



THE WOMEN'S WORKSHOP. ALTERNATIVES. ENCOUNTERS AND
CONTRASTS.

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As apart of the sociopschoanalytic research project in the mining community, we carried out a refunding of the results yielded by the interpretative questionnaires, which had been applied to the children of the town. As a result of this and the state of hopelessness prevailing among them, the idea arose of forming a "social school", as an attempt to modify this situation. Then, as one of the integral part of this project, a workshop group for interested women and mothers was generated.

This line of work has attempted to fill two principal needs. First, to offer to the mothers a time dedicated to them for reflection and the stimulation of creativity. The second need was to take, as a member of the Seminary of Sociopschoanalysis, a position, and make a commitment in the face of social conditions of extreme poverty and deprivation of all types prevailing in this community, as in so many other small towns in our country.

The guiding idea in this approach, as in the rest of the interventions by the team, has been to create awareness



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of how, those who are immersed in a given social or personal situation, participate in preserving it's continuity over time, even when the prevailing conditions are very unfavorable for those involved.

In this women's workshop, a first step in getting the process under way, was the creation of an atmosphere of confidence in a climate of openness and interest, which, as a second step, would favor the establishment of a link. The purpose of the link would be, as in the case of individual psychoanalysis, to open up the possibility of a joint investigation, both in reference to the discovery and understanding of problems and to proposals for possible solutions.

Together with this, there exist some particular characteristics of the functioning of the group which it is necessary to mention.

The working meetings take place as part of the monthly visit and they are held independently of the number who may be present. From the beginning, this has functioned as an open group, so that any women who so desire may attend, since they belong to the town or come from some nearby locality.

During all the work, the participation is spontaneous and we are especially careful that the problems exposed shall not be treated in an individual way, but, on the



contrary, that the dialog be carried on among all those present, each woman having a chance to present her anxieties and points of view.

It is not a question, of course, of a group therapy, since the conflicts related by the women are not regarded or interpreted as symptoms of any pathology. Rather, they are approached as parts or facets of the reality of life. Besides, we point out very especially the social influences for their presence and conservation.

I shall attempt now to give a brief resume of what has transpired until now in the women's workshop.

Once the first contact was established with them, the problem to be solved was to make possible the experience of getting involved in some creative activity, which would at the same time stimulate verbal communication with us and between themselves. Therefore, the carrying on of manual tasks became an essential part of our meeting. This activity has been constantly stimulated and supervised by the teacher, Cristina Duarte.

The work with the hands had two impacts, namely: One, that, in fact, the oral expression about their worries became more fluent and, two, that, from that moment on, the women have had a conscious and clear reason to attend the workshop, that is, they have "something" to come for, which for them is of great importance, given the conditions of



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sexual inequality and submission to the masculine figure which prevail in the community.

Closely tied to this activity, a female psychologist, psychiatrist or psychoanalyst of the group prepares and gives a talk on some topic or worry brought up by the members of the workshop. In this sense, it is interesting to point out that the subjects requested for these talks have been changing, from my point of view, as a consequence of the evolution that has taken place between them and us.

At first, interest was wholly concentrated on obstacles they faced in connection with bringing up their children, so the problem consistently brought out, was, how to make the children "obey" more easily. Consequently, the talks focused on informing and explaining. At that time, we spoke about the characteristics of a child's emotional life and its development, adding some alternatives for handling problems based on care and respect for feelings, as proposed by Ginott, Faber and Mashlisch.

This first phase lasted more than a year and was characterized in their contact with us by an almost obstinate tendency on their part to let us know that nothing we had proposed as a different form of treatment was applicable or useful. From my point of view, this attitude might correspond to an expression of resistance, based on lack of confidence in us because they considered



us strangers.

