

## VOICES UNDER ARREST: Political Violence and a Chilean Family\*\*

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*This is a case study of a Chilean family seen before the end of the dictatorship in Chile in 1987. The author was involved in an agency that worked with families and children suffering political repression. This paper is an effort to understand the family story in the context of the nation's history.*

It is my belief that therapeutic processes are affected by sociopolitical conditions and that persons who come to therapy can be oppressed by wider historical conditions, as well as by their own stories about themselves and their relationships, stories that are not just familial, but also societal. As White (1989) points out,

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"We can't think about the therapeutic experience taking place in a vacuum." Certain cultural practices are themselves oppressive. He highlights how people or relationships can be "thingified" and argues that therapists should be prepared to challenge the ways in which dominant ideologies operate on people and subjugate them. The implications of such a conclusion are beyond the scope of what has been traditionally defined as therapeutic activity, even the larger systems conceptualizations such as have developed in the United States. The family does not only reflect cultural/political patterns, but is also a reconstitution of them in real human action. This is relevant since I want to locate systemic family therapy in an historical-cultural reality.

My analysis will not remain solely within the realm of political or psychological explanation, since neither are sufficient to embrace the unique and rich cultural milieu from which political and psychological 'realities' emerge and in which they are embedded, through which they are interpreted and from which future 'realities' emerge.

### The larger framework and the therapist

Chile has been under the rule of a military dictatorship since 1973, when a military coup overthrew the socialist government which had been headed by a President democratically chosen by the Chilean people in 1970. Since 1973, there has been political violence, primarily perpetrated by the government. Many

people have "disappeared", thousands exiled. Torture, imprisonment and other forms of repression have become commonplace. The economic situation has deteriorated, with high rates of acknowledged and unacknowledged unemployment. The economic 'miracle' perceived by outsiders does not reflect the dire levels of impoverishment or the marginality of a majority of the people. Anti-government agencies and social organizations were created in an effort to ameliorate these problems. Human Rights organizations also sprung up during the year the military took over. From the beginning, networks were created powerful enough to sustain an organization of the families whose relatives had disappeared in Latin America.

"... women whose sons or husbands were 'disappeared' were the first to brave the dictatorship's repression after the 1973 coup. These women became Chile's conscience, the ones who spoke out. Grieving relatives and lovers did not see themselves as a women's organization, but effectively they were. And in demanding to know where their men were they showed they could act politically, that they could move the world a little. Paradoxically, Pinochet's ultra-capitalist economic policies also have helped women to liberate themselves. The high unemployment rate and the starvation wages undermined men's traditional role as their family's only breadwinner. In many poor neighbourhoods (shanty towns), hunger drove women to form collective soup kitchens and handicraft workshops. Today 40% of the households in poblaciones are headed by women. Today 36% of Chile's labour force is female, 15%-20% more than before the coup. Women earn less than men, but having a minimal economic independence has allowed them a certain freedom and an incipient awareness of their power. The blows dealt them, a dose of earning power and the experience of fighting back, have produced strong women, specially among the pobladores. But, the typical male-female relationship is still

closer to one between a caring mother and a mischievous son than to one between equals." (*The Guardian*, March 15, 1989)

In Chile, any therapeutic analysis must take into account this dramatically changing political situation. As a result, the therapist becomes also a political analyst; she or he must try to predict possible contextual "futures". The feminist perspective is useful here, when we think about the notion of responsibility and neutrality. "Because the problems and conflicts within the family reflect larger social issues and viewpoints, whatever stance the therapist takes, even the stance of avoiding taking a stance, reflects a political position within the larger system, regardless of the therapist's intentions. Relationships cannot remain neutral, nor therapists apolitical in such a context" (MacKinnon and Miller 1987, 148)

This is vital when a direct link exists between those political processes and the security and welfare of the people being interviewed. The therapist needs to be trusted not only for his or her professional proficiency, but also for his/her political "profile". The family must be sure of the therapist's trustworthiness since he or she could literally threaten their lives or expose them to repressive measures, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Thus, therapeutic alternatives during treatment can become limited by political realities. For instance, from a therapeutic standpoint, there may be issues important to discuss, but which might introduce dangerous information into the family, such as revealing data that it may be dangerous for children to know. Such a highly unpredictable and unsafe political and economic situation makes it very difficult to provide a stable, protected and trustworthy therapeutic context which attempts to operate from a non-violent stance.

