might help the field rise to the Grand Challenge for Social Work to “harness technology for social good” (Uehara et al., 2015: 2).

Digital narrative methods combining digital and storytelling technologies offer many potential benefits to social work researchers and participants (Miller Scarnato, 2017; Beltrán and Begun, 2014; Lenette et al., 2015). However, these relatively new methods also raise important questions about potential risks involved in using digital technologies to engage research participants in processes of knowledge production (Beaulieu and Estalella, 2012; Markham and Buchanan, 2017; Quinton and Reynolds, 2017; Thompson et al., 2021). A set of practices to guide social work researchers interested in using digital narrative methods will help ensure that such approaches are implemented in ways that reflect the mission, values, and ethics of the social work profession.

The purpose of this article is to examine the feasibility, challenges, and opportunities of using digital narrative methods in anti-oppressive social work research (AOSWR) by providing empirical insights from the *AltaVoces* Project—an AOSWR project that used digital narrative methods to engage Latino youth. An integrative framework for assessing AOSWR projects is presented and applied to the *AltaVoces* Project. Using a case study approach, this article analyzes field and process notes, analytic memos, and reflexivity journal entries to examine unique features of a digital narrative AOSWR approach and suggest practical strategies for using digital narrative research methods within the AOSWR paradigm. By offering practical guidance for using digital technologies in qualitative, anti-oppressive research with members of marginalized groups, this case study contributes to ongoing debates about the ethical and appropriate use of digital technologies in social work (Berzin et al., 2015; Reamer, 2017) with the hope of empowering others to take up and improve upon the use of digital narrative methods as an innovative, anti-oppressive approach to qualitative social work research.

## Digital narrative methods

Digital narrative methods refer to a wide range of approaches and techniques that use digital tools to generate and analyze narrative data. Digital narrative is both process and product, referring to the methods employed during the data collection phase to co-produce stories digitally, and the resultant media artifacts that can be interpreted and shared in subsequent phases of the research. Digital narrative approaches have been found to help

facilitate youths' engagement with research and are considered a culturally-sensitive approach to working with cultural groups that employ oral storytelling practices (Botfield et al., 2018; Huber, 2009). Many digital narrative methods are participatory in nature, actively involving research participants in data collection and analysis (De Jager et al., 2017), which has helped researchers to center participants' voices and perspectives and led to positive outcomes for participants (Karadzhov, 2020; Lenette et al., 2015; Willis et al., 2014). However, digital research approaches also introduce ethical challenges in balancing opportunities with novel risks related to mediated communication and the privacy, access, management, and ownership of digital material (Beaulieu and Estalella, 2012; Quinton and Reynolds, 2017).

Despite these risks, digital narrative methods may hold value for qualitative researchers who are committed to empowering marginalized populations because they have the potential to transform the traditionally extractive relationship between researcher(s) and participant(s) by allowing participants to play a more active role in the research process (Quinton and Reynolds, 2017). Through the use of digital tools designed for everyday use by "non-experts," digital narrative methods have been endorsed as a means of using collaborative creation processes to challenge typical hierarchies in social research with marginalized groups (De Jager et al., 2017; Hemy and Meshulam, 2020; Lindvig, 2017). Indeed, when researchers and participants come together as collaborators, they enter into shared arrangements of power that may help overcome social inequalities within the knowledge creation process (Chataway, 2010; Hemy and Meshulam, 2020; Lindvig, 2017; Warne et al., 2013). For these reasons, digital narrative methods seem to be well-aligned with the anti-oppressive, social justice values, and principles of social work. However, the limits and possibilities of digital narrative methods as an approach to AOSWR have been seldom explored.

## Anti-oppressive social work research

Acknowledging the need for social work research to align with the profession's emancipatory goals, social work scholars are increasingly calling for and adopting an AOSWR paradigm (Clifford, 2016; McLaughlin, 2012; Potts and Brown, 2015; Strier, 2007). These AOSWR scholars conceptualize it as a value-based, emancipatory approach to social work research that is concerned with challenging dominant research conventions, especially as relates to the relationships between knowledge and action, researcher and researched, and process and outcomes (Clifford, 2016; McLaughlin, 2012; Potts and Brown, 2015; Strier, 2007). Rooted in anti-oppressive social work theory (Dominelli and Campling, 2002), AOSWR extends beyond conventional research paradigms that create knowledge *about* marginalized groups by co-creating knowledge *with* marginalized groups in ways that acknowledge and aim to transform, dismantle, and abolish the systems and institutions that adversely impact them. Such emancipatory, participatory, action-oriented approaches to research are needed to ensure that the social work profession fulfills its social justice mission not only through direct practice with marginalized populations, but also through research and knowledge production.

