A LONGITUDINAL CASE STUDY OF GRADUATE SCHOOL AS LOGOTHERAPY FOR AN INTERNATIONAL PH.D. STUDENT STUDYING IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

The present study describes the graduate school experience of Lorena, an international student who was pursuing a Ph.D. in the United States. Three years of longitudinal data were explored from within the a priori theoretical framework of Viktor Frankl’s logotherapy. Lorena’s graduate work facilitated meaning-discovery through creative, experiential, and attitudinal values simultaneously. Specifically, graduate school (1) offered opportunities to realize creative values through scholarship, mentoring, and advocacy, (2) facilitated the realization of experiential values such as self-understanding, (3) promoted attitudinal values by helping Lorena reframe challenges posed by her unique status as an international student, and (4) provided outlets for exercising responsibility. When Lorena considered quitting, this responsibility kept her going, suggesting that the logotherapeutic framework might be useful for conceptualizing both motivation and mental health among international Ph.D. students. The author argues that more attention should be paid to the existential reasons for pursuing advanced education in the U.S.

Many resources are available to help Ph.D. students be successful in graduate school in the social sciences (Cortada & Winkler, 1979; Darley, Zanna, & Koedinger, 2004; Gray & Drew, 2008; Goldsmith, Komlos, & Schine Gold, 2001; Johnson & Huwe, 2003; Sternberg, 2003). These excellent books combine practical advice and anecdotal evidence from experienced faculty mentors with additional information gleaned from empirical investigations of the postgraduate education experience (Lovitts, 2001; Morgan, 2003). One strength of these resources is their comprehensive approach to reporting information about graduate school relating to the first four of the axiomatic “who, what, when, where, and why” questions first described by Classical thinkers such as St. Augustine, Cicero, and Boëthius, and which are still considered by many in the 21st century to be essential considerations for a comprehensive narrative (Robertson, 1946; Stovall, 2004). For example, students are often encouraged to get to know the top scholars in the field in order to answer the who question (e.g. Gray & Drew, 2008). Detailed descriptions of various professional trajectories help students decide what they should study (e.g. Norcross, Sayette, & Mayne, 2008). The question of when to enter graduate school is discussed with regard to the many financial, professional, and familial considerations. Where to study is frequently examined in tandem with the who question, and this is also often accompanied by an allusion to the latest U.S. News And World Report rankings (see Zucker-
The last of the “5Ws”—the why question—is given far less attention in these guides to successfully completing a Ph.D. If it is addressed, the emphasis is usually on professional and financial considerations/motivations, rather than on existential questions pertaining to the role of postsecondary education in individual meaning-seeking or personal transformation, or on responsibility in return for the freedom to pursue advanced education (Esping, 2008; 2010). Yet, Viktor Frankl’s logotherapy (1946/1984; 1955/1983; 1956/2004; 1969/1988; 2000a; 2000b) suggests that this existential connotation of the why question is the essential one which makes attention to the other four questions possible, even bearable, when the rigors of postgraduate education threaten a student’s forward trajectory. Indeed, the acknowledged problem of high attrition rates in U.S. Ph.D. programs (Lovitts, 2001; Morgan, 2003) suggests that if the goal is successful completion, far more attention must be paid to the existential why of graduate school. Frankl often quoted Nietzsche: “He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how (Nietzsche, quoted in Frankl, 1946/1984, p. 12). The present researcher believes that Nietzsche’s “how” can be interpreted broadly to be inclusive of the first four axiomatic “who, what, when, where” questions as they pertain to postgraduate education.

This article focuses the existential “why” question as it pertains to the specific case of Lorenai, a Latina international Ph.D. student studying in the United States. This case study is derived from a larger, three-year longitudinal research project in which data from four participants (three U.S.-born, and one international student) was presented and analyzed in aggregate form (Esping, 2008). Lorena’s case deserves special attention due to the complexity and richness of her data, and the uniquely vulnerable position of international graduate students in U.S. universities. It is therefore presented separately as a case study (see Yin, 1984).

According to the Institute for International Education, nearly 300,000 international students were pursuing graduate degrees in the United States during 2008-2009 academic year, an increase of 2.3% from 2007-2008 (Institute for International Education, 2010). Postgraduate study is understood to be a demanding undertaking for anyone (e.g. Goldsmith, Komlos, & Schine Gold, 2001). However, research suggests that international students face many special challenges which make them particularly susceptible to psychological distress. These include: uncomfortable and unanticipated changes in their personal worldviews (Arthur, 2004), feelings of culture shock (Perdersen 1995; Arthur, 2004), difficulty building meaningful social relationships due to unfamiliarity with new social roles (Perdersen, 1991;1997), perceived loss of prior identity and self-image (Lewthwaite, 1997; Leong & Chou, 2002), and prejudice and racial discrimination (Leong, 1984). In addition, they may have to adapt to unfamiliar pedagogical strategies (Arthur, 2004), and cope with unusually high performance expectations derived from their awareness of their families’ financial sacrifice (Zhai, 1996). International students who are taking courses in an acquired language may lose self-confidence...
feel discomfort in discussion-based courses, or experience cognitive overload due to learning content in a foreign language (Arthur, 2004; Yi et al., 2003). Feelings of isolation may ensue if the students cope with the overload by spending most of their time studying alone (Arthur, 2004).

Despite these stressors, international students are less likely than U.S. students to enter counseling (Arthur, 2004; Pedersen, 1991; 1997; Yi et al., 2003; Zhang, & Dixon, 2001). Several issues, such as unfamiliarity with the concept of formalized mental health services, perceived dishonor at asking for help, or lack of trust in the counselor or counseling process may deter international students from seeking formal psychotherapeutic intervention. Therefore, their psychological needs are more likely than U.S. students to remain unmet (Mori, 2000). This may make it difficult for them to move forward in their studies.

For several reasons, Viktor Frankl’s logotherapy (e.g. 1946/1984) is promising for helping international graduate students cope better with the many stresses of graduate school. First, as an existential psychotherapy, it explicitly addresses the essential why question. Second, logotherapy is both a clinical psychotherapy and a psychologically-healthful worldview that can be exercised individually outside of clinical settings (see Frankl, 1946/1984). Therefore, international students who do not feel comfortable with formal counseling can still benefit from it. Third, its appropriateness to higher education settings has been previously established (see Frankl 1946/1984; 1969/1986; 1969/1988; Fizzotti, 1990; Schulenberg, Merlton, & Foote, 2006; Wong, 2006). For these reasons logotherapy will be primary interpretive framework for this case study.

