

## SOCIOPSYCHOANALYTIC EXPERIENCES IN PARTICIPATIVE-ACTION

### COMMUNITY PROJECTS: ON FACING SOCIAL CHARACTER

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As a professional, living in a large city means a way of life more or less circumscribed to the clock, to the university and the academy. Capitalism exalts individuation and independence (to some extent the paternal) and pathologizes fusion, dependence and communality (to some extent the maternal). Knowledge is produced out of theory, which comes from above, with a strong influence from the great masters of knowledge, the "Maitre", as Turkle pointed out in her research on psychoanalytic politics(1), and as psychoanalysts well know. The intention is to link theory with practice, clinical work with research to return to the theories, without the opportunity of taking into account the collective, community and popular knowledge (an interdisciplinarity point of view)(2) Research can be conducted along the lines of participatory research-action, in an attempt to involve oneself not only in self-reflection but in social reflection.

#### The bridge

Erich Fromm's central hypothesis, as the Seminar of Sociopsicoanálisis A.C.<sup>1</sup> in Mexico has understood it and put it into practice, is that the concept and the role of social character gives psychoanalysts a chance to contribute to understanding society, to social analysis. This in turn contributes to an understanding of the social context and its influence on the formation of the unconscious.

It is possible and necessary to express concern for other human beings, beyond the borders of the psychoanalytic framework, faced with the de-humanizing conditions that life in modern society inevitably creates, by ignoring the central value of the human factor.

For Fromm himself, social character and the social unconscious are precisely the bridge between the economic base and Marx's ideological superstructure. Community and social experience, set in the framework of social character theory and with the support of clinical psychoanalysis, is an alternative for laying a bridge between individual analysis and analysis of society. This is how J. Boltvinik (3), a political economist at University of México puts it in his analysis of Fromm ("El Psicoanálisis Social de E. Fromm", 1987). For this author, the concept of social character lays an appropriate bridge between microanalysis and macroanalysis:

Microanalysis → Social Character → Macroanalysis

With the advance of modernity, our appreciation of the society that surrounds us has diminished, particularly if we do not like it, or it is painful. In the Seminar of Sociopsicoanálisis, we believe that as psychoanalysts, we can contribute outside our offices, in a genuine concern for others, other human beings in normal population groups, but which form part of what Fromm called the pathology of normality.

Close-up meetings with groups where social and economic differences are as pronounced as they are in Mexico, where social disparities are striking, enriches researchers, who also construct themselves as subjects, because of unconscious levels of mutual influence between social groups and inter-subjectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> The Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis members are: Salvador Millán, Sonia Gojman, Guadalupe Rosete, Patricia Gonzalez, Ana Maria Barroso, Carlos Sierra, Cristina Duarte, Clotilde Juárez, Ana Carolina Fontes, Angélica Oviedo, Angélica Cortés, Silvia Rosas, Estela Palma, Esmeralda Arriaga, Juan José Bustamante, Mauricio Cortina, Angélica Rodarte, Guadalupe Sánchez



Since there is a growing spirit of communication across schools and generations, I would like to speak on behalf of my Seminar colleagues and share the history of our social experiences. These experiences have developed in various parallel processes:

- Social Character Studies or Participatory-research.
- Community Projects or Investigative participation.
- Training psychotherapists with a socio-psychoanalytic orientation.
- Group travels and meetings with other study groups

### **Social Character Studies (Participatory-Research)**

The social history of the Seminar begins with the participation of one of its founder members<sup>2</sup> in an international study of peasant village women, their life changes and fertility(6). At the end of the 1970s in Mexico, women with 12 or more pregnancies were still found. The study continued in research on character traits in formation and dreams of children of various and contrasting social spheres: children from urban upper classes, children from the working class in a suburban zone, and children from a rural community. The broadest socio-psychoanalytical experience began in 1985, in a mining community.

Participatory research into social character is based on the application of a socio-psychoanalytic methodology proposed by Erich Fromm and the accompanying use of an Interpretative Questionnaire. The discussion of results is obtained through qualitative and quantitative analysis of the interview responses.

Returning the results to the studied group itself, in the style developed by this Seminar, demonstrates that the process is not unilateral and asymmetrical, but rather one of reciprocal sharing of knowledge, in the context of a symmetrical inter-relationship, as outlined by Sánchez, M. E., Almeida, E. (11) and Moscovici, S. in their proposed genetic model (7). This practice generates the participation and action of both the team and the studied group, in activities aimed at developing the group's productive traits through workshops<sup>3</sup>. In these, the link has been: socio-psychoanalytic understanding of the social context, the degree of development and artistic and cultural activities for the possibility of emotional development. This was the case with the mining community which we visited once a month on Sunday, working with them approximately for 6 hours during nine consecutive years.

During those years, we studied social character traits in formation among the children of miners, whose fathers spent most of their time underground in the mine to earn a living. These children not only studied and helped with the housework and family chores, but also took care of animals and younger siblings and worked outside the home to increase the family's income(8) We studied teachers, women and community leaders as well.