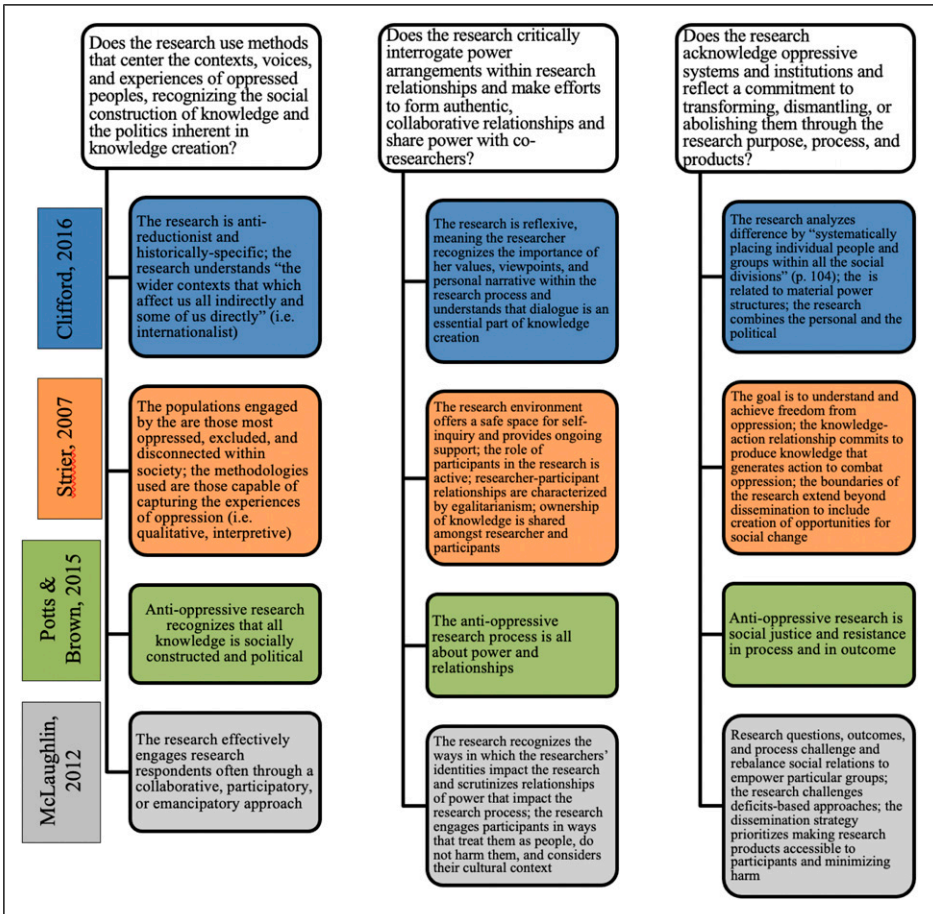


Figure 1. Integrative AOSWR framework.

Although there are many exemplars of AOSWR in action (Brown and Strega 2015), there are comparatively few proposed frameworks for assessing how a project fits within the AOSWR paradigm (Clifford, 2016; McLaughlin, 2012; Potts and Brown, 2015; Strier, 2007). A few notable scholars offer some guidance in defining and assessing AOSWR (summarized in Figure 1): Strier (2007) developed a preliminary definition of AOSWR using nine analytic categories, McLaughlin (2012) included a chapter in his textbook that applies anti-oppressive theory and practice to social work research, Potts and Brown (2015) identified key AOSWR principles, and Clifford (2016) analyzed Black feminist writings to present thematic guidelines for conducting AOSWR. Because each of these perspectives offers thoughtful considerations for assessing the complex dynamics involved in AOSWR, Figure 1 provides an integrative AOSWR framework that encapsulates the defining features of AOSWR proposed in this body of literature.

The integrative framework summarizes and synthesizes existing AOSWR definitions with the aim of providing an accessible tool for AOSWR researchers to critically assess their projects by asking three overarching questions: (1) Does the research use methods that center the contexts, voices, and experiences of oppressed peoples, recognizing the social construction of knowledge and the politics inherent in knowledge creation? (2) Does the research acknowledge oppressive systems and institutions and reflect a commitment to transforming, dismantling, or abolishing them through the research purpose, process, and products? (3) Does the research critically interrogate power arrangements within research relationships and make efforts to form authentic, collaborative relationships, and share power with co-researchers? These questions are not discrete areas of assessment, but overlap, reinforce, and coincide with one another. To advance understanding of the opportunities and challenges presented by digital narrative methods in AOSWR, the integrative AOSWR framework will be applied to a case study focused on the *AltaVoces* project.

