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A Sociopsychanalytic Intervention Process in a Mexican Mining Village

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An important lack in the cognitive development of elementary school children from a Mexican mining village was discovered in a diagnostic study leading the researchers to the necessity of informing the adults of the community, which derived into a enduring process named „the sociopsychanalytic experience“.^{1,2}

This has developed as a dialogue between the researchers (a group of psychologists, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts - most of them trained in the Mexican Psychoanalytic Institute which was founded by Erich Fromm and influenced by his teachings during the 25 years he lived in Mexico, and the community members who got involved in a process seeking alternatives tending to improve children's everyday-life conditions. The project has been named „the sociopsychanalytic experience“ because it emerged as a coherent consequence of the psychoanalytic perspective put forward by Erich

Fromm, (cf. E. Fromm, 1941a; 1961b; 1962a; for empirical studies see E. Fromm, 1980a and E. Fromm and M. Maccoby, 1970b) in the sense both, that it aims at making people conscious about those daily facts of life which are not consciously recognized - including not only sexual but also disguised socioeconomic, social or cultural motives - and in the confidence it outlines of the power this knowledge can provide to those who are looking for changes through life-oriented and productive alternatives.

After five years of the „sociopsychanalytic experience“ the results which were obtained can be evaluated in different ways and clearly point to the benefits of its perspective showing that it has been a very good alternative for promoting self-developmental processes among poor people. These have had, besides, a prophylactic effect among the participating mothers and enhanced the mental health of the children.

The interviewing of the mining village children, grounded in the theoretical-methodological aims of studying social character development and moral reasoning in different social groups (cf. S. Gojman, 1988; 1989; 1990a; 1990b), has evidenced, in spite of its imperfection, very high depression indexes, physical malformations, deep inhibition and emotional dejection. Knowing this about the children in a „normal“ school, the researchers felt an inescapable professional ethical responsibility to get in contact with the municipal authorities and with the teachers who had permitted the study of the school children to let them know about these

¹ Sociopsychanalytic Seminar of The Mexican Institute of Psychoanalysis, coordinated by Dr. Sonia Gojman and Dr. Salvador Millán. Members: Dr. Francisca Diez de Pinos, Psic. Patricia Gonzales B. A., Psic. Guadalupe Rosete B. A., Psic. Guadalupe Sanchez B. A., Dr. Ana Maria Barrosa M. D., Dr. Carlos Sierra M. D. and Anthropologist Pascual Borcelli; Language and Auditive Therapist B. A. Sara Burguete. Creative and Art Teachers: Cristina Duarte, Carlos Díaz, Verónica Espinoza and Sergio Cházaro.

² Most of the findings, developments and history of the project have been reported in the periodic publications at the Mexican Psychoanalytic Institute since 1980.- Cf. S. Gojman, S. Millan, 1989.



findings. Doing this led to work with the parents of the children and the rest of the teachers in the school. From these original contacts emerged the „sociopschoanalytic experience“ (cf. S. Millán, 1988) as such, which has included for more than five years Sunday visits of the researchers, lasting for six to eight hours monthly, at the beginning to notify the adults about what had been found in the study of the children and afterwards to support any initiatives directed toward improving their living conditions.

The monthly attendance of the team of mental health professionals developed group dynamics with the parents of the children (cf. F. Diez, I. Hernández, G. Rosete, E. Tripp, 1988), workshops with the school teachers (cf. P. Gonzalez, D. Campos, 1988), and creative workshops with the children themselves (cf. J. Escudria, C. Politi, T. Granados, 1988), incorporating the mental health workers, two teachers, one of them for a workshop of corporal expression, the other for creative manual activities with waste materials, and a group of 5-6 young students willing to participate in the project as assistants. A special program for the youngsters with learning difficulties, which were highly frequently present among these children, has also been included (cf. B. Sanchez, D. Campos, 1988).

