



AN OVERVIEW OF THE MEXICAN PROJECT OF SOCIOPSYCHOANALYTICAL PARTICIPATIVE RESEARCH IN A MINING COMMUNITY.¹

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I think that the desire to open a meaningful dialogue between our two groups, which is the main reason for this meeting, would require a chance to transmit to our German companions, from an industrialized First World country, what it means to live –to be a person– in a Latin American country of the Third World, one of those countries usually called underdeveloped or sometimes developing, and to be precise, plunged into an economic crisis with indisputable social effects, which does not seem to hold much hope for prompt recovery, not even seen from the perspectives of the most optimistic arguments sustained in official measures offered to solve it.

It means, for a researcher in the social sciences, realizing day after day how little a capitalist system interests itself in people themselves, in the human being – as such, not profitable, and how hard it tries to reach

¹Sociopschoanalytic Seminar of the Mexican Institute of Psychoanalysis, presented at the meeting with the social study group of th International Erich Fromm Society from october 16 to 20, 1992. IMFAC Mexico D.F.



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"industrialization", the levels of competitiveness and financial solvency which will assure the renewal of loans indispensable for its immediate survival, for its participation in the concert of the western economic system. Perhaps because we are immersed in a Third World country, which has never seemed to be a great beneficiary of this system, even in its best times, as have the First World countries, maybe for that reason, we have a greater chance to notice that the western world's economic approach to the crisis does not rime with Schumacher's proposals in his work when titling it "Small is Beautiful, a Study of Economics as if People Mattered".

Neither does it rime with the vision of humanist psychoanalysis, socially and dialectically revised, so profoundly and carefully exposed by Fromm, when he assumes that it is not only the sexual impulses that we repress or drive away from our consciousness, but also, and in a fundamental way, the background motives (of economic infrastructure) by which we move within our specific social systems, the central and unconscious role which the functioning of formal established institutions plays in the modulation and channeling of our passions, desires, acts and criteria, of our social character. To work in social research is, from this perspective, to create science and consciousness, to generate knowledge of the deep roots of



phenomena, beyond ideologically justified and "scientifically" proved appearances. It is to discover the social unconscious –the reproductive demands of the dominant system with its justifying mechanisms– and to put it at the service of the people themselves, with their real, daily experiencies, in order to seek the transformation of reality, in order to produce changes by learning from experience and by bringing about benefits for and by people themselves, as if they really mattered.

THE SOCIOPSYCHOANALYTIC PROCESS. WHERE WE STARTED AND HOW IT DEVELOPED.

Interviews of mining village children –grounded in the thoeretical–methodological aims of studying social character development and moral reasoning in different social groupsⁱ– evidenced, besides the lacks that characterize them, 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 findings. Doing this led to work with the parents of the children and the rest of the teachers in the school. From



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these original contacts emerged the "sociopschoanalytic experience"² as such, one which has included for more than five years, six to eight hour monthly sunday visits of the researchers, 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. We call it "the sociopschoanalytic experience" because it emerged as a coherent consequence of the psychoanalytic perspective put forward by Erich Fromm³ in the sense both, that it aims at making people concious about those daily facts of life which are not conciously recognized –among them not only sexual but also disguised socioeconomic, social or cultural motives– and also 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.

The monthly attendance of the team of mental health professionals thus developed group dynamics with the parents of the children⁴, workshops with the school teachers⁵, creative workshops with the children themselves⁶ (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.⁷

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 through 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 them, 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 them. Initially men and women met together, afterwards in sex apart sessions in which the men did not persist and finally so as to justify their attendance to their husbands, who thought of their talking with us as unfruitful, working at the same time, doing something with



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their hands, and so developing a combination of the psychological interchange about their difficulties and different alternatives with their children (in which Guinot's⁶ orientations and suggestions have proved to have an impressive value in facilitating an effective emotional communication and sensitivity⁷) 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 in some of the cases, hearing aids in some others or even the possibility of getting to the city for a medical consultation).