### **Case study: The *AltaVoces* project**

The *AltaVoces* project employed digital narrative methods and was guided by an AOSWR framework. This collaborative project engaged 12 Latino young people in a participatory, digital narrative inquiry process that explored their perspectives on the barriers and bridges to well-being they experience in New Orleans. Findings from the study revealed the ways in which oppressive forces operate across levels to negatively impact Latino youth's well-being and the intricate webs of support that help them in resisting, recovering from, and resourcefully responding to injustice (Schiraldi, 2012). This project will serve as a case study to demonstrate how digital narrative methods can be used within an AOSWR framework, and the unique aspects of digital narrative research that this project brought to the fore.

#### ***Does the research use methods that center the contexts, voices, and experiences of oppressed peoples, recognizing the social construction of knowledge and the politics inherent in knowledge creation?***

The *AltaVoces* project centered the contexts, voices, and experiences of Latino, first-generation immigrant youth (ages 18–21) in New Orleans. Although Latino peoples are not culturally homogenous and collaborators were of diverse nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, language traditions, and colonial histories, they shared a politically oppressed status as first-generation immigrant youth without U.S. citizenship. Non-citizens are a group that includes undocumented persons, legal permanent residents, visa-holders, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, and various other immigrant statuses that are not granted the full rights of citizenship in the country. In the U.S. context, thousands of Latino residents are denied access to social and economic resources and rights on the basis of non-citizenship, creating significant disparities in health, social, and educational outcomes for Latino youth (Barnhardt et al., 2018; Brietzke and Perreira, 2017; Corona et al., 2017).

The digital narrative approach implemented in the *AltaVoces* project was designed as a participatory method of inquiry that would center Latino youth's contexts, voices, and

experiences through the innovative integration of two narrative, social-constructionist methodologies: (a) *testimonio*—a form of oral history with roots in Latin America that is connected to an oppressed, marginalized, or persecuted group and invokes a call to action (Bernal et al., 2018; Huber, 2009); and (b) narrative therapy—a de-pathologizing approach to working with people to make meaning of trauma and hardship through storytelling (Denborough, 2006; White, 2007). Both methodologies conceptualize research as an intervention in the lives of participants, and their integration was meant to offer Latino youth a trauma-informed approach to knowledge-building and social action through a sustained and collaborative research encounter.

*Testimonio* interviews were the primary form of data collected for the project. Unlike traditional interviews, *testimonio* interviews are minimally intrusive, allowing the narrator (i.e., interviewee) to guide the shape and direction of the narrative while the recorder (i.e., interviewer) asks clarifying questions and records (in this case, digitally) the *testimonio*. In addition to being a culturally sensitive approach to research with Latino youth (Huber, 2009), the *testimonio* methodology emphasizes the narrator's voice, experiences, and context through its oral life history approach (Bernal et al., 2018). Creating digital records of the *testimonios* helped to ensure that the narrators' voices (including specific expressions, preferred language, and non-verbal communication) were at the center of the research process (Benmayor, 2012).

Narrative therapy practices were included in the research methodology to protect participants from re-traumatization and create a supportive, trauma-informed environment for giving *testimonio*. Narrative therapy offers a framework for receiving and documenting trauma testimonies that aims to prevent re-traumatization and “redress the effects of trauma in the person's life” (Denborough, 2005: 31) by setting a context of care, documenting the person's experience of trauma, and eliciting stories of their resistance and survival (Denborough, 2005). We implemented this three-part process during *testimonio* interviews and drew on specific narrative therapy techniques (described in Appendix A) to support participants in telling their stories in ways that made them stronger (Wingard and Lester, 2001). At the conclusion of the project, one of the co-researchers reflected: “I would definitely recommend this experience because it lets you be free in a way that helps and heals your emotions.” In our experience, narrative therapy and *testimonio* combined to create a safe and supportive environment for co-researchers to engage in collaborative processes of inquiry and social change, in alignment with the emancipatory goals of social work and AOSWR.