**Logotherapy**

This section will provide a concise overview of some of the essential tenets of logotherapy that were used in the interpretation of Lorena’s case. For a more comprehensive treatment, readers are directed to Frankl (1946/1984; 1955/1986; 1969/1988) and Wong (in press).

Logotherapy is a meaning-focused psychotherapy in which a person is “confronted with and reoriented toward the meaning of his life” (Frankl, 1946/1984, pp. 120-121). It has also been described as “healing through meaning” (Frankl, 1969/1988) and “therapy through meaning” (Fabry, 1968/1980). The Oxford English Dictionary offers a concise definition of logotherapy: “An existential type of psychotherapy which maintains that [a person’s] mental health depends on awareness of meaning in his life” (Simpson & Weiner, 1989).

Logotherapy asserts that the motivation to discover meaning in life is the most powerful motivational force in human beings, surpassing other biological and psychological concerns, including Freud’s pleasure principle (1900/1999) and Adler’s will to power (1912/1926). As evidence, Frankl offered the example of a hunger strike: People sometimes choose to forgo nourishment—or even die—in service of something they believe is meaningful (1946/1984). Self-transcendent acts such as this are an essential part of our
Ontological makeup.

**Meanings and “Values”**

When a sense of meaning is absent, people feel a profound and distressing inner emptiness or void that Frankl called the “existential vacuum” (1955/1986). Logotherapists help their clients relieve this suffering by helping them to discover meaning through the realization of three types of “values”: Creative values, experiential values and attitudinal values (Frankl, 1946/1984). Creative values help individuals discover meaning through what they give to the world. For example, a person may find meaning through writing a book, teaching a class, becoming an activist, or being a kind and loving parent. Experiential values are the second way to find meaning. Whereas the realization of creative values allows individuals to find meaning through what they give to the world, experiential values help people find meaning in what the world gives to them. One example is the love a person feels for another person. Self-understanding, awe in the presence of breathtaking scenery, or appreciation of a moving bit of poetry are also ways to find meaning through experiential values (Frankl, 1946/1984). The feeling of gratitude is sometimes also placed in this category (Coetzer, 1992).

Realization of attitudinal values is usually considered by logotherapists to be the highest form of meaning-finding because these values are available to everyone, even when access to creative and experiential values has been limited or denied by life circumstances. It may not be possible to escape some situations, such as those involving Frankl’s “tragic triad” of unavoidable suffering (e.g. chronic illness), irretrievable loss (e.g. death of a loved one), and guilt (e.g. for a poor decision made in the past) (Frankl, 1946/1984, p. 161.) However, logotherapy asserts that individuals always have a choice as to how to respond to these unchangeable situations through a change in attitude. The wounded healer phenomenon described by Jackson (2001) is an example of this; people who have been wounded may choose to view their experience with pain as an advantage or a tool that can be used to help others heal, as in the case of successful recovering alcoholics who sponsor newcomers to Alcoholics Anonymous. Because of its accessibility in all circumstances, Allport (1984, p. 12) describes attitudinal values as the “last of human freedoms” (1985, p. 12).

**Uniqueness, Freedom, and Responsibility**

The emphasis of logotherapy on meaning discovery is closely aligned with another idea central to all expressions of existentialism: The uniqueness of the individual. In *The Doctor and the Soul*, Frankl wrote:

With his unique destiny each man stands, so to speak, alone in the entire cosmos. His destiny will not recur. No one else has the same potentialities as he, nor will he himself be given them again (1955/1986, p. 75).

Since each person is unlike any other in the world, each individual has the ability to contribute to the world in a way that is unique and irreplaceable. It follows then, that it is each person’s responsibility to use her uniqueness to fulfill the tasks fate places
in her path. In this way, responsibility (literally, the ability to respond) transforms into responsibleness (the act of being responsible). According to Frankl, this responsibleness is the very “essence of existence” (2000a, p. 29).

**Happiness and Success/Power**

Logotherapy emphasizes the psychological distress that may be brought about as a result of misplaced pursuit of happiness or success. It is important to include some discussion of these here because these pursuits are core U.S. values. Indeed, the pursuit of success and power may be particularly salient for the ambitious individuals who are drawn to graduate school (a system which views itself as a meritocracy) and the “pursuit of happiness” has been deemed one of our inalienable human rights (Jefferson, 1776). Frankl’s clinical experience, however, lead him to conclude that the intentional pursuit of happiness and success often leads people to existentially empty, and ultimately unsuccessful, unhappy lives. It leads them in fact, to the existential vacuum described earlier. The reason is this: Happiness for the sake of happiness, or success for the sake of success is existentially unfulfilling. Of happiness, Frankl said this:

It is a characteristic of the American culture that, again and again, one is commanded and ordered to “be happy.” But happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. One must have a reason to “be happy.” Once the reason is found however, one becomes happy automatically….A human being is not one in pursuit of happiness but rather in search of a reason to become happy, last but not least, through actualizing the potential meaning inherent and dormant in a given situation (Frankl, 1946/1984, p. 162).

Of success, he said:

Don’t aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one’s personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one’s surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it…Listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long run…success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think of it (Frankl, 1946/1984, p. 17).

The next section will describe the methods used to explore these central tenets of logotherapy as they apply to an exploration of Lorena’s graduate school experience.

**Method**

**Research Questions**

The questions guiding the present study are (a) was the search for meaning evident in Lorena’s decision to enter graduate school? (b) Can graduate school be logotherapeutic? (b) If it is logotherapeutic, how does this healing manifest? and (c) What barriers to meaning-discovery are present in graduate
The study participant is a subsample of a larger longitudinal study investigating the logotherapeutic potentials of doctoral study (Esping, 2008). The participant discussed in the present article, Lorena, was recruited via purposeful sampling (Schwandt, 1997).

Lorena

Lorena is a Latina international student from an urban area in a Latin American country. At the time of her first interview she was 30 years old. She lived with another female graduate student in a park-like apartment complex in a small college town. Lorena was single at the start of the present study; she married her boyfriend in the interim between her second and third yearly interviews during this research project. She did not have children at the time of her involvement in the study. She described her childhood socioeconomic status as “lower-middle class but highly cultural.” When asked to elaborate, she stated that although her parents did not attend college other members of the extended family had obtained advanced degrees. When asked to label her spirituality, Lorena replied “Christian.” Throughout the present study Lorena was working on a Ph.D. in educational psychology. Her specialization area was human learning, and her minor was in counseling psychology. Her research in graduate school focused on international graduate students’ experiences in U.S. universities and white teachers’ perceptions of newly arrived Latino students. Lorena was familiar with Frankl’s book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946/1984) before she became involved in the present study, having studied existential approaches to counseling for her undergraduate degree in psychology.