From an interpersonal point of view, physical violence can be used to ensure cooperation. Enforced cooperation, however, makes willing cooperation impossible, thereby prohibiting the creation of a shared reality. The "causal

efficacy" of violence is brutalizing. "It propels victims and aggressors into a state of powerlessness in employing their own procedures for knowing and acting." (Harris *et al*, 1984, p.31). Physical violence is a "logical" reaction to an illogical procedure for knowing and acting. If this is true, all members of a violent culture are victims of their own imperfectly structured knowledge. However, using this hypothesis as a vehicle for understanding broader societal patterns of violence is too narrow. I expand the definition of violence to include the effects of economic marginality, the authoritarian and abusive actions of the state, liberal hegemonic ideology and a history of traditional values and traits, for example, sexism and stereotypical gender roles.

Before introducing the case and to frame the discussion, I would like to introduce some "national characteristics" of Chileans. We give priority to social interaction in all enterprises, business and pleasure. We tend to become over-involved in our social interactions, much more spontaneously and emotionally than with Europeans (Perez, 1984) and with North Americans (Bellah *et al*, 1985). Chileans are eager to interact continuously with others and to help them, even if it entails postponing "individual" needs. Another central characteristic is the close relationship between family life, political identity and political activity. Each person's daily life seems permeated by a sense of and by feelings associated with aspects of political consciousness and experience. Even non-militants are aware of or are involved with national politics at some level. It exists inside the homes as much as in the streets. A Chilean psychologist making an evaluation of the last democratic government and Chilean society affirmed that political life permeates all aspects of social life: "a long history of political awareness had given the citizenship a degree of consciousness of the social roots of political programs that made the 1970 elections a choice among ways of life" (Zuñiga, 1975, p 101). The following case will reflect much of the above.

### Voices under Arrest

In 1987, I worked with a family in a human rights and mental health agency. It was one of the first that I had worked with in this institution, and it was considered by the staff to be a difficult case. I saw the family three times, only two of the meetings being full family sessions. I am not presenting the case as an example of "successful" therapy, but as a way of examining this wider context. In considering the complexities of this situation, I have been guided by the ideas of Cronen and Pearce about the Coordinated Management of Meaning (Pearce and Cronen, 1980; Cronen, Pearce and Tomm, 1985)

The father had not been directly involved in the political decision-making between 1970 and 1973 but he had been close to the Chilean President on a service level. He had lost his job and consequently all of his supporting network, he ran away from oppressive measures, and it was impossible for him to get a job. At the time the family sought therapy, he had several physical illnesses, and he and his wife also complained that one of their adolescent daughters did not want to attend school.

This family is a good example of a biographic breakdown, with a severe dislocation of its past narrative, and a rupture of its projected future as a group of people committed to a political project, alienated from any direct political activity or social movement. I believe, as Padilla and Comas-Diaz (1986), in the power of social action and protest in giving people a sense of purpose, a feeling of control and personal agency, and an outlet for anger and frustration. However, social action and its excitement carries serious risks of beatings, arrest and torture by the police or the military. This fact poses a profound problem in any therapeutic and/or educational setting of whether or not to encourage political consciousness, or any form of participation or action.

In the first interview, the parents and the oldest daughter started by telling their stories,

while the other two daughters claimed a non-problem status.

It was my intention to find ways to identify the father's already existing resources, and to understand the history of the symptoms in relation to his past work. His answers to my questions were somewhat vague, but he soon introduced the political dimension. The family members perceived themselves as "losers", which was consistent with their status as a low-income family. Here, another crucial theme emerged, that of being "expelled from." This is a historical/national/political pattern often occurring in Chilean family stories. For instance, in this family, the three older sons had been sent away from their home by their father. This can be equated with political exile.