### *Does the research critically interrogate power arrangements within research relationships and make efforts to form authentic, collaborative relationships and share power with co-researchers?*

AOSWR requires co-researchers to critically interrogate and challenge power dynamics and hierarchies and encourages participatory research designs that promote shared arrangements of power and action. The following strategies reflect our efforts to transform power relationships throughout the research process:



### *Forming collaborative relationships*

The *AltaVoces* project was developed in collaboration with Puentes New Orleans—a local organization offering programs and services to Latino youth—as well as the Latino youth who eventually became involved in the project. Prior to beginning the research, I volunteered with Puentes’ youth organizing group, LUNA (Latinos Unidos de Nueva Orleans en Acción). In one of the first meetings of LUNA, members identified media organizing and storytelling as potential solutions that could amplify immigrant youth voices to counter inaccurate and harmful media representations of immigrants. Based on these ideas, we worked together as collaborative partners to implement digital narrative workshops designed to train Latino youth participants in basic media production skills.

After the workshops concluded, I spoke with youth about the possibility of continuing to collaborate on a digital narrative research project exploring health and well-being, and they were excited about the idea. The *AltaVoces* project was then developed through months of conversations among LUNA members, Puentes staff, and board members. All stakeholders were vocal about how to tailor this research project to best suit participants’ needs, priorities, and interests—we wanted the project to be action-oriented (allowing youth to use digital media tools as part of their broader organizing efforts related to the social injustices that impact them and that LUNA seeks to transform), and to actively engage youth participants in the research (participatory) while being mindful of participants’ multiple responsibilities and limited availability (participant burden). Working collaboratively and honoring diverse perspectives challenged conventional research paradigms that position the researcher as the authority.

### *Forming authentic relationships*

By volunteering with LUNA for 2 years, I was able to build trust and rapport and form long-term relationships with the young people who would eventually become my co-researchers. My consistent presence at LUNA meetings and events helped my future co-researchers and I to get to know one another organically. During our time together, youth frequently asked me questions about the identities I hold that society imbues with power, including my age, ethnic heritage, educational background, and trajectory, Spanish-speaking abilities, nativity, and citizenship status. Recognizing the differences between our social locations and identities, youth also confronted me about my motivations for working with them. By asking these power-laden questions, youth gave me the opportunity to enter a space of shared vulnerability and self-inquiry with them. We engaged in regular dialogue around these well-founded concerns, which helped us to interrogate the arrangements of power in which we were located and challenged us to find ways to transform them.

Spending time with one another, sharing food, giving rides, and participating in exercises that encouraged self-reflection and storytelling prior to engaging in research together offered the youth and me the invaluable opportunity to form authentic relationships rooted in mutual support, understanding, and regard for one another as complex individuals in unique social locations in which privilege and oppression intersect. At the



conclusion of the project, co-researchers were asked how they viewed my involvement and responded in ways such as: “I was able to open myself to Jenn because she is understanding and actually cares about you” and “I appreciate that she is bringing attention to these issues and how much she cares.” These statements help to demonstrate the capacity for authentic relationships to transform traditional hierarchies of power.

### *Implementing reflexive practices*

As a White, adult, native-born U.S. citizen, doctoral researcher working with Latino immigrant youth, interrogating the networks of power and privilege in which I am embedded and complicit was essential in forming authentic, collaborative relationships and sharing power with my co-researchers. I critically reflected on my positionality throughout the research process by watching/listening to myself in digital recordings and keeping a reflexivity journal in which I recorded my observations and perceptions about how my identities, actions, and behaviors impacted my relationships with co-researchers, and thereby, the research process. Having digital materials available facilitated my ability to reflect on how I showed up in the research, a process that helped me to learn from my mistakes, question my assumptions, better understand my role in shaping the research context, and act in more ethical ways throughout the research process. Co-researchers also engaged in reflexive practices through group meetings and focus groups that involved watching/listening to ourselves and collectively reflecting on the research experience. Although the experience of watching ourselves on screen oftentimes felt uncomfortable, the digital recordings allowed us to re-view, analyze, discuss, and improve upon our interactions and group dynamics throughout the research process.

### *Devising trauma-informed recording practices*

By the time we started data collection, our authentic relationships made possible the level of intimacy and vulnerability that *testimonio* requires. However, we were wary that the digital devices used to record the narrators’ *testimonios* might be seen as intrusive or intimidating, posing risks to narrators’ safety and privacy. It is rarely easy to talk about experiences of oppression and its potentially traumatic effects, and we feared that the presence of recording devices might increase people’s discomfort in doing so. Instead, we found that recording the *testimonios* provided extra motivation for youth to talk about their struggles because they felt that sharing the resultant digital narratives might help others. Narrators were not telling their stories only to me (the recorder), but also performing them for imagined or “ghostly” audiences (Minister, 2016: 29). Digitally recording the *testimonios* offered the added advantage of being able to help others and contribute to social transformation by sharing them with desired publics.