Setting

The setting for the present study is the School of Education (SOE) in a large, research-focused Midwestern University in the United States. The university is situated in a lush, park-filled city of approximately 70,000 people, about half of whom are students. In the final year of this 3-year study, approximately 1000 graduate students were enrolled in the SOE, including approximately 180 international students visiting from more than 40 countries. A little more than 65% of students in all SOE graduate programs were female. The majority of these individuals were white (69.2%).

Procedure

Data sources

Data sources were (a) three transcribed, semi-structured, two-hour interviews (undertaken at approximately one-year intervals for longitudinal analysis, (b) two essays Lorena wrote for her master’s and Ph.D. program applications (a two-year interval), (c) one scholarship application stating Lorena’s academic and career goals, (d) five relevant papers Lorena wrote for course assignments in graduate school, (e) one conference presentation proposal, (f) two research papers Lorena submitted for publication, (g) Lorena’s disser-
The researcher personally transcribed all interview data within two weeks of conducting each interview. Original transcripts are verbatim; however, to enhance the clarity and readability of the present article, the researcher corrected some grammar and deleted filler words and phrases such as “you know” and “um.” Artifacts, (such as Lorena’s scholarship essays and other documents listed earlier) were solicited at the end of each interview, and sent to the researcher via email within a few days. Data analysis began after the completion of the third interview.

Data analysis

Data coding and interpretation were conducted using Carspecken’s (1996) critical epistemology, which is based on the theory of communicative action articulated by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas. The first step in these procedures was organizing all interview data into low-level codes based on broad topical areas, often directly aligning with questions on the semi-structured interview protocols. Little, if any, interpretation was done during this step. The researcher then implemented a rigorous set of procedures for gathering validity evidence to support high-level coding and data interpretation.

The first procedure was articulation of meaning fields. This involved articulating, directly in the transcript, the full range of possible meanings that the researcher (or other readers) might infer from statements made by Lorena in her interviews. Articulating this array of sometimes contradictory possible meanings makes it difficult for critics to say that the researcher “just saw what she wanted to see” in the data. This analysis tool also helps for clarifying the meaning of ambiguous statements in the primary record, for seeing patterns in the data, and for opening the researcher’s eyes to alternative interpretations of statements that seem at first glance to have an “obvious” communicative intent. An example meaning field can be found in Appendix A.

The next step in data interpretation was reconstructive horizon analysis. The present researcher created a matrix in which she articulated the range of possible meanings behind Lorena’s words at various degrees of backgrounding and foregrounding. This helped gain access to possible meanings behind the participant’s words and actions, which may be useful for building an explicit, defensible structure for understanding the participant’s worldview. An example can be found in Appendix B. The data were then consolidated into high-level codes based on logotherapy themes and synthesized into the final report.

Validity

Carspecken’s (1996) critical epistemology imposes a structure for checking validity through the articulation of meaning fields and reconstructive horizon analysis, as described in the Data Analysis section of this article. Other validity procedures were also utilized in the present study:
1. Peer-debriefing. The longitudinal study from which Lorena’s case study is derived commenced while the researcher was enrolled in an advanced seminar in qualitative methods. The researcher’s professor and peers provided useful feedback relating to the interview protocols, data codes, and preliminary interpretations of data from two interviews. The researcher used this feedback to calibrate the coding for the remaining data.

2. Triangulation. One strength of the present study is this diversity of its source material, which included longitudinal interview data as well as a variety of artifacts, as described in the Data Sources section of this article.

3. Prolonged and persistent engagement. During the three and a half years it took to complete the study, the researcher was able to build trust and immerse herself in the culture of graduate school (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is likely to enhance the credibility of the data interpretation.

4. Member checking. Approximately two weeks after each interview, Lorena was invited to look over each transcript and indicate if there was anything she wanted to “add, change, or clarify.” She indicated via email that all transcriptions were accurate, and no changes were necessary. After the low-level coding was complete for all three interviews, the researcher randomly selected the codes from one interview for Lorena to review. She was invited to check the low-level codes for fidelity to the transcript. The researcher made small changes to the language based on Lorena’s feedback. (English is not Lorena’s native language, so she requested a few words be changed to better convey her original, intended, meaning.) The researcher sought feedback again after the data had been synthesized into the first draft of the present article. Lorena was asked to make comments directly in the text. She inserted nine comments, which the researcher used to make the manuscript more accurate. The article was sent back to Lorena a second time, at which point she stated that she was satisfied with the outcome. These procedures helped ensure that Lorena’s experiences and perceptions were represented authentically.

5. The liberal use of direct quotes. Readers of the present article may use these quotes to make their own judgments about the researcher’s interpretation of the data, and the results and discussion derived from this interpretation.

6. As a final step, Lorena was invited to submit a personal statement describing her impressions of the final version of this article. This statement is provided at the end of the present article, giving Lorena the literal and metaphorical “final say.”

**Person as Instrument Statement**

Doing qualitative research is “always a construction of the self as well as of the other” (Stacey, 1991, p. 115) and it is therefore important to include a brief statement pertaining to the present researcher’s motivation for and orientation toward Lorena’s case study. The impetus for this inquiry can be traced to informal interactions with fellow graduate students while the researcher her-
self was pursuing a Ph.D. Although somewhat familiar with *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946/1984), the researcher did not originally intend to pursue research in the domain of existential psychology. However, unsolicited statements made by peers in classes and in casual conversation with the researcher drew her attention to the potential logotherapeutic benefits of graduate study. She was surprised that (a) some students stated that they were pursuing research on topics relating indirectly or directly to their own personal experiences with adversity, and (b) these students indicated that graduate school felt “therapeutic.” Further reading and study about logotherapy convinced the researcher of its value as an interpretive framework for these individuals’ experiences in graduate school.

The researcher also recognized the potential value of her own insider status as a fellow graduate student, and decided to position herself as a complete member researcher (see Ellis, 2004). She also believed that the opportunity to follow graduate students longitudinally while sharing aspects of their experience offered the potential to enhance the validity of her data interpretations by facilitating prolonged and persistent engagement with the research participants (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, Manning (1987) warned that researchers must guard against presenting a warped mirror image of the phenomena they study (see also Vidich & Lyman, 2003). This is perhaps especially true for complete member researchers, who must make special effort to guard against projecting their own experience onto their data interpretation. Therefore, the present researcher attempted to follow research protocols and validity checks precisely as described in the present article.