Another interesting example of redesign of the psychological activities is the mothers' developing of daily school stimulation sessions with the complete groups of children included in the motor-sensory-perceptual program designed for the children with learning difficulties by one of the psychologists of our group to reinforce the one that we, as experts were having once a month. They did this between each of our visits. These "trained" mothers to accomplish these activities, emphasized to us –and 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 themselves 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 Mexico City which offered to check them with extremely reasonable fees for their possibilities and to facilitate access to glases, 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 those in need have had accepting the facts and then, when conscious of them, coping with the real difficulties to gain access to a reasonable solution (We think 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



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facts, it can become very painful confronting them repeatedly and it certainly feels better not to know about it, repressing it, rationalizing it, making it unconscious, but loosing 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 through it really important new possibilities which seemed very far from realistic before.

Similar in its proceedings has been the development of the program for auditive and language difficulties¹⁰ among the children which has been basically implemented by the trained parents who started by cheking the complete groups of the children in the school, and then developed by themselves with the youngsters the specific routines of the treatement designed by a language and auditive therapist, who cheks and supervises them through 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 activities required¹¹.

The scheme that has been developing in the Mexican sociopsyoanalytic project in the mining community was put together while under way, in a kind of social replication of the model maintained in the individual clinical practice of psychoanalysis –the researchers taking the role of the therapist and the people of the community involved, that of



the person being analyzed. This has been leading us to discover in the dialogue between the two an understanding of the unconscious motivations from which their experiences actually originate, to apply it to the dynamic of their life processes and so vitalize the search for alternatives, transformation and chances for growth. This functioning as the therapeutic shared fundamental principle.

Behind this working plan, there is evidently implied a nonpositivistic concept of what science is, a recognition that investigation, observation and analysis of social phenomena are always done from one's own perspective, which either implicitly or explicitly modulates what is observed, what is understood and what is emphasized in any study. We consider it essentially a participatory observation, assuming it as a priority in our scientific activity –very much in keeping with the most important contributions offered by psychoanalysis ¹²to the Social sciences through the concepts of transference and countertransference. Consequently, this diminishes the emphasis on methodological perfection in handling the data after they have been collected and specifying in a very central way the importance of the interaction between investigator and investigated, the context in which the information is collected and granted, the depth that the understanding generated may reach, depending on the use to be made of it.



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This use may be either in a traditional context to achieve a perfectly structured academic scheme concerning the "object" of study, or, in the dynamic-participatory context, trying to establish a dialogue between subjects who carry it on together and participate actively together in a search, critique and countercurrent, while it tries to become aware of what reproduces the power system and justifies it, while it attempts to get free of the illusions that adorn its chains and listen to and heed particularly the voice of the weak, to perceive plainly and simply how naked the emperor is, how dazzle of his fantastic tinsels denigrates us all, although it may take us time to do so and we may give this knowledge no other use but that of favoring an increase of awareness.

FORMAL AND WELL RECOGNIZED INSTITUTIONS VERSUS DAILY PERSONAL AND INFORMAL FACTS OF LIFE WITH THEIR POPULAR DEFENSIVE WISDOM.

In this case, perhaps not so incidentally, our project was initially conducted in a primary school. We approached, as said before, a group of children in a mining town, at some distance from Mexico City. This means (as it did in the Morelos Study¹³ of Fromm and Maccoby) a place where the impact of "modernity" is not received either as soon or as directly as in the large cities, especially in the



repercussions that might imply concomitant "advantages" in the affluence of material resources. Yet, it is in the manifestation of its vices and deficiencies and in the destruction by the massive communications media of the more traditional ways of life that, in towns like this one, some distance away, the repercussions occur a little later and are combined, though clandestinely, with informal resisting strategies.

After opening the doors to us and allowing the children to be studied, the school authorities asked us if we could at the same time offer some of our professional knowledge to study, diagnose and orient a strategy to be followed with a group of children who were not succeeding in absorbing the necessary minimum learning and had failed over and over the same school grade level. Official actions to contend with this type of problems usually solve them in the official manner; that is, on paper and statistics, but not in the peculiarly human facts with their everyday dynamics. It was evident to us from the time we arrived that the children we were asked to study were suffering from very important visual deficiencies, which had not been detected previously.

This led some time later to the organization of campaigns to check the visual acuity of all the students of the school. These were carried on by the mothers and later on



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in other schools of the town. For those found to be deficient visually, different solutions have been found through group and individual action.