Although narrators appreciated the benefits of digitally recording their *testimonios*, we still chose to implement trauma-informed practices (provided in [Appendix A](#)) to create an environment in which they felt safe during recording. Some of these practices were established and communicated at the beginning of the interview process, and others were learned along the way. These practices require researchers to search for a careful balance

between the best interests of the narrator and the best interests of the research (and its digital products). In addition to implementing these practices, we offered referrals to services and programs that could provide ongoing support to narrators to ensure they felt safe and supported throughout the course of the research and beyond.

### *Sharing power*

At the outset of the project, we agreed to share power over the digital material we would produce together. Unlike traditional approaches to social research that dispossess research participants of knowledge, AOSWR favors shared ownership of knowledge as a challenge to extractive research traditions to which Latinos and other marginalized groups have often been subjected (Cacari-Stone and Avila, 2012). However, digital narrative AOSWR produces knowledge *and* digital material (digital data for analysis and digital products for dissemination), which we found requires consideration of both knowledge and data that extends beyond “shared ownership.”

Scholars agree that the usefulness of the ownership or property model is limited when applied to data and knowledge, which is interactional and non-rivalrous (i.e., can be shared and consumed repeatedly without depleting the original “supply”). Rather than conceptualizing research products as property, AOSWR researchers might consider “who has the right to what data and for what purpose” (British Academy et al., 2018: 24). This approach requires co-researchers to think through everyone’s rights and responsibilities toward the knowledge *and* data co-produced in AOSWR. To that end, we implemented several strategies meant to afford co-researchers’ control over the research process and products and foster trust in “a data management system focused on stewardship” (British Academy et al., 2018: 8).

First, we discussed potential risks related to digital data during the informed consent process. We saw this as an important opportunity to heighten awareness of and engage with ideas surrounding digital privacy and security. Then, we drafted a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that detailed agreed-upon rights and responsibilities toward knowledge and digital material. Our MOU established that each participant had a right to maintain a copy of all audio and video recordings of her individual *testimonio* interview. Each participant was given a USB drive containing a copy of her files and had the right to use them in any way she saw fit. Participants were also able to review in advance the specific portions of their *testimonios* that were to be reproduced and shared and had the right to approve or deny the use of any clips from their own *testimonios*. Additionally, participants had the right to determine for what purposes research products could be used and shared (if at all). All participants agreed that they could be used and shared for the purposes of research, education, and advocacy, but should not be made available publicly. The MOU further established that participants had a right to be credited (as a collective to maintain confidentiality) on digital products created through this project, and a responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of other participants.

As the sole adult involved in the project (and a PhD student with the privilege of access to secure storage facilities and equipment), it was agreed that I should act as the steward of the material we co-produced. In assuming this role, I aimed to ensure that everyone

involved felt confident that their digital materials would be protected and looked after in accordance with their rights and preferences (British Academy et al., 2018: 7). To create a trustworthy data management system, all digital material was de-identified and maintained on password-protected external hard drives, and materials were frequently backed up to prevent data loss. Because sharing video recordings of interviews may place narrators at greater risk for breaches of confidentiality, data were shared only with participants throughout the project.

Establishing an MOU at the beginning of our project set the context for our participatory research design, helping us conceptualize ourselves as a collective with shared goals, rights, and responsibilities. Although *testimonios* were recorded individually, we understood that each individual was telling a part of a collective story—a central tenet of the *testimonio* methodology (Bernal et al., 2018). Bringing these stories together during the editing process and viewing them as a group was one of the most valued aspects of the experience with co-researchers reporting that it reminded them, they are not alone. Co-researchers reported that they “saw how everybody’s story was connected” and it helped them “understand more about the problems that we are facing” and learn “what things I can do to help others and ways that I can be helped.” These statements and others like them demonstrate co-researchers’ recognition of the interconnectedness of our struggles, and our collective power in responding to them.