More recently, The Seminar has begun a unique research project that combines two frames of reference that will shortly be subjected to comparative analysis in some of their basic postulates: mother-baby dyads in Mexican peasant communities, where patterns of attachment are being studied using the Mary Ainsworth Strange Situation, adult attachment using AAI with the mothers, and social character features.

Outside of the rural environment, in the city, we have studied the social character of small groups of pediatricians, nurses, young adolescents literacy campaign workers and artists working with street children.

<sup>2</sup> Sonia Gojman and Salvador Millán founder members, in 1984.

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the workshops see *El Carácter Social, su Estudio, un Intercambio de Experiencias*, Cuadernos IV, Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis 1993, Instituto Mexicano de Psicoanálisis A.C. México, 1993.



### Community Projects: Investigative participation

We arrive on the ground of social experience by the path of psychoanalysis, extending our interest in the knowledge of oneself to encompass the knowledge of concrete societies, at a time when Mexico's modern economic and social crisis were beginning. When the 1985 earthquake destroyed much of downtown Mexico City, giving birth to a grass-roots movement to rebuild and assist earthquake victims, there was virtually no social class that did not participate. **Some members of the Seminar also contributed in collecting and distributing food and medicine, and so in our country we had a deep experience of concern for other human beings in critical conditions.**

The Seminar of Sociopsychanalysis, with the members that had already begun to study the mining community, trained some mothers to measure the eyesight and hearing of children with low scholastic performance, and a campaign was organized to obtain glasses for those that needed them. This is how what we call "social practice" began.

The economic crises intensified in several periods, such as in 1988-89 with the first major stock-market crash that affected a country that did even fully understand what a stock exchange was. In 1994-95, the change of presidential administration was accompanied by a dizzying devaluation of the peso and an alarming rise in unemployment. The Seminar then facilitated a network for the unemployed, created and participated in a support group where members could express their anxiety over unemployment and their lack of economic resources. It also gave the group of unemployed and employed members an awareness of an unforeseen advantage in their situation: the free time to develop creative talents and do what they had always wanted to do but had not had the opportunity.

The Seminar has also made several presentations of videos on the importance of attachment, directed at health care professionals, parents, and schoolteachers, which are shown in dialogue and discussion groups. For three years, we participated in Children's Book Fair, giving talks on the importance of emotional development for children, reading of fairy tales in childhood, the role of pets and a psychoanalytic approach to the analysis of children's stories by Mexican writers which allowed us to have an interesting interchange with the general public.

A variation on this type of participation is what I will call field visits. It is in the cities where the class society is most present; there is not much to lose in crossing the city borders, and there is much to gain. Attending religious festivals and community events, witnessing and hearing and being shown **from inside** allows us to expand our vision and to become acquainted with the different images of a single reality.

Some of the visits we have conducted, along with students in psychoanalytic training with a social orientation, have included: religious festivals on the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe (December 12) in a Nahuatl indian community in San Miguel, the festival of the village's patron saint, and a traditional Nahuatl wedding. On the numerous occasions we have visited this community, we have also had the opportunity to participate in an Oral Tradition Recovery workshop, where we heard nahuatl legends translated into Spanish, and poetry by village residents. We were invited to understand the functions of its health clinic, its rural high school, and in return for their hospitality we presented them some of the videos on attachment and the importance of the mother-child relationship, after which we were able to establish a dialogue on their impressions.

Seminar members are interested in an in-depth understanding of the meaning of some important Mexican traditions, like the Day of the Dead festivities. For three years in a row, we have conducted visits to rural communities with particularly original Day of the Dead celebrations, which have remained essentially unchanged over 500 years or more. Anthropologists (Corona, E. personal communication) have traced the origins of these traditions, to as far back as 2000 A.D., long before contact with the Spaniards. Around these visits, we organized reading and discussions sessions on subjects like death, myth, prehispanic culture and symbols.

We also visited a rural community in the state of Puebla where young adolescents literacy workers from a Mexico City private highschool worked during the summer teaching inhabitants to write and read (using



Freire's method), in an intensive program where they lived and worked in the daily reality of illiterate adult men and women.

The creation of a Clinical Attention Network, which in addition to serving the community creates a space for psychotherapists in training to engage in clinical practice, extends the range of psychoanalysis to **people with economic disadvantage** that would otherwise not have access to this type of treatment(9). *even though, it involves a tremendous economic and energy resource*

The group's travel to distant cities and countries to hold meetings and share theoretic and practical experience with other groups interested in clinical and social research has been enriching in many respects. The combination of work and enjoyment trips in those places has helped us to learn about other cultures and their history from within, identities constructed in different contexts: M. Maccoby et. al., R. Duckles, and B. Lenkerd in the U.S., R. Funk, P. Taucher, E. Ubilla et. al. in Germany (may, 1994) with their work: A Comparative Study of the Social Character of Teachers in Eastern and Western Germany(10) Centro Psicoanalítico de Madrid (october, 1991) and a group from Sweden and Finland during the Mexico-Finnish Seminar in Cuernavaca (1999). This last encounter brought two groups together from the most dramatically different geographies, climates, and lifestyles, revealing both the fundamental differences and commonalities in our cultural experience.