This first incident which we encountered was, it seems to us, the common manifestation of rather generalized practice¹⁴, and not only in educational institutions, but commonly in all systems which officially justify their exercise, values and ideology with the assumption that they are at the service of everyone, while in practice, they are only able to serve the few, then keeping out of official or formal recognition the impossibility of contending effectively with the real problems of the whole population. Expressed in another way, they avoid revealing and recognizing how incompetent galloping capitalism has thus far shown itself to be in attending the rights of the poor, both in the more "developed" countries and in the consequences which their systems have over those who sometimes speak through human rights commissions, international organizations and official entities, which shatter us with their extremes of violence and cruelty, when they are faced with political dissention. But these consequences are not so clear in the case of the most common majority dissent, which is the economic one and is flagrantly incompatible with the real exercise of individual guarantees. In this case, the teachers "fill



out" the bureaucratic requirements established on paper and "report" officially about numbers which are supposed to refer to what they do and how they are supposed to do it, in accordance with the programs established and approved by law and which must be covered in the respective statistics. These reports always leave out of sight what is most important, vital and human, that is, the real problems the teachers and children face and the ways in which they in fact solve them. Clear, therefore, is the sharp division between what is consciously seen and counted legally, and what it experienced in reality in the school. It is a question of daily, living practice, divorced from the requirements of the recognized official system, which excludes them, and is satisfied by word in reports in each and every one of its elements -all of which occupies many hours of work by teachers and pupils in order to disguise and/or legitimize their activity. This in turn allows them to continue functioning informally without even recognizing it themselves, or properly realizing what the every day facts are, what they are really doing, what both parties require, one as much as the other. The children "learn" systematically to repeat what their teachers tell and teach them officially, in order to pass examinations and not be held back in the school course, which to their parents means, moreover, a great effort in money and time. The



greater part of this "learning" is not applied to or openly contrasted with everyday living and if it happens to connect in some exceptional way in the classroom with their experiences, requirements, etc., it is not presented as a lesson taught. What the lessons as such do establish, almost naturally, is to learn to reproduce what the lesson, the book or the teacher says and/or guess, manage to please authority, so as to be a child graded as obedient and well behaved by the teacher, who in his turn is graded as good, capable, because he or she succeeds in keeping the children quiet and allowing them to progress, insofar as they are able to repeat what is supposedly already made and agreed to as what "has to be". When teachers in reality do spontaneously talk with the children, what the latter learn in school from their interactions and games with other children, from their personal observations and how they see their teachers and adults in general act and live. These undoubtedly vital riches are looked upon as surreptitious, incidental or extracurricular (as Illich¹⁵ notes in his criticism of schooling). Following the psychoanalytic scheme, our intervention in the community as researchers has been contending with precisely this type of assumptions and has backed de-alination, active participation, civil, individual or in group, without depending on official institutions which supposedly or in statistics solve



problems for them, but in reality conceal them as best they can or leave them alone with their problems. We pay special attention to their displays of anxiety, their spontaneous searching to give them support by recognizing and giving space to the existence of other experiences, other options, with an inverse dynamism, the one which confronts the problems presented by their children, their everyday intra-family relationships with their solutions and special limitations, without denying the fact that they have no real place within the official system as such, and participating informally and on a voluntary basis, without getting circumscribed either themselves or us by the routine of any official solutions, and trying to make conscious, to recognize the presence of these phenomena in their lives and everyone's own possible and real alternatives for solution.

The expression of one of the women of the community, who originally joined the project to help her son with language problems and who, some time later, coordinated an important campaign for better vision in another school, summarizes her experience by saying "It has been like ceasing to be asleep in a way, shut in and alone in my house with my problems, to see others have them, too, but... above all, to realize that I can do something myself to solve them and even help others". On that occasion, for the first time, she was



attending IMPAC (Mexican Institute of Psychoanalysis) our Participatory Research Meeting. In this way, she synthesized what for us may be compared to the experience which one seeks to gain in a psychoanalytical treatment, face to face with alienation, even though our presence in the community is only once a month, the work is carried on neither individually nor in consulting room. Successes like that just mentioned are rare, one here and one there, yet considerably more than what one might expect, as will surely be understood after considering some of the vivential anecdotes we will describe below. Very palpable have been, on the other hand, the achievements with which the children in general and these are confirmed in the more methodological oriented analysis of the interviews we have carried out to evaluate the effects on them.