**Results and Logotherapy Interpretation**

**Decision to go to Graduate School**

The system for training practicing psychologists in Lorena’s country is different from the system used in the United States. There are no graduate programs for clinical fields in psychology. Instead, undergraduate students complete a rigorous, five-year program that resembles graduate training in the U.S. Upon successful completion of the program, students are qualified to offer psychological services. However, some psychologists choose to pursue advanced training in other countries. Many of Lorena’s professors had earned master’s degrees, and Lorena wanted to follow in their footsteps. She applied for clinical psychology programs in Spanish-speaking countries, but she did not receive the necessary scholarship funding. A much-admired professor named Maria had earned a prestigious scholarship to get a master’s degree in the United States, and she encouraged Lorena to try for this one. Lorena already spoke and read English, so she decided to apply.

Lorena won the scholarship, which guaranteed payment of expenses for the two years it would take to earn a master’s degree. In return, she agreed to go back to her country after graduation for two years of service. During her second year in the United States she was accepted to a Ph.D. program. Lorena delayed her service obligation for a few more years because she believed a Ph.D. degree
would give her even more “tools” and “status” to help people in her country.

Lorena looked forward to fulfilling her service obligation in her home country by mentoring clinical psychology students in her country the way Maria had mentored her. She also viewed her degrees as an opportunity to gain “a position of influence” that would allow her to demonstrate “humanity” and political activism the way Maria did. One specific goal was using the counseling center at her undergraduate university to provide services to poor people from the city and surrounding villages:

I want to have a position of influence that would allow me to be like [Maria]. Not exactly like her, but I saw…how she came back [from the U.S.] and…was able to influence us a lot…People from villages or from the city who are very poor…cannot afford to go to a counselor in a fancy clinic, so they came…to the counseling center. And that was [Maria’s] main thing, being able to target that population, not just in counseling but also in education.

In her first interview, Lorena explained her desire to give back in terms of responsibility and gratitude for the “gift” of her scholarship award:

That [scholarship] just implies giving back. And, it’s not that [the scholarship committee] teaches you that you have to give back. It’s just so implicit… I’m here [in the U.S.] because I’m going to learn and I’m going to give back…give back to Latin America, give back in the United States… That’s my calling. To give back… I got this money.

It’s a gift. And I need to do something with that… I have this responsibility. I have to give…back.

Logotherapy Interpretation

Lorena’s reasons for going to graduate school in the United States illustrate an important logotherapeutic theme. The sense of responsibility Lorena expressed towards the “gift” of the scholarship can be interpreted as a manifestation of her will to meaning. For Lorena, the freedom to pursue advanced study in the U.S. was balanced with a sense of responsibility toward that freedom (Frankl, 1946/1984), as evidenced in her use of the word “calling.” Her acknowledgment of this responsibility suggests that she was not pursuing power (in the form of an advanced degree) for its own sake; rather, the “position of influence” she desired was attractive because it would allow her to give back, to accomplish self-transcendent goals, such as mentoring clinical psychology students as Maria mentored her, and providing mental health services to village residents who could not afford to pay for them. Frankl’s logotherapy views this as an existentially healthy perspective on power (e.g. 1946/1984) which could serve as a powerful motivation for Lorena as she navigated the rigors of graduate school.

Barriers to the Discovery of Meaning in Graduate School

Lorena faced a serious obstacle to the pursuit of the meaningful goals articulated in the previous section. The funding agency supporting her would not allow scholarship recipients to study clinical psychology, so she
was told that she would have to choose another degree. The next closest thing would have been counseling psychology, but due to a lack of guidance and problems with the Spanish translation, Lorena did not know this. She applied for a master’s in educational psychology instead. She based this decision on two wrong assumptions. First, she mistakenly believed that an educational psychology degree would train her to work directly with students to improve their academic performance and emotional health, like Maria did. In the United States, however, educational psychologists are trained to be researchers, test developers, and college professors—not clinicians. Lorena was excited about doing research, but when she first arrived in the U.S. her meaningful goals for giving back centered on clinical work. The clinically-focused degree Lorena thought she was applying for is actually called “school psychology” in English. Lorena’s second wrong assumption was that she would have “a lot of freedom” to choose her classes in the graduate school. If she couldn’t get a degree in clinical psychology, then she would try to include many clinically-focused classes in her educational psychology program of studies. When she got to the United States she learned that the system is not quite so flexible. Although she eventually learned that she could take three counseling classes as part of her minor, this constellation of misunderstandings ultimately left Lorena feeling confused and deceived:

Lorena: I thought there would be more freedom... But [the counseling minor] has not given me any new [knowledge], a little bit of new knowledge, but not the practical part that I [wanted].

Researcher: So do you feel deceived?


When Lorena first arrived in the United States, she was not yet aware that in choosing to pursue educational psychology instead of school psychology, she had committed to the wrong degree. However, she was immediately confronted with other challenges. In Lorena’s culture, children typically live with their parents until they marry. At age 27, Lorena had never lived on her own. She had also been “overprotected” by her parents, a circumstance she attributed to growing up during a time of civil war in her country. She had learned to depend on her parents’ support and guidance. Now, alone for the first time and in a foreign country, she had to learn how to do things for herself.

The mistakes she made as a normal consequence of the acculturation and acclimation process made her feel “stupid”. For example, Lorena didn’t know how to go about finding housing. She described her culture as very warm and helpful, and she was unprepared for the emphasis placed on independence in the U.S. She took it for granted that someone from the U.S. university would take an active and directive role in helping her to get settled in her new environment, as this would be expected as a matter of course in her own country. A U.S. professor invited her to stay in her home temporarily, but otherwise Lorena was expected to take care of herself. She wasn’t able to do this because she was experiencing “shock” in her new environment. When I asked her to define this emotional state, she stated that she felt “not able to move,” “petri-
fied” and “overwhelmed”:

I was in shock…I was not thinking. I lived for a week with…one professor, but during the whole I week I couldn't even go and look for apartment. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know even what…first step should I make, and I didn't receive any offer of help...[I expected] I would have somebody say to me “Hey, let's go and look for apartments”...I didn't know [we weren't going to do this] until [the professor] said “I have somebody else coming. You need to move [out]”.

Lorena eventually found an old house to rent, but because she did not have enough money to buy a car, she felt “like a prisoner” in it. If she had received more guidance she would have known to secure an apartment on the bus line. The old house also brought other problems. It came with a “nasty” roommate and had ventilation issues that compounded her asthma. As it turned out, the college town was notoriously bad for people with allergies. Lorena spent several weeks of her first semester struggling to breathe.