The father changed the subject but did it in a way that seemed to be part of a strange loop (Cronen, Pearce and Tomm, 1985). As he told his story, he connected his life with larger historical patterns, claiming for himself an important role in a specific moment of political national life. Such a claim can be of major significance in a culture which values "personal connections." He had been attached to the most important person in the political/power hierarchy, the President. Furthermore, he had been a trusted person and close to the figure who embodied that power. The sudden overthrow of the government had put him in a delicate, stressful and potentially dangerous situation. Initially his contacts helped, but later he found himself without status, with even his life threatened. This is a common dilemma for those in such regimes who eventually resign from or are relieved of their governmental duties, even though they may not necessarily be as comprehensively displaced as this man was (and thus, consequently, his family).

The man continued with his story which was filled with remembrances of a past in which he had experienced himself as having power and a past that had carried with it a promise of a good future. Despite the radical changes that had intervened, "the projective narrative that dictates the logic of action and projects that

and its agents into the future, retains its stubborn structure" (Tololyan 1989, 114). When he spoke in this manner, in his political/personal/familial voice, the children began to act-out. In the face of these behaviours he would become silent. His silence would lead to a decrease in the acting-out behaviours, and he would again be prepared to talk. When the symptomatic behaviours appeared, he and his wife would enact the role of "parents," sometimes ineffectively. Whenever the symptoms were not present, he began again with his discourse, recommencing the whole process. The family was, in a sense, metaphorically replaying those earlier, extremely repressive years, when talking had in itself been dangerous.

Therapists working with people injured by human rights violations, consider the "testimony" central to the healing process. It focuses on re-establishing personal and political ties that have been severed or interrupted by the political situation. The testimony has been used as a psychotherapeutic technique and as a political tool. The problem in the reports of its use is that when it is adjudged to have failed, the attributed cause is located within the person who becomes labelled, for example, as a "premorbid personality" (Cienfuegos and Monelli 1983). There are, at present, no reports of a systemic approach to the use of this tool.

The family members shared the popular belief that "full and open communication" would solve all kinds of problems. One of the daughters said: "everybody is retreating into their problems and they don't communicate to each other what's happening." The parental difficulties with "controlling" their children, as demonstrated in the session, reinforced in them their existing explanation, which relied upon familial interpersonal factors, and so diffused the possibility of each taking responsibility for their own actions. These actions, at the same time, blurred the possibility of connecting some of the issues with historical and hierarchically higher levels. Consequently, the possibility of their commitment to active par-

participation in social and/or political areas was diminished.

When one member tried to connect their story with the history of the nation, the family members protected themselves from seeing those connections by describing them as painful. Furthermore, the medical illnesses would help them obtain a stable income in the near future. Indeed, in such a situation, to be healthy was to be "insane" in the context of a low income, or no income at all. It had become increasingly difficult for them to acknowledge the wider connections, which were associated with a person unable to "earn the money we need." For the family it had become a better solution to "lose" control over everything rather than confront a loss of identity in terms of their "tragedy," which was isomorphic to the national tragedy. In the Marxist sense, this is an alienating mechanism, protecting them from what they have constructed, which was emotionally painful. Their solution was to behave, and regard themselves, in an individualistic manner, so becoming closer to the North American, individualistic definition of self.

As the interview ended, I had some hypotheses about the in-session difficulties. Yet, I was not clear about the "precise" connections these difficulties had with larger systemic patterns. Restricted by a "family system" perspective, I was unable to incorporate the sociopolitical complexities into my analysis, even though I, myself, was involved in these. Whilst conscious of the political situation, I felt I lacked the tools to connect that framework to the context of this therapeutic situation. I did not have a "critical systemic tool" which would allow me to be more than just neutral or caring. Some of the questions I may have asked related to issues of power. What are the possible moves for this family, so as to connect them with solutions that are coherent with their political beliefs? How would they be able to reconcile their immediate difficulties with those issues? If the father supports the family, how would things be? If the father tried to re-establish the old, traditional pattern of "doing

better", what would happen to his relationship with his wife?