To be social scientists in a third world country, oriented by Fromm's ideas of humanistic psychoanalysis and to participate in this experience with them, has permitted us to see daily, and in all its dimensions, that our ways of life – just vulgar imitations of those styled in the First World but an undeniable reflection of the defects of the western economic system – do not fulfill – as Robert N. Bellah¹⁶ notes – either the most legitimate and orthodoxly liberal aspirations of respect and protection of individual freedom in relation to the state (as foreseen by John



locke), or in relation to exploitation (as Marx predicted). All people –and not just the poorest of the earth (who are, it is true, in a country like ours, those who prove to be harder to ignore), all without exception must, in this system, be attentive to the "totalitarianism" of the laws of the market, defending the right "to be left alone", when faced with the brutality of power and money, and not assuring anybody of a real chance to exercise another right which might be fundamental for humanbeings: the right to participate democratically in the community, in the important decisions that affect us all, to act responsibly with others, to recognize, strengthen and profit from the advantages offered by institutions which we ourselves create ad hoc, those that each of us model with the experience of every day and which in turn are constantly modeling us, educating us and inserting us into social interaction.

I will finish by telling three anecdotes about the mining community because I think that can transmit a kind of experiential frame of reference, hoping it can in this way offer a more emotional and not intellectualized comprehension of the people involved in it.

I. A PECULIAR CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE.



One of the teachers of the community tells us her oneiric experience concerning one of the children who, from the time we began working in the community attracted our attention, because of his hiperactivity and problems with learning:

"I dreamed about Peter, that he was giving me a lot of rubber bands; he said he had been assigned the task of taking them away from the other children, and he was giving them to me. I told him not to do it and ask him why. He said it was so I could shoot things at the children."

When we ask her what comes to her mind in relation to this dream she adds:

"It was last week. He is a very restless child. He likes to sit with me. He leaves things on my desk. He sits wherever he likes, not in his place. I don't pressure him. He stands up at mid morning -and not only he but two other children also)she mentions the names of other two children, who are also known to us for being difficult to manage in group situation). He talks and gets me angry. If I speak to him, he pays me no attention. If I reprimand him, even less. Then we become friends again. When he leaves the class, he says he's going to see his dad (who is the principal of the school) and I tell him not to."

"-Does anything occur to you in connection with the rubber bands?"

"-Just that Peter had them in his hand and was giving them



to me in the dream... When I was a little girl, I used to like very much to play with tops, yoyos and shoot at others with the rubber bands, misbehaving like that... In my parents store, I used to shoot at someone with a rubber band and hide immediatly. In the season when there are oranges, they take to shooting pieces of orange peel with rubber bands. My daughter (who we know is 17 years old) and I still do it for fun."

She expresses in her dream the problems she has exercising authority (which is not rare in general among persons with a receptive orientation). She seems to wish to take pupils' place and loves to tell about her play experiences. And yet, it is not just any child, but specifically one with problems, very serious developmental problems. Many of the teachers manifest, in one way or another, their identification with children. They take their places in plays, which they present for holidays. They enjoy jokes, legends and poems, in which the central characters are children and tell endlessly about experiences about difficulties which derive from being teachers and adults, which not rarely come very close to being infantile and childish. The population per se has a high degree of mother fixation with its traits of dependence. But in this case, it is a question precisely of pupils with serious learning problems, those who are not only hard to manage but almost



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impossible to integrate into group work, to the extent the they hinder the general performance.

She, as the teacher, does not appear either desperate or specially authoritarian in her oneiric teaching performance, but she does in the role of the rebellious opponent with whom she chooses to identify. Shooting with a rubber band and hiding is the game of provoking, opposing and freeing from authority. Those who do not succeed in maintaining the pace of the organized contexts, in formal structures, -who have such severe learning problems- act as if they are participating, while, in fact, they devote themselves to obstructing, maybe as if thjey wanted to turnthings around, so as to ajust them to their specific conditions.

We thought that this teacher's vitality, as we sae it in her evident defense of her pupils, which we witnessed personally more than once, would make her an especially productive collaborator in the project. However, she only attended to it as long as it was a question of activities organized by "her" school. Later, when a wider and less formal group was formed, she has limited herself to inviting pupils to the activities and tooffer her assistance verbally. She has done so, on very few ocassions, and years afterward, more than anything in order to ask for orientation and to unburden herself of her



suffering due to acts on sociopathy committed on several occasions by the oldest of her sons.