Lorena was also mystified by certain social conventions in the U.S. She had grown up watching episodes of the American television show Friends. In that show, the characters often kissed each other when they met. Lorena assumed that all Americans greeted each other with a kiss. The first time Lorena kissed another student, the person seemed surprised and backed away. Lorena described this as “horrible” and “embarrassing”.

It took me a while to realize that people don’t kiss each other….I grew up watching Friends and they kiss each other, and give hugs! So…[I thought I should] kiss people because they kiss [on Friends]…. So [laughing] “Wha-? They don’t kiss here? I mean when do you [kiss]?“ Give me the rules! When do people kiss and not kiss? I [didn't] get it, and I still don’t get it!

This, and many similar episodes, convinced Lorena that she was not “fitting in” in the U.S. She felt terribly homesick and spent a considerable amount of money on phone bills in an attempt to seek consolation from friends and family back home. Her discomfort was compounded just a few weeks after her arrival in the United States. On September 11, 2001—only a couple of weeks into her first semester of graduate school—the World Trade Center was hit by two airplanes. She was completely alone for the first time in her life, and it looked like her host country might be going to war.

I [spent] more than $200 in calling [home] every month…I would cry a lot with [my mom] on the phone. Cry about how stupid I felt. How alone and stupid or impotent, like it’s depressing…I felt like a prisoner. A prisoner. Yeah. Like a prisoner…I came to the United States which is supposed to be the country where you can have everything. That’s what they say.

Logotherapy Interpretation

The emotional distress Lorena experienced as a result of her homesickness and confusion about which degree she was applying for might be interpreted as examples of
the unavoidable suffering element of Frankl's tragic triad (e.g. 1946/1984). This interpretation requires some explanation, as it is not self-evident. It is possible that with proper guidance, the misunderstandings Lorena experienced with regard to her degree selection might have been avoided. However, as it is not possible to change the past, by the time Lorena arrived in the U.S. this circumstance qualified as unavoidable pain. It is also undoubtedly true that Lorena could have renounced her scholarship and returned to her family. In doing so, she could have avoided her respiratory illness, the nasty roommate, the prison-like house, the cultural confusion and the homesickness. In this respect, Lorena had options open to her that were not available to other sufferers, who have no options to remove themselves from the source of their suffering. Despite everything, Lorena could go home. However, Lorena did not feel she had this option. She felt compelled to stay and fulfill her responsibility: In making this choice, she accepted certain unpleasant and unavoidable external constraints. Her search for meaning would have to take place from within these external limitations. This is consistent with Frankl's assertion that freedom is always exercised from within boundaries (e.g. 1946/1984). Lorena continued to pursue her educational psychology degree, and during her second year in the program she chose to remain in the U.S.A. and earn a Ph.D. (during her 6th year in graduate school), I asked her to provide her explicit personal definition of “meaning” or “meaningful.” Her reply focused on what types of research projects had been meaningful to her during her. She stated that she found meaning in research when she felt “passion about something; and that meaningful research projects “do something for...people,” “make a difference” and make her feel that she is “contributing to something”. This focus on direct help was consistent with the importance she placed on clinical work; as a psychologist, she was used to being in the field and “making a difference”:

If I were doing any research just [because I] had to do it, I would be sad. But for me it’s more like, “God. I’m going to do something for these people.” Or “I’m going to make a difference” … It’s just the idea that you are contributing to something. And so that personally is meaningful to me. And that’s what keeps me going, actually. Otherwise I would have quit. [

Lorena also indicated that she found research meaningful when it was motivated by her personal experience:

It comes from my personal experience. It comes from my own insights. It’s not something that I read somewhere. It’s something that I own. And it’s part of me.

In her first and second interviews (during her third and fourth years in the program) Lorena also provided negative examples: Research was not meaningful if it did not seem to have clear practical implications, did
not ultimately “change things”, or resulted in publications that would only be read by other Ph.D.s. She was particularly critical of some educational psychology research agendas that did not seem to her to directly benefit people in need:

If I think about it, it makes me mad… I don’t understand how [researchers] can be interested in those things. I mean, I cannot understand why they think that it’s going to be meaningful. To what? To the journal that just the Ph.D.s are going to read? It’s not going to go beyond that? [sigh and little laugh] How people solve puzzles? Wow. [“How people solve puzzles? Wow.” Said in a whisper as if the topic inspires awe. She is being ironic.] That will change the whole society and the whole world? Umph! [laughing; pause] The worst part is that intelligent people are doing that, but I don’t understand why. [laughing]

Logotherapy Interpretation

Lorena’s examples of meaningful and not meaningful research projects seem illustrative of Frankl’s creative values: Meaningful research gives something to the world; research that is not meaningful does not. Lorena also explained that personally meaningful research projects are what “keeps me going” in graduate school. If she could not conduct meaningful research, she “would have quit” after the master’s degree. This provides support for Frankl’s assertion that the will to meaning is a stronger motivational force than the will to pleasure or the will to power (e.g. Frankl, 1946/1984). Lorena’s experience in the U.S. was often very difficult. Anticipation of greater power and status in the form of the Ph.D. label was not enough to keep her moving forward toward the degree. The pleasure that awaited her if she chose to go home to her family and culture was not enough to pull her away from it. The meaning she found in her research agenda was of utmost importance. This is what kept her going.

Lorena’s Research Interests

The statement of purpose Lorena wrote for her Ph.D. (year two in the United States) focused on the political and economic problems in her home country, and her desire to use her research to “contribute to the educational system in [my country] and Latin America by developing research that embraces issues and problems characteristic of [my country’s] society”. In her first interview (year three in the United States) she affirmed this by stating that it was important for her to do research that would be “meaningful for me and for my country” rather than something that would be valued only in the U.S. academic context:

One side of me wanted to do something related to Latin America so it was going to be more meaningful for me and for my country than something I can just do in the United States… But also [there] was the other part. How can I… make a contribution to the United States using something from Latin America?

Her first research ideas included using a specific Latin American perspective on social psychology to compare Latin American and U.S. college students, using Latin American
social psychology to explain observations of U.S. culture, and writing about the history of Latin American psychology and education for a U.S. audience. Lorena felt these topics were important because interactions with classmates in the U.S. had convinced her that many people in the U.S. have misconceptions about her Latin American country. She thought that she might be able to serve her own country well by educating people in this one. This would give back to both nations:

I came from a third-world country, which you would think is all poverty and this bad stuff, but one side of me wants people to know that we are really good in this and this and that.” Or, “I really got a good education even coming from [my] country.”