The insight into these real life circumstances of the community, had, in turn, an important impact on the researchers, causing them to discover the gap between their well-organized professional practice and the facts of everyday life outside of their private and institutional offices in large cities. It has offered throughout the whole experience multiple and recurrent opportunities for mutual teaching-learning events by the work of both the professionals and the mothers of the children - who have fostered, with their enthusiastic participation, different modes of organizing most of the activities in order to make them appropriate to their own sensibility, habits, traditions, and specific possibilities. One of the results, for instance, was that „group dynamics“, developed with the mothers, became much more active in the course of the step by step modifications proposed and required by the women. Initially men and women met together, afterwards they met in sex apart

sessions in which the men did not persist, and finally the women had to justify their attendance to their husbands, who thought of their talking with us as unfruitful, working at the same time, doing something with their hands. In the course of time the women developed a combination of the psychological interchange about their difficulties and different activities with their children, so that orientations and suggestions given in the group have proved to have an impressive value in facilitating an effective emotional communication and sensitivity (cf. A. M. Barraso, 1991) with the carrying out of manual activities and even the production of small things to sell (most of them, but not exclusively or necessarily, for the cooperative effort of the group of women -which has been consolidating as such - to help the poorest to afford their special and recently discovered requirements: glasses or hearing aids, for instance, or even the possibility of getting to the city for a medical consultation).

Another interesting example of the transformation of the psychological activities by the mothers was the development of daily school stimulation sessions with the complete groups of children included in the motor-sensory-perceptual program exclusively designed for the children with learning difficulties by one of the psychologists of our group to reinforce the meeting that we, as experts, were having once a month. The mothers had these sessions between each of our visits, and so they were „trained“ to accomplish these activities - an effect that taught us about the importance of considering the damage caused by marking the children through the diagnosis as „having learning difficulties“, and so made clear the advantages of working - as they did - with the complete groups and being able to benefit more children and obtain better results.

Some of the villagers have also taught us about the very convenient possibility of being trained to measure visual acuity, doing it originally in the school in which the project started and afterwards in other schools in the same community. The first one developed into an impressive effort that carried half of the 46 children detected for the first time as lacking visual acuity to an institution in México City which of-



ferred to check them with extremely reasonable fees for their possibilities and to facilitate access to glasses, when required. They accomplished this by discovering the possibility of getting the help of the Miners' Union, which contributed the bus which transported the children. This event also showed the delicate and fortunate work done by those responsible for the project in overcoming the difficulties the parents of the poor children had in accepting the facts and then, when conscious of them, coping with the real difficulties to gain access to a reasonable solution.

We think that many of the experiences in the community could be seen as psychoanalytic metaphors of the sequences of facts like these:

When there is little to be done to change real facts, it can become very painful to be confronted with them repeatedly, and one certainly feels better not to know about it, repressing it, rationalizing it, making it unconscious, although one is losing at the same time even the minimal chances available for changing those same facts. Most of them (about 60 children or so) have by now been able to do it, and have acquired really important new possibilities which seemed very far from reality before.

Similar in its proceedings has been the development of the program for auditive and language difficulties (cf. G. Sanchez, 1991) among the children which has been basically implemented by the trained parents who started by checking the complete groups of the children in the school, and then developed with the youngsters the specific routines of the treatment designed by a language and auditive therapist, who checks and supervises them during the monthly visits, and is at the same time supervised by them through their impressions and the real possibilities of getting ahead with each of the required activities (cf. S. Burgete, 1991).

After three years of working in the school and before the beginning of another project we call a „social school“, which was proposed by the community members to give access to the project to families who did not participate in the initial school, we repeated the study of the children and so had a chance to make a more systematic evaluation of the clinically observable changes undergone by the children and which

were continuously seen - and mentioned to us - by the teachers in their classrooms. The Mexican National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT) soon offered us the opportunity to work on a comparative study of the interviews of the children: The answers to the interpretative questionnaires by the children in the elementary school in which the project started were analyzed in detail to compare their similarities and differences after three years of working in the sociopschoanalytic process³: There were 141 questionnaires, 73 from the first application, 68 from the second. A content analysis of the children's answers, their character traits and their moral reasoning were analyzed. The most frequent traits among them and the differences between applications described.

The most remarkable result was a very significant decrease in physical mistreatment among the youngsters and some changes which show a clear improvement in their self-images, their character traits orienting towards enhanced productivity and biophilia. Their relation with authorities, initially blind and submissive acquired some possibility of being critical. Autonomous moral reasoning, characteristic of developed reasoning, almost absent in the beginning among both the younger and older children appeared frequently among the older children. These tendencies were collaborated in the same direction among the specific children of reapplication and even increased in some aspects among those most assiduous to the project.