In addition to giving individual *testimonios*, all participants were actively involved as co-researchers in other aspects of the research. To reduce participant burden, an oft-noted challenge in participatory research, (Blackbeard and Lindegger, 2015; Lenette et al., 2015), participation beyond the *testimonios* was optional; however, to varying degrees, all 12 co-researchers continued to participate after giving *testimonio*. Youth engaged in collaborative data analysis processes centered around viewing and discussing the digital recordings in a focus group format. To attend to group dynamics and be inclusive of all voices, participants had the option of providing written feedback, verbal feedback, or both. Some participants also chose to assist with transcription and editing. All participants elected to remotely review their individual narratives and the four films we produced, and six offered feedback. Participants who remained involved with LUNA (8 of 12) participated in ongoing discussions about the project during bi-monthly LUNA meetings. Thus, while levels and duration of participation varied, the participatory research design provided the opportunity for all to exercise power during the process through their active participation over a 12-month period.

However, digital narrative methods, which require some technological know-how, introduced another dimension of power in the researcher-participant relationship, and in relationships among participants. My technical abilities positioned me as the authority on certain aspects of the research, like operating recording equipment and using editing software. Some of the participants received prior training in digital media production during a pilot project, which helped to bridge this divide through peer-to-peer teaching and learning. However, this also created divisions among participants based on varying skill levels because technical skills placed certain youth more often in the role of teacher and facilitated increased involvement in some aspects of the project (i.e., editing). Thus, mastery of technology created unanticipated power hierarchies for which we were unprepared.

It is also important to note that unique arrangements of power arise in research that involves adults and youth (McGarry, 2016). In keeping with the epistemological tenets of *testimonio* and narrative therapy, I sought to attend to these power dynamics by affirming youth as holders of knowledge. I did so by making explicit statements of that nature (i.e., “You are the expert. I am here to learn from you.”), maintaining a stance of curiosity (i.e., “I’ve heard of that, but tell me what you think about it.”), using collective/collaborative language (i.e., “We’re going to produce digital narratives together.”), and encouraging participants to correct me (i.e., “Does this seem accurate to you? What would be a better way to present this?”) These approaches were helpful in positioning youth participants and me as collaborators working toward shared goals, thus creating a more egalitarian relationship; although it should be acknowledged that some youth reported viewing me as a “mentor” or person they admired, which suggests that traditional power hierarchies between youth and adults were still operating in our project.

***Does the research acknowledge oppressive systems and institutions and reflect a commitment to transforming, dismantling, or abolishing them through the research purpose, process, and products?***

The *AltaVoces* project centered on barriers and bridges to well-being, with explicit attention to the multi-level and inter-related impacts of oppression on well-being, and participants’ resistance and resilience in the face of oppression. The purpose of the project was to understand Latino youth’s experiences of oppression to support their actions to liberate themselves from it. In tandem with LUNA’s organizing activities, the *AltaVoces* project aimed to work toward the following collaboratively determined goals:

- to provide Latino youth with a safe and welcoming space to discover and share their own voices, stories, and struggles, and to locate their stories within a historical and cultural context connected to systems of power and oppression that participants can identify and interrogate
- to mobilize Latino youth around issues identified through storytelling processes to further understand and combat oppression and its effects on their lives
- to teach Latino youth how to effectively incorporate digital media tools in organizing and advocacy campaigns designed to counter oppression

As these goals encapsulated, the *AltaVoces* project leveraged digital narrative methods to engage participants in understanding and combating oppression.

Through the *AltaVoces* project, we were committed to co-producing actionable knowledge centered on Latino youth’s self-determined goals and aspirations. Thus, at the beginning of each *testimonio* interview, all narrators were asked about their aspirations and goals in participating in the research (especially as relates to what impacts they wanted their digital narratives to make) and we committed to realizing them together. A goal shared by all co-researchers was to motivate and inspire other Latino youth through their digital narratives, so we co-produced a short film directed at a Latino immigrant youth audience for this purpose. Although this film was not directly associated with the

research questions and findings (i.e., beyond the scope of conventional research), it was the first product we co-produced because inspiring and mobilizing Latino youth toward social change was our priority.

In later stages of the research process, we engaged in many discussions about additional actions we could take to counter oppression. We agreed that we should share our findings with educators, practitioners, and policymakers in positions to positively impact the lives of Latino youth, so we co-produced three additional short films that illustrate project findings (focused on defining well-being and describing barriers and bridges to well-being.) Once the films were finalized, we committed to implementing a targeted dissemination process by connecting with contacts in organizations, schools, and community groups involved with Latino youth who could help the films reach their intended audiences. This was an important step, as our intended audiences were those best positioned to benefit from and act on our research findings.