Logotherapy Interpretation

During data analysis, the meaning field created for Lorena’s declaration in her statement of purpose broke it down into three elements: “I want to do research that is meaningful for my country” and “I want to do research that is meaningful for me” and “I want to do research that contributes to the United States.” These acknowledged goals represent separate, but interrelated pathways to the discovery of meaning in graduate school. Lorena’s desire to do something meaningful for her country manifested itself through the realization of creative values. She wanted to make the best use of the combination of her U.S. environment and her Latin American personal and cultural background. She did not want to use the opportunity to study in the U.S. to investigate phenomena that would only be relevant in the United States. It might have been practically easier, given her current educational context and resources, to focus on North American issues, but the “call” and “responsibility” she felt with regard to her scholarship pulled her to give back to Latin America as well as United States.

Evolution of Research Interests

By the following year, however, Lorena’s research agenda had moved gradually away from Latin America and towards the United States. She turned her attention away from a broad focus on U.S. and Latin American psychology and cultures, towards topics that were specifically related to her own painful experiences as a new international student in the United States. For example, when Lorena first began graduate school, she had benefited from participation in an international peer mentor program. In her second year, she volunteered to co-coordinate this program. She wanted give back by helping new international students as she herself had been helped. She also used this role as a platform to advocate for international students’ needs within the school. She was drawn to this work because of the empathy she felt for the other students:

I can totally empathize with these people. I can totally say “Yeah…I know exactly what you are talking about”…If…I’m in the [international student] orientation…I would ask…the person who looks the [most] sad or…helpless…“Do you need something? Do you want to go apartment shopping?” [little laugh]…I would do something…because I know what [is] going through their
minds. I know that…[they] are afraid to ask [questions] because [they] don’t want to sound stupid.

Lorena also had now begun thinking about the international peer mentor program as a springboard for research on international students’ experiences in U.S. universities. When Lorena was invited to contribute to a school-wide research project aimed at improving the Ph.D., she chose to focus her efforts here also on the experiences of international students. She wanted to gather information about the things international students found difficult and helpful. She was also curious to know if others shared her homesickness and cultural confusion. If so, she wanted to use her research to find ways to help alleviate their suffering.

Lorena had both personal and professional motivations for gathering data about international students’ experiences. Personally, Lorena was eager to find an “echo” of her own experiences in the U.S. Finding others who shared her struggles would help to normalize those experiences, and she wouldn’t feel like she was “the only one” who struggled when coming to the U.S.:

I think I have developed from trying to…use something from Latin America to explain something in the United States to… trying to understand my own issues, my own experience of being oppressed. It’s not that [the] United States oppressed me. But it’s more like the situation, the environment, the difference in the culture. All that was oppressive to me somehow.

Lorena’s research with international students also confirmed the sense of pride she felt in being successful despite the challenges of her first year. She was eager to lead by example, and wanted to use convince other struggling international students that they also could survive the challenges. She saw them as extensions of herself:

My research with international students— I’m doing research on myself. I don’t see any separation…Doing my research [on international] students is a way to do research about myself [big sigh] It’s kind of therapeutic…It could be a good closure… [very long pause; she starts to cry]…It’s kind of “I did it.” It’s a way to say “I did it.” I did it, and there’s so many [international graduate students] who did it, and there’s so many who can do it…The whole process of coming to this country…was so meaningful for personal reasons…Everything that I have been doing since I started has to do with me as a person growing. So for me, writing about being away from home, being away from your comfort zone, and all this experience is just a way to understand how that helped me…I’m not going to be the subject of my study, but it’s just a way to enjoy the process of growing. Because I know that these international students can grow…That is huge for me. Growing.

Professionally, Lorena felt that this line of research could contribute positively to other international students’ lives. She articulated specific goals of using her findings to educate faculty and administrators about the needs and expectations of international students, creating a helpful handbook for new
international students, and improving the training programs provided for international students already in the U.S. or who are preparing to enter it.

Logotherapy Interpretation

Lorena’s research agenda illustrates meaning-discovery through creative and experiential values simultaneously. Her personal connection to her research topics helped her gain some self-understanding, which can be interpreted as an experiential value. The meaningful contributions she hoped to make through her work are a creative value.

Another existential theme is present in the evolution of Lorena’s research agenda. Frankl’s logotherapy asserts that each individual’s destiny is the result of three things: (1) Her disposition, or her natural endowments or gifts, (2) her situation, or external circumstances and environment and (3) her position, which is the attitude she takes towards her unique disposition and situation (1955/1983). Frankl repeatedly emphasized that each individual is responsible for using her unique combination of disposition and situation to contribute something meaningful to the world. Lorena’s research goals may be interpreted from within this framework. The three research ideas presented above represent the position she took with regard to her singular combination of disposition and situation. Her Latin American personal and cultural background (disposition) was unique in her Midwestern U.S. university. Her situation—studying educational psychology in the United States—made her unique among psychologists from her country. Her research goal of doing something “meaningful” for her country could be realized by using the advantages of her disposition and situation to help other people. This is the position she took. This position helped her to find meaning through an attitudinal value: She was in the wrong degree program, but there were still many valuable intercultural research topics that she was perhaps uniquely well-suited to pursue.

Meaningful Coursework

Lorena’s original approach to studying international students evolved as her professional knowledge-base grew and she became more sophisticated as a researcher. At some point during her second year of graduate school, she discovered a new way to study international students’ experiences. One of the courses she had taken during her first semester in the U.S. had provided an opportunity to explore her homesickness and cultural confusion through writing. At the time, she had found this experience “therapeutic”. She began to wonder if this outlet could be useful to other international students. For a time, she thought this would be her dissertation topic.

The “therapeutic” course Lorena took during her first semester focused on semiotics, which is the study of how signs and symbol systems relate to each other (e.g. Pierce, 1897/1985). The form of the “signs” discussed in this course included culturally-bounded interpretations of meanings and events (e.g. what does an “educational psychologist” do?); differences in the intended and interpreted meanings of nonverbal communication (e.g.
What does a kiss on the cheek communicate to the person being kissed? What is the intent of the person doing the kissing?); and the metaphors people use to make sense of their environment (e.g. Is the graduate school experience like climbing a mountain, being swept up in an ocean of ideas, or something else?). The professor who taught the course assigned a series of reflexive papers in which students were supposed to use semiotic theory to interpret the way they made sense of their life experiences, and then to reflect on these interpretations. Students were permitted to choose their own topics.