### The experience in San Miguel

Another non-sociopsychanalytical participatory research team with which we have kept up a constant interchange of ideas and visits is the group PRADE, founded by Sánchez M.E. y Almeida, E. made up of Mexico City social scientists, which since 1973 has been living and working within a specific community in order to began what they call a "life-research" project.

Their work is being conducted in a small Nahuatl community located in the mountain range known as the Sierra Norte in Puebla. Its Nahuatl peasant residents survive by producing corn for their own consumption and working for coffee growers. Their belief system is based on a syncretic blend of prehispanic indian and Christian influences. They still wear indian costumes and their native language is Nahuatl, although some bilingual residents also speak Spanish. From our contact with PRADE and the community of San Miguel, we have been able to witness a process of participatory research, a common community project between two groups: the team (mestizos) and the village (indians) from very different parts of the country (the city and the mountains), which was articulated amid pronounced contrasts that have existed throughout history, to fight poverty.

The San Miguel group formulated its observations epistemologically as they, in their own words(11) "learned by transforming", establishing a symmetrical human relationship that has resulted in a "dynamic action that set in motion a people that lived on the defensive."(12)

The most important contributions of the experience of these two groups for us as clinicians have been: the capacity to self-generate solutions, with bottom-up knowledge. In clinical work, we say that this is knowledge from one to the other, and not from the therapist, from true-self, which remains out of communication. Learning from experience by transforming reality to produce knowledge, the interaction between the local, the regional, the national and, as we will see later on, the international, life-research through self-reflection and group-reflections within PRADE, are some of the interesting concepts we have been in touch with.

The work in San Miguel in the 70s began to take shape through a concept of "team-village synergy,"(11) which Yvon Le Bot (13) a french sociologist has recently called the new social actors. These social actors do not belong to a single social class, nor are they articulated solely as community movements; they are movements that articulate different sectors of the population in civil social networks, non-government organizations.

Movements in the network, with migratory flows and trilingual communication, function as modern "horizontal" communications media, through letters in newspapers, radio programs, videos and the





Internet(14). Le Bot says that “today’s social movement of Latin American indian people is one of the most innovative, creative, and modern of recent decades.”(15) He explains that this is a new cultural expression, different from the classic social transformation movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and which, paradoxically, is more in keeping with the new post-industrial context of globalization, because it is indifferent to borders, inclusive of various ethnic groups and communities and sectors of the non-indian population, as Mexican Oaxacan Miztecas, Tzotziles and Tojolabales from Chiapas, Europeans, South Americans and North Americans.

These are not community movements in the strictest sense, because rarely is the entire community involved (as we discovered through our experiences in the mining community). There are rather some sectors that show interesting character traits, such as a refusal to be walled in by the community, they are less custom-bound or traditional, and seek out new orientations for social relations and culture from the standpoint of civil society, rather than the State. Le Bot explains: “the new social actors mobilized to participate in the pursuit of change are modern, integrationists, not separatists. What they want is to be different but equal. In other words, we are in the process of building modernity, in the nation, and in globalization: something that articulates modernity and identity”(16) ) This seems to be the new shape of democracy, with the social character traits required for change amid globalization. It coincides with the idea of the new minorities: active, heterogeneous, and innovative promoters of social change, as studied by Moscovici, S. (7).

The material, social, economic and multicultural (17) reality has been an important component of our understanding and being sensible to its influences in constructing the intra-psychic reality, the unconscious, the emotional, the development of character orientation, the mode of relating and the life experiences of those involved.

Researchers, students and members of the Seminar that participate in socio-psychoanalytical experiences start out by taking the interpretative questionnaire interview, before beginning to use it as a methodological instrument when they join some research project. Beginning the experience as a subject to be understood oneself, to be placed in a context of self-reflection and in the place of those who will later be one’s subject of study, confronts us with our own level of social consciousness, our social unconscious, our personal mode of relating with the social world, our attitude towards work and our character orientation. This makes it easier for researchers to gain a sensitivity of the instrument in question, of what the other might be feeling. The interviewer glimpses all this in reality through a social window.

on what he could see and not see in himself.

If psychoanalysis is the science of self-reflection—as Anzieu states—then, the author would say, “theories embody the personalities of their theorists; elements of character etch themselves in the theory, leaving traces both of strengths and limitations”(18). Then, “the construction of theory is through a social process, theorists with different social character structures must collaborate in the edifice of knowledge”(19). For my part, I do not have a passion for facts and figures in and of themselves. I see them rather in terms of their importance for establishing a shared knowledge that promotes creativity in groups.

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