During and after the *AltaVoces* project, we committed to taking further action to reduce educational barriers for Latino youth (a significant finding of the research). LUNA spearheaded a tuition equity campaign for undocumented students in the state of Louisiana. As part of this campaign, several youths created films that advocated for more equitable tuition policies and fundraised scholarships for undocumented students, leveraging support from *AltaVoces* co-researchers (reviewing scripts, assisting with filming, and editing) and resources (equipment loans and software use). We also created an archive of digital *testimonios* from the *AltaVoces* project for possible use in future initiatives and are continuing to work together toward social change through a digital zine that is currently in development. In this way, we are extending the scope of the research to take needed action based on our research findings—a process that is ongoing.

## Conclusions

Grounded in the AOSWR paradigm, the *AltaVoces* project engaged Latino immigrant youth in self-inquiry, knowledge-building, and social action through a sustained, participatory, and emancipatory research process that leveraged digital narrative methods to help realize its goals and “harness technology for social good” (Uehara et al., 2015: 2). This case study demonstrated the compatibility and feasibility of digital narrative methods in AOSWR by examining to what extent the *AltaVoces* project: (1) used methods that center the contexts, voices, and experiences of oppressed peoples, recognizing the social construction of knowledge and the politics inherent in knowledge creation; (2) critically interrogated power arrangements within research relationships and made efforts to form authentic, collaborative relationships and share power with co-researchers; and (3) acknowledged oppressive systems and institutions and reflected a commitment to transforming, dismantling, or abolishing them through the research purpose, process, and products. We found that reflexivity and relationships were integral to carrying out a digital narrative research design that demonstrated collaboration and shared arrangements of power. The use of digital tools helped to center and amplify the voices and experiences of Latino youth throughout the research process, generate new possibilities for reflexive praxis that helped to rebalance power in research relationships, and connect knowledge to

action by co-producing accessible, digital products that can reach diverse publics with the goal of mobilizing them to engage in processes of social change.

The participatory digital narrative process transformed historically oppressive relationships between the researcher and the researched by positioning all involved in the project as co-researchers using digital tools to collaboratively build knowledge. Although power differentials were not eradicated, forming collaborative and authentic relationships, implementing reflexive practices, devising trauma-informed recording practices, and sharing rights and responsibilities through an MOU helped us to challenge them and create a more equitable distribution of power amongst co-researchers. Using digital narrative methods in our research was both a help and a hindrance in this regard: it opened new possibilities for active participation in various aspects of the research, but also introduced additional power hierarchies based on technological skill level and risks related to producing digital material. Collaboratively producing digital materials required us to engage with issues of digital privacy and safety in recording, managing, storing, and accessing digital materials, as digital recording may be more intrusive and digital data more readily identifiable than other data collection methods.

AOSWR is a recognized approach to research that resonates with the social work profession's ethical mandate to address the root causes of oppression ([National Association of Social Workers, 2008](#)). This article presented an integrative framework for assessing AOSWR projects that may encourage greater understanding, transparency, and accountability in future AOSWR research by evaluating the process and impact of the work. By using this framework to critically assess the *AltaVoces* project, this article increases understanding of the opportunities and challenges of using digital narrative methods in AOSWR and offers the first empirical example of the integrative AOSWR framework in action.

The *AltaVoces* project provides one example of how digital narrative research may be implemented and evaluated using the integrative AOSWR framework, exposing several aspects of digital narrative research that warrant specific attention and presenting practical strategies for doing so. Future research should continue to explore methodological and ethical issues associated with digital narrative methods to increase the evidence base and add to the set of promising practices presented here. We hope that this article will act as a springboard for continued exploration, critical debate, innovative ideas, and novel applications of digital narrative methods in social work research that aims to understand and abolish oppression.

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## APPENDIX A

### TRAUMA-INFORMED practices for digitally-recording interviews

The following trauma-informed recording practices offer guidance to interviewers for digitally-recording narratives that explore oppression or trauma. Examples of each practice are provided from the *AltaVoces* project—an anti-oppressive social work research project that engaged Latino immigrant youth using digital narrative methods.

### *Limit the number of people in the room*

Guidance: The use of recording devices often necessitates skilled equipment operators or crew members whose presence may make the interviewee uncomfortable. Although it may be advantageous to the project to have these individuals operate recording equipment during the interview, efforts should be made to assure the comfort, confidentiality, and safety of the interviewee by minimizing the number of people in the room. Gaining basic knowledge of and practice in equipment operation is one way that interviewers can promote a safe(r) space for participants by eliminating or reducing the need for additional equipment operators. Alternatively, if equipment operators are vital to the project's success, interviewers might consider introducing them to interviewees beforehand and training them in these trauma-informed recording practices.