Lorena’s three reflexive papers covered the metaphors she used to understand her work as a psychologist; her emerging understandings of the impact of U.S. culture on the culture in her own country; and on the role of prior knowledge in understanding homesickness. She found the experience of writing these reflexive papers “very therapeutic” and “a catharsis.” She would later characterize these assignments as a “tool” that helped her to make sense of her response to being inundated daily with unfamiliar signs that needed to be (re)interpreted. She was grateful for the opportunity to “move things in different ways and combine things in different ways” because it allowed her to respond to her homesickness in a “more healthy way”.

It’s like when you are in therapy, that suddenly your therapist says “No no no! You are not crazy. You’re not crazy. That’s a normal reaction to what happened.” Finding a theory that would explain what was going through my mind just gave me a like [Lorena makes a movement to indicate a great weight has been released; sighs] like “Okay. I’m not getting crazy”

During her second year of graduate school she was asked to write an intellectual history that covered her development as a psychologist. In the process of writing this paper, she spent time reflecting on the therapeutic impact of the semiotics course. She began to wonder if other international graduate students used the reflexive papers for therapeutic purposes:

[I was] very curious to know if it was something that just happened because…I was coming from a counseling background…I wanted to know if other students have felt that empowerment from writing. What kind of topics they choose to write about [in semiotics class]?…If they go to topics that has nothing to do with what they are dealing with or if they go into topics that are related to what they are dealing with at that moment.

In order to find answers to these questions, Lorena thought she would do some participant observation in the semiotics class, and look at the topics international students write about in their semiotics papers. Did they spontaneously use those assignments to make sense of their experiences in a new culture the way she had? Did the experience “change” students as it had changed Lorena? Lorena’s semiotics professor invited her to contribute to an article that was going to be published in a prestigious journal. In that article, she wrote in the first person to make the case that writing reflexive semiotic papers can be “therapeutic” and “powerful” for interna-
tional students who are trying to make sense of experiences that don’t fit with their pre-existing beliefs. She wrote that she had found this process useful, and also “less threatening than going to counseling.” She thought that this method could be of particular benefit to international students who come from cultures that are less likely to seek help from counselors, because semiotic reflection may feel “safer” to them than asking for help from a counselor.

**Logotherapy Interpretation**

The relief through self-understanding Lorena found in writing the reflexive papers might illustrate an experiential value. Her desire to use the course as a springboard for research with other international graduate students can be interpreted as a creative value. At the time of Lorena’s second interview, (during her fourth year of Ph.D. study) she indicated that she “had to” do the semiotics class study. When the researcher asked her to explain why, her answer emphasized the search for meaning through creative values:

Well, because it’s my experience. I mean, it is what I’ve been through…I know I went through homesickness and all this stuff. And that was part…of my research, and then how I made sense of things—in semiotics…But also…I’m getting closer to being done. So what?….I’m going to have a Ph.D. in educational psychology. And what have I done for the community? What have I done for society?

**Lorena’s Final Research Interests**

Lorena was surprised by some of the other international students’ responses to the focus of her research project on international students’ experiences. She had an a priori hypothesis that most graduate students struggled with homesickness in a way that was similar to her own struggle. However, in casual conversations and formal interviews with other internationals she discovered that students who came from (what she believed to be) less expressive cultures were reluctant to admit to experiencing difficulties. This made her “doubt” her research:

I was upset because…it was like “Okay, so my research is not true?” I mean, what I’m saying is not accurate? It made me doubt. It was true for me. But I’m thinking, in this population, where the majority of [international students] are [from different cultures than my own]—If I’m going to be working with [students from these cultures], I don’t think this [research] is going to play out the way I want.

An extensive literature review convinced Lorena that most international students do actually struggle with homesickness, but that it is difficult for students from some cultures to admit this. One of her professors told her that for reasons of research validity, it might be better for Lorena to study other Latino international students specifically. Unfortunately, at the time there were no newly-arrived international students from Latin American countries at Lorena’s university. She ultimately postponed this research agenda, deciding to pursue research with international students at a later point only if she found an environment with a higher population of students from
Latin American countries.

Another reason for abandoning the research with international students was that Lorena discovered that although many people were focusing their research in this area, she did not believe that the findings were being translated into changes in practice. The research process would not be meaningful if it didn’t actually help other international students. She also felt “guilt” for focusing research on this population when there was so much need for research that would directly help people in or from her own country. She explored several ideas, and on one trip home she made contacts with potential research participants. Unfortunately, logistical, financial and travel constraints made conducting research in Latin America very difficult. Lorena ultimately settled on a meaningful research project that she could do in the United States that would contribute something positive to people in the U.S. and to people from Latin American countries.

Lorena’s final decision for her dissertation research focused on white middle-class school teachers’ perceptions of newly-arrived Latino students. Among other things, she was interested in misconceptions and misunderstandings that occur in the classroom as a result of the mismatch between the two cultures. Her experiences in the U.S. school system convinced her that this was an important area:

It’s just sad when I see [Latino students] in the schools sitting by themselves and doing nothing because they don’t speak the language and the teacher doesn’t speak Span-

ish…How they communicate? So what they are doing is just drawing or coloring. When they are in 3rd or 4th grade they should be doing something else. And so there’s no support. And then, I teach future teachers and [sigh] it just amazes me the misconceptions that they have. And so for me, it’s like, I need to do something. I just get so annoyed to hear misconceptions about the students.

Lorena believed she could use her interviews with teachers to become “an agent of change.” Her data analysis would reveal the teachers’ misconceptions and implicit beliefs, but it was also important to her to use the interviewing process to make the teachers themselves aware of these. In the final interview with each of the teachers in her study, Lorena would use reflexive techniques similar to those that had expanded her own cultural awareness when she wrote papers in the semiotics class. She hoped this would expand the teachers’ understandings of the impact of their own culture. She believed this would benefit the teachers and also their Latino immigrant students.

Logotherapy Interpretation

Lorena’s choice of dissertation topic illustrates the use of research to find meaning through a creative value; it would help the Latino students and their teachers, and in doing so contribute something positive to the world. Her dissertation project also helped her to discover meaning through the exercise of an experiential value. In her third interview (during her 6th year of graduate school), she explained the personal connection she
felt to her research on white teachers beliefs about teaching Latino children:

It’s very personal. I cannot detach myself from that. I’m not a Latino immigrant student. I’m not. I’m a Latina doctoral student. But, [I relate to] the idea of understanding the process of being away from home and having to get used to a new culture. And the idea that it’s not that you are stupid, it’s just that you are not used to the culture. And [you] have people judging you because of way you talk or the way you act without putting themselves in the position the way you are. That is very personal to me. And so, that gives me the strength to keep going.