As the relationship between them and us has become deeper and has stabilized, thanks fundamentally to uninterrupted contact and presence, the focus of interest has turned toward them, so that it has become possible to approach subjects such as the relations of couples, sexuality, the characteristics of the mother-daughter relationship and its continuation in relations between women, as well as the fears and anxieties that afflict women with the greatest intensity.

The implications which this work has had could be divided into two levels. One, which would include actions carried out by them directed toward their community, which we could call social, and another, which would represent attempts at change, focused toward themselves and their family relationships.

On the latter level, perhaps the most important work carried out has been that which corresponds to the communication and conclusions that the women have been able to make inside and outside of the group originating from contacts with us. For example, there has begun to emerge questioning about their roles as mothers, with its necessary counterpart, their role as daughters; criticism of their role as women in relation to authority and conventional values, but principally recognition of their



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resources and the possibility of affecting their lives and modifying a fate that seemed to leave them no choice whatever, in synthesis, the possibility of bringing about a rebirth of hope.

This process has been sustained by the development of the ability to recognize and express their feelings, mainly those seen as unacceptable socially, among them anger, envy, desperation, etc., allowing them to be seen and explored from a different viewpoint, the viewpoint of growth. This has generated, in its turn, a more tolerant and understanding attitude toward the feelings of their children, who require less, a purely authoritarian handling for their upbringing.

As for the actions directed toward the community, there have been several worth mentioning. One has been the visual acuity campaign, carried out by several of the mothers who attended the workshop. This project was implemented when part of the team investigated a number of children reported by their teachers as having learning problems, and detected that the main cause was to be found in their diminished visual capacity. They were able to check all the children attending primary and secondary schools, finding 46 in primary and 60 in secondary with important problems, all of whom have been attended, thanks to the joint action of the mothers and the team.



Another line of derived influence has been the training of some mothers to detect hearing problems, which consequently produce language disorders. These mothers have succeeded, moreover, under the supervision of specialists from our team, in carrying through the rehabilitation of the language disorders.

Under the same social perspective, during the past year, an additional activity was proposed to the workshop. This was the manufacturing and sale of some of the articles made by the women, with the idea of using one part of the income thus obtained to form a common fund and the other part to economically benefit those who made them. The manufacture of various toys was organized. These were placed in a store in this city for sale to the public.

With this, a new element has been introduced into the functioning of the group: The possibility of remunerated work, which has brought out several responses. In the beginning, the new project was welcomed with enthusiasm. However, as it showed signs of really consolidating, some important problems between the women involved began to surface. Some of the sources of conflict, in my judgment, might be related to the competition for recognition and acceptance by authority, that is, by our team. Others might be a question of expression in the process of socialization of character traits. A more serious factor would be the



fact that among the group members exist economic differences, which, seen in the context of extreme deprivation, imply, however small they may be, great differences, because they have to do with unsatisfied primary needs and, therefore, with survival.

Continuing with the idea of the characterological traits involved, I feel that the group may be regarded as a little laboratory permitting the natural expression of these traits. The types most frequently encountered are those corresponding to receptive-submissive and receptive-accumulative characters.

The conflict which has emerged among the women has obliged us who participate in this work to reaffirm our attitude of neutrality, because, if we did not do so, we should run the risk of losing our role of observers and participants and, with it, access to this kind of research and knowledge.

To conclude, the study of the community from this perspective provides the opportunity to understand how social conditions make certain specific impressions on individual character, plus a chance to get beneath the surface in order to observe the dynamism of the forces which operate when a person sacrifices his productive capacities in favor of "adaptation".

The understanding thus obtained has been based on



experience, a situation closely comparable with what occurs in an individual psychoanalytic process, sharing with this, besides, the fact that the learning has been mutual. We reflect together, investigate together and find solutions together.

At present, a small nucleus of regular attenders has formed, in whom it will be necessary to study meticulously the possible consequences their constant attendance with us may have exercised over their character orientation.

The understanding of poverty in our country is the understanding of reality, which, if we try to ignore it, will condemn us to live in the ideology and in alienation.