Example: During interviews in our project, the interviewer was the only person present with each interviewee. The interviewer had sufficient knowledge of and experience with the recording devices, so she set up, operated, and monitored equipment during the interview, while also listening attentively, asking follow-up questions, and taking notes. By avoiding the need for outside assistance, interviewees were spared the potential discomfort of sharing their experiences in the presence of someone with whom they did not have a relationship.

### *Give interviewees control*

Guidance: Helping interviewees gain a sense of control over the interview environment is an important means of establishing safety and preventing re-traumatization. Before the interview begins, establish some measures through which the interviewee can assert her agency in determining how the interview should go.

Example: In our interviews, we implemented several practices designed to afford interviewees control that can be used in any interview process. These included empowering interviewees to pause or stop the interview at any time, skip or opt out of answering any question, or step away or out of the room whenever needed. We also used a simple hand signal (tapping twice on one's lap) as a way for interviewees to visually indicate they wanted to stop recording. Several interviewees utilized that signal during particularly emotional points in their interviews, and recording was promptly stopped so the interviewee could take a break or receive needed support.

### *Demonstrate empathic listening*

Guidance: Non-verbal demonstrations of empathic listening on the part of the interviewer can help to maintain a connection with the interviewee without compromising the quality of the recording. It is common practice in recorded interviews for the interviewer to limit verbal interjections and responses. This is done to ensure the interviewee's voice can be heard clearly throughout the recording, and to prevent the need to edit out interviewer utterances. However, an interview is a dialogic process, so the interviewer should not be completely silent as that would mean sacrificing a vital component of the interview. When

possible, interviewers should interject sparingly while the interviewee is speaking, and demonstrate empathic listening.

Example: Before each interview, the interviewer explained to the interviewee that she would sometimes withhold verbal responses while the interviewee was speaking to simplify the editing process afterward. In lieu of verbal communication, the use of eye contact, facial expressions, and body language were effective ways of visually demonstrating the interviewer's attentiveness to and presence with the interviewee, as evidenced by several interviewees reporting that they felt "heard" after interviews.

### *Offer support*

Guidance: When asking an interviewee to recount potentially traumatizing, difficult, or emotional experiences, it is important to offer support when needed. Although interviews conducted for the purposes of research or documentary projects are distinct from interviews that take place in the context of therapy, therapeutic techniques may be helpful in providing the support that interviewees need to discuss difficult topics. Many therapeutic approaches are rooted in having empathy for the person and recognizing their strengths using techniques that any interviewer can apply.

Example: In the *AltaVoces* project, we used narrative therapy techniques to offer support to interviewees and maintain a strengths-based perspective throughout interviews. *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience* by David Denborough (2014) is a helpful resource that offers non-therapists guidance for implementing narrative therapy techniques, including those we used in our project: (a) externalizing the problem—helping people to view problems or behaviors as external; (b) double-listening—listening for and eliciting not only the telling of the trauma story and its effects and consequences, but also stories of the person's response(s) to the trauma they have experienced; (c) identifying unique outcomes—distinguishing instances when the person responded differently to the problem or limited its effects; and (d) thickening alternative storylines—developing rich descriptions of multiple storylines and identities so that the problem story or negative identity conclusions do not dominate the person's perception of self.

### *Limit requests for repetition*

Guidance: Technical mishaps, interferences, and mistakes can and do happen in the recording process, which often means parts of the recording are not usable. A common approach to resolving such issues is asking the participant to repeat whatever was not captured properly. Researchers should take care to limit these requests whenever possible, recognizing that discussing experiences of oppression is taxing and potentially re-traumatizing for participants. Using multiple, independent recording devices can help limit these requests. However, there may be noises or disturbances that compromise recording across all devices, requiring researchers and/or sound recorders to use their best judgment in determining if a request to repeat is needed. If repetition is necessary, a recommended approach is to make a note of the question or topic being discussed and

return to it toward the end of the interview, when participants may be less emotionally involved in the telling of the story.

Example: We used two cameras with external microphones and a lavalier microphone connected to an audio recorder. However, there were times when interruptions (a doorbell or phone ring were common) occurred, compromising the quality of audio recording. On one occasion, an interruption occurred while an interviewee was tearfully recalling her experience of being bullied at school. Although she was caught off guard by the phone ring, she continued telling her story, and a few seconds of it contained the audible phone ring in the background. Rather than asking her to repeat what she said immediately, I made note of the specific part of the story during which the phone was ringing, and asked her to clarify it for me toward the end of the interview when she appeared calmer.