Starting from Erich Fromm's conception of social character traits as a result of the economic and material conditions of everyday life, from his remarks on the unconsciousness not only of sexual and aggressive drives but also of all which is contrary to the socially attributed functions, and not rarely those most creative and productive tendencies, if they are not functional to the system as a whole, has been a most orienting

³ Cf. S. Gojman de Millán's final report to CONACYT: „Revaloración del cuestionario interpretativo en una comunidad minera después de tres años de trabajo comunitario (diseña experimental pre y post-aplicación a la experiencia de trabajo de grupo)“, Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología, México, February 1991.



perspective for developing the sociopschoanalytic dialogue between the villagers and the socio-psychoanalysts attending to the community. It has made very clear that many of the realities of poor people in the so-called underdeveloped countries are not perceived as they are; they are neglected and cannot easily be seen with objectivity. Being aware of them can provoke different ways of confronting the facts of life, by not conforming unconsciously to them or at least realizing the easiness of each other's participation in the maintenance of the status quo, which means that, in these countries, many or most of the people - an inevitable and surprisingly growing percentage in the whole world, as reported by international organisations (cf. J. Boltvinik, 1990a; 1990b) - are not able to satisfy the minimally acceptable human conditions.

The process of becoming aware of things we would prefer to ignore has become evident for both groups involved in the dialogue, the villagers and the professionals, who in different ways and moments have realized the effects of the project in themselves as one of getting a sense of becoming awake: They discovered among everyday facts of life how other relevant motives were intertwined and how asleep or unconscious they had been of them in their everyday life, with their everyday problems, without trying or knowing that they could do something, or at least - as one of the mothers of the children put it in one of the meetings - that they could try to do it, instead of staying at home in the conviction that they were the only and lonely one with the problem.

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Zusammenfassung: *Ein sozio-psychoanalytischer Interventionsprozeß in einem mexikanischen Bergarbeiterdorf*

Dieser Beitrag gibt Rechenschaft von den Wirkungen, die eine knapp 6jährige sozio-psychoanalytische Arbeit in einem mexikanischen Bergarbeiterdorf, speziell bei der kindlichen Bevölkerung an einer Grundschule, gehabt hat. Zunächst wird in allgemeinen Begriffen die Struktur des „sozio-psychoanalytischen Prozesses“ beschrieben, wie er im Anschluss an Erich Fromm konzipiert ist: Aus der erweiterten Perspektive einer Integration des Unbewussten wird nicht nur der Bezug zu unterdrückten Sexualimpulsen wiedergewonnen, sondern es wird auch aufgezeigt, inwieweit das Sozialsystem als solches diese verdrängt und so Charakterzüge ausprägt, die dazu beitragen, das System und seine sozio-ökonomische Struktur durch Rationalisierung und Ideologiebildung zu stabilisieren.

Der Bericht basiert auf der Auswertung von insgesamt 141 Fragebögen, die bei einer Zufallsstichprobe von Kindern 3 Jahre vor und 3 Jahre nach dem Anlaufen des Projekts erhoben wurden (hiervon umfasste die erste Stichprobe 73, die zweite 68 Fragebögen). In einer vom Mexikanischen Nationalen Rat für Wissenschaft und Technologie (CONACYT) geförderten Auswertung wurde zwischen beiden Stichproben ein systematischer Vergleich gezogen. Bei der Inhaltsanalyse der Antworten wurde besonders auf die Bildung von Charakterzügen und auf das moralische Urteil geachtet; die häufigsten Charakterzüge und die Differenzen zwischen den beiden Auswertungen werden beschrieben. Dabei stellt sich, was das Selbstbild der Kinder angeht, eine gewisse Besserung heraus, verbunden mit einer Verschiebung hin zu produktiven und biophilen Charakteren. Bei einer gründlicheren Auswertung des Materials tritt als ein spezieller Befund eine merkliche Verringerung im Ausmaß der physischen Misshandlung, die die Kinder zwischen der ersten und der zweiten Erhebung zu erleiden hatten, hervor. Dies weist darauf hin, dass der Prozess der sozio-psychoanalytischen Intervention eine hervorragende Möglichkeit von Gemeinwesenarbeit darstellt. Es scheint gelungen zu sein, selbsttätige Entwicklungsprozesse in Gang zu setzen, die vor allem bei den beteiligten Müttern der betroffenen Familien eine prophylaktische Wirkung zugunsten der geistigen Gesundheit der Kinder hatten, abgesehen davon, dass ihnen auch eigene Möglichkeiten der Partizipation zugänglich wurden.