Lorena’s Perceived Advantages as a Researcher

A skilled qualitative researcher can learn “to make the familiar strange” (Gordon, 1974) by mastering a codified system for systematic observation and interpretation (see Car-specken, 1996), but as an outsider studying phenomena in the U.S. she may have had an advantage. She did not have to work at putting aside her own understanding in order to see the strange things around her. They were just obvious. (see Denzin, 1992; Kogler, 1996) For a budding researcher interested in cultural questions, this could be a genuine—and relatively unique—strength. Lorena’s experiences in graduate school helped her to see it as such. In her first interview, she expressed it this way:

There are people who cannot see [certain things]. And I can see it...because I don’t feel part of it. I have a different perspective...When you have experienced...different things than the majority of people in a particular culture, you can see things in a different way that all other people are not aware. It takes them to go out to a different place or a different situation to be able to look back and see that there’s different ways to see things. There’s not just one way to do things, or just one way to see things.

When researching and advocating for international students Lorena wanted to help them recognize the outsider advantage and see their “full potential” and feel “proud” of themselves:

International students have such...huge potential. I mean, just because we see things from different perspectives. We can be those lenses that see things from different perspectives, and help [U.S.] Americans who have never been out [of their country] to see things from those perspectives.

She also wanted U.S. graduate students to take advantage of the presence of international students by asking questions and learning from them. Whenever possible, she used her outsider status to educate her U.S. colleagues:

One of my favorite [meaningful experiences] was when I...gave a presentation in a class about behaviorism from the perspective of Latin America. Because I actually think I gave a different perspective that nobody was thinking about. And it was like a...way to tell them there’s different ways to see behavior. There’s a history also in Latin
America, going on. It's not just here. And it has a different impact than it will have here...It was awesome. I was feeling very like, this is my purpose. In terms of I'm a [scholarship recipient]. I'm called to...exchange my culture with the other culture. And I think I did my job. The other one was when I also gave a presentation...and I talked about schools in [my country], and how they are different from schools in the United States. And I just felt like it was...informative to the students...Every time I talk [to the future teachers in my courses] about “This is what’s going on in other parts of the world. And you are going to be teachers. And you're very lucky you are here!....Be aware that you are very lucky. But be aware that you are going to have students coming from this reality.” So when I do those things that bring me back to home, it’s what is very meaningful to me.

**Logotherapy Interpretation**

Being an international student was sometimes a lonely and confusing experience for Lorena, but she was also aware that the experience granted her unique insight. In recognizing the strength inherent in her outsider status, Lorena was exercising an attitudinal value: Thus, the positive aspects of the experience did not negate the negative aspects; rather, the advantages and disadvantages coexisted. In recognizing this, Lorena discovered meaning.

**Discussion**

The experiences of Lorena’s first year in graduate school demonstrate the challenges advanced education poses to some international students. The evolution of her research interests shows how one graduate student exercised freedom within the constraints of the system to look for meaning in those challenges. Lorena’s experience can be interpreted using several concepts from Frankl’s logotherapy. First, she found meaning in creative values when she acknowledged a sense of responsibility and attempted to find research topics that would “give back” to the U.S. and her country. She took a position with regard to her unique disposition and situation and “gave forward” to other international students by researching their experiences. Her goal of using the findings for advocacy, education and direct help is also a manifestation of creative values. Second, Lorena exercised experiential values when she sought self-understanding through research. This personal motivation was inexorably linked with her desire to use this research professionally to help alleviate the suffering of others who shared her struggles. Her final dissertation topic satisfied her need to become “an agent of change” and do research that would benefit both the U.S. and Latin America, while also fulfilling her need to study something that had relevance to her personally-painful experiences in the U.S. It was an elegant resolution of multiple existential imperatives. These meaningful research projects “kept her going” even when she felt like quitting. It is clear that for Lorena, the Ph.D. degree, by itself, was not enough. The will to meaning was more powerful than the will to pleasure or power.

Lorena also found meaning in her coursework. Her semiotics class was “thera-
meaning in an attitudinal value. Thus, her perceived weakness was transformed into a strength. Lorena also repeatedly acknowledged the sense of responsibleness she felt with regard to her uniqueness as an international student, and the freedom to pursue a Ph.D. in the United States. Her emphasis on this responsibleness suggests that she was not pursuing power (in the form of an advanced degree) for its own sake, but rather that her desired “position of influence” was the means to which she could accomplish self-transcendent goals. When academic or personal challenges threatened, these ideals kept her moving forward. For Lorena, then, graduate school was logotherapy.

Lorena is a unique case. However, Lorena’s inherent uniqueness as an international student (and other particulars of her experience) do not discount the reasonableness of generalizing aspects of her experience to others. Her experiences in graduate school suggest that the existential why question may be of paramount importance to some Ph.D. students. Therefore, it would be prudent to focus more attention on the all-important why question in publications which purport to help graduate students successfully navigate the path to the Ph.D. It is important to remember that in academia we do not build résumés. Instead, we create vitas. In Latin, *vita* means “life.”

**Validity Check: Lorena’s Involvement in the Present Study**

As a validity check at the end of Lorena’s second and third interviews (during her fourth and sixth years of graduate school), I asked her if there was anything they would like to share with me regarding their involvement in my study. She stated that it has been “really good” emotionally to talk about these issues, and she appreciated the opportunity to “vent.” The interviews helped her to think about things “more slowly” which helped her to “make sense” of her experiences. The interviews also challenged her to think about how her research can help other people, and provided practical help because “once or twice [during the interviews] I have been able to think about things in different ways.” She also described these as giving her a “therapeutic perspective.” She could not think of any negative experiences associated with her involvement in the present study.

**Validity Check: Lorena’s Response to this Article**

After completing the first draft of the present article I submitted it to Lorena for her feedback (member checking). I used her comments to make revisions. Once we were both satisfied with the final version, I asked Lorena to share her response to reading it. Her first person narrative follows:

My first reaction after reading this [article] is a sense of gratitude because of how much I have learned and grown. Being able to look at how much I struggled during my first three years in graduate school and
compare this to where I am right now almost seven years later makes me feel more competent and aware of my strengths both personally and professionally. I think that it is evident while reading “my story in graduate school” that for me graduate school was not just a professional step toward achieving professional skills and in this way become more competent in my job as a psychologist, but a personal journey towards independence, growth and finding out who I was professionally. I learned that being a psychologist in Latin America and practicing psychology in Latin America have provided me with so many tools that I could use in the United States. When I first read this…my first reaction was of concern of looking more like a victim because of how much I struggled when I first came to the United States. When I read the meanings behind my experiences through Franklian theories it made me understand that my feelings and experiences at any point of my life are valid and are part of the journey of finding the purpose in your life.

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