II. THE CHILDREN'S THEATER GROUP CONFRONTS A PROBLEM OF INTERNAL ORGANIZATION AND STAGES A LEGEND.

A group of children of the community approaches Carlos (one of the members of the team, who generally acts as a support for the theater teacher and takes his place when he is absent), and request his help to find a solution for an internal problem. We are at the time when the children themselves are preparing a little play for the theater, between one and another of our monthly visits, and are practicing it on their own in order to have it ready to present to the audience at the end of the month's work.

One of the little girls has indicated that she no longer wants to participate. She is asked why. She states that she does not like to do it any more, because everything that is done in the group is decided by the girl who acts as leader. Both the latter and the rest of the group say that the dissatisfied girl does not bring forward any ideas never proposes any other alternatives. After a brief discussion of the pros and cons, they come to the conclusion that all of them should take turns at deciding who is to take charge of what is to be done in the monthly project. It was very especially stipulated that, if the



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girl whose turn it is to make decisions so desires, she may consult the leader and stage whatever the latter invents so easily.

The next month, we find a play decided upon by the girl who claimed she was dissatisfied, whose name appears in capital letters on the classroom blackboard. The plot, proudly showing off a kind of black humor, refers to a tragic story, like most of those told in the community:

After having tried and failed for three successive years to get the father of a mining family a television set which he had been wanting, his happy children arrive with the surprise for him as a father's day gift. He receives them with another surprise, the apparently natural news that he has become blind.

It was this girl's mother, and not the leader of the girls, who seems to have offered to her daughter the theme to be developed on the stage and which left us all with questions in our mind. The girls were able to reach an agreement, exercise the rights of all without losing one important element of the group, with a message which discourages at the same time perseverance and the insistence on and the search for desired glamorous satisfiers, frustrating the passive consumerism of the great communications media with its in fact unattainable dreams, at the cost of mutilation, of an extremely vital loss, expressed frivolously, with the indifference of desperation, of the dead-end street of this adult world,



which offers no other outcomes than resignation transformed into renunciation.

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III. ONE OF THE ARTISANS OF THE GROUP OF MOTHERS APPARENTLY DECIDES TO WITHDRAW.

The women learn to make high quality toys. a toy store in Mexico City starts selling them and sends the mothers orders which they barely succeed in filling. The group is formed fundamentally by women whose economic situation is the most precarious and those who do it for the pleasure they derive from it, although the latter do not live in easy circumstances either. It is not until the group begins to produce something economically that the importance of these differences becomes evident for us. It is the treasurer (appointed from among themselves to buy the material and distribute it), belonging to this second subgroup, who makes the toys best. In second place is one of the most needy economically. Everything would make one think that the latter (like the rest of her sub-group) would be benefited by being able to do work in the group and receive additional income, be it ever so small, which was the original motivation for doing it. We see that at one time it even allowed her to leave a job as a maid,



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which she had taken during one of her husband's alcoholic crises. There began to be a series of conflicts between the two women, after several occasions when it appeared as a struggle between the two sub-groups. As the lack of infrastructure –she has no sewing machine– seemed to be limiting the poorer of the two, we offer to help by obtaining a machine for her on loan, so that she could do her work at home, learn to operate the machine and latter get one of her own if she desires it in the future. She does not accept. She thinks that would "cause her more problems" in the group, that it would provoke more envy. She and the treasurer quarrel again and again with any pretext whatever. The latter, when they are brought face to face in the group apologizes publicly for her part –acts of evident rivalry– while the former continues insistently complaining about the same annoyances, the same deeds for which the treasurer has already accepted guilt and, ignoring the apology, does not cease to bring them up in front of the entire group every time they meet. She finally leaves the group, but not before presenting herself at the homes of some of the group members to continue with the complaints and demands by now well-known to all.

Her questionnaire showed us from the begining clear signs of exploitative passivity and great resentment, while the treasurer's showed a not at all submissive drive to improve



and get ahead, quite untraditional. We regret that the conflict between them could not be settled, as was done in the case of the girls, and we were awaiting her return to the project thinking it would very probably not occur. The resistance, resentment and fear of attempting other options with hope for a different outcome would very probably be stronger than the real perhaps perceived as illusory possibility of accepting, becoming enthusiastic, participating actively and trying to change. She after all does come back and works with the group more steadily.

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