Riassunto *Un processo di intervento sociopsicoanalitico in un villaggio di minatori messicano*

Questa relazione riferisce sugli effetti avuti da un lavoro sociopsicoanalitico durato quasi 6 anni in un villaggio di minatori messicano, in particolare nella popolazione infantile di una scuola primaria. Dapprima viene descritta nei concetti generali la struttura del processo sociopsicoanalitico, come viene concepito con riferimento ad Erich Fromm da una prospettiva allargata di un'integrazione dell'inconscio non viene solo recuperato il rapporto con impulsi sessuali rimossi, ma viene anche mostrato in quale misura il sistema sociale come tale li rimuove, e in tal modo determina tratti caratteriali che portano alla stabilizzazione del sistema e della sua struttura socioeconomica attraverso la razionalizzazione e la costruzione di ideologie.

La relazione si basa sulla valutazione di un totale di 141 questionari, raccolti dai bambini con un campionamento casuale 3 anni prima e 3 anni dopo l'avviamento del progetto (il primo campione comprendeva 73 questionari, il secondo 68). In una valutazione promossa dal Consiglio Nazionale Messicano per la Scienza e la Tecnologia (CONACYT), venne fatto un confronto sistematico tra i due campioni. Nell'analisi del contenuto delle risposte si prestò particolare attenzione alla formazione dei tratti caratteriali e al giudizio morale; vengono descritti i tratti caratteriali più frequenti e le differenze



tra le due valutazioni. Per quanto riguarda l'immagine di sé dei bambini, risulta un certo miglioramento, collegato con uno spostamento verso caratteri produttivi e biofilii. Con una valutazione più approfondita del materiale, è emerso il dato particolare di una notevole diminuzione della frequenza di maltrattamenti fisici subiti dai bambini tra la prima e la seconda rilevazione. Questo indica che il processo di intervento sociopsicoanalitico costituisce una notevole possibilità di lavoro nella comunità. Sembra che si sia riusciti a mettere in moto dei processi di sviluppo autonomi, che hanno avuto un effetto preventivo nei confronti del benessere psichico dei bambini, soprattutto agendo sulle madri che facevano parte delle famiglie interessate, a prescindere dal fatto che venivano rese loro accessibili anche proprie possibilità di partecipazione.

Sumario: El proceso de intervención sociopsicoanalítica en una comunidad minera

Se revisan los efectos que sobre la población infantil de una escuela primaria, ha tenido el trabajo sociopsicoanalítico en una comunidad minera mexicana, a cinco años y medio de estar funcionando. Se describe, en términos generales, la estructura del „proceso sociopsicoanalítico“ derivado de las planteamientos de Fromm - en el sentido de buscar la ampliación de la conciencia, y de recuperar desde esa perspectiva no solo lo referente a impulsos sexuales reprimidos, sino todo aquello que el sistema social como tal oculta de la vista e incorpora como rasgos de carácter que funcionan estabilizando al sistema y su estructura socioeconómica, y evitando la clara conciencia acerca de los motivos por los que se adoptan y realizan las decisiones cotidianas, racionalizándolas y dando lugar a la ideología. Se compararon sistemáticamente - en una evaluación propiciada por el Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología de país - las respuestas de los niños - seleccionadas al azar - a cuestionarios interpretativos tomados antes y después de tres años de iniciado el proyecto: 141 cuestionarios, 73 de la primera aplicación y 68 de la segunda. Se realizó un análisis de contenido de las respuestas, resaltando los rasgos de carácter en formación y el razonamiento moral. Se describen las rasgos más frecuentes, y las diferencias encontradas entre las dos aplicaciones. Apuntan una marcada mejoría en cuanto a la propia autoimagen de los niños y a orientar sus rasgos de carácter hacia la productividad y la biofilia. Se destaca muy especialmente como un hallazgo de la revisión exhaustiva del material, el haber encontrado una disminución muy marcada en el maltrato físico que padecen los niños entre una y otra aplicaciones. Se señala al proceso de intervención sociopsicoanalítica como una muy buena alternativa de intervención comunitaria en tanto que parece haber podido propiciar procesos de desarrollo autogestiva que, a su vez, tuvieron un efecto profiláctico en las madres de familia involucradas y amén de haberles hecho accesibles sus propias opciones de participación, han redundado en beneficio de la salud mental de los niños.