One of the dilemmas for family therapists is dealing with such multiple levels of analysis. For instance, the notions of power and ideology in the family therapy field are areas in which we have not overcome the dichotomies highlighted in the early Batesonian writings. This ambiguity may be a handicap when we work with oppressed people. Dell writes: "Laing insisted that a systemic or process conceptualization should never be used to hide or obscure the violent acts of family members. Such obscuring of violence is what Laing (and Marx) meant by the term, "mystification". Laing argued that process or systemic formulations hide the praxis of individual actors and, thereby, obscure the matter of individual responsibility" (1989, p 12). This surely is also true in the context of violence towards the family by the state, or by the processes of media and state propaganda which become rapidly dissociated from the everyday experiences of the people whose experiences they purport to be describing.

## Second session

This interview reintroduced some of the same themes that arose during the first session. The mother characterized the father as disabled, implying he was unable to come to sessions. Her account was consistent with the strange loop already described. This interview might have revealed how the family arranged or dealt with the issues of its powerlessness within the political context. If he remained sick, she would be in charge. This could not have been the case without marital conflicts in a "normal" situation, due to the hierarchically more powerful traditional gender role script. Before the political coup, during democracy, he was always in "control" of the situation even when sick, in part sustained by his position and his contacts. In the present situation, without such a supporting external network, and being unemployed, any kinds of symp-

toms might be functions of powerlessness. The current repressive political conditions prevented the possibility of sharing power. The wife now seemed to be in control, and he now appeared as "the oppressed", whereas, under democratic conditions, she might be "dominated."

Gender plays a crucial role as a higher order context. In a way, under two politically different conditions (Dictatorship v/s Democracy) the sexist "obligations" recreate repressive conditions at home. The public definition of who is the looser may change, but the interactional definition stays the same. A rehearsal of the same sexist context in a specific pattern (money=control) will be observed later, when to be financially successful is presented as one of the roles father should fulfill. The political context changed but the family did not challenge the cultural values, which include the patriarchal trap.

### Final session

Disciplinary power often operates independently of the intentions of individuals. "The character of disciplinary power is masked by the invitation that modern discourse makes to us to assume full responsibility for our acts and intentions" (Parker, 1989, p. 62). Foucault argues that true knowledge is defined by the individual, but what is permitted to count is defined by discourse. What is spoken, and who may speak, are issues of power (Foucault, 1979, 1980, 1988).

In the final interview, the parents seemed pre-occupied with the issue of disciplinary power. Early on, both seemed to agree about confronting the "stubbornness" of one of their daughters with respect to school. The agency shared this agenda. Later in the interview, the parents began to differ, the father's arguments taking on a violent edge, while the mother opened a new agenda. She aired the possibility of their allowing their daughter to make her own decisions about school matters. At the same time, she seemed to be trying to maintain an alliance

with her husband by gently confronting the daughter, encouraging school attendance. Remembering the differences of opinion demonstrated in the first session, the therapist asked questions of mother, seeming to offer an alliance with the father in discussing the possible causes of the problem. The mother is distracted from making negative statement about her daughters. The younger daughter repeated a similar behaviour to that enacted in the first session. The family members, regardless of the specific actors, replayed the same drama. If the mother mentioned the history (the family story), symptoms would appear, followed by her silence, and the loop would repeat. The therapist interrupted the pattern by connoting it as a "protective behaviour". This created a space in which the family discussed the problem which originally brought them to therapy.

Chilean society is one in which education is highly stratified, valued by all classes as a vehicle for social mobility, yet the universities are generally not seen by the poor as within their reach. However, they believe education offer the best opportunity for change. This cultural pattern, embedded within the family script, creates another strange loop. Their child's refusal to study is against both parental and agency wishes, but is coherent with their socio-economic condition. For the parents to accept her decision would mean they would have to ignore the "general" cultural values about education. The adolescent's decision will already have alienated her from the cultural values already described. Her refusal to study should not be seen as a simple case of personal psychological distress or disability. It is embedded in complex and inter-related political, cultural and familial patterns.

### Follow up

It is interesting to know what the family experienced after they abandoned therapy, since they supported the hypothesis proposed in this paper. Carmen became pregnant, and thus closed off the possibility of attending school

(the law prohibits pregnant adolescents from attending schools). This "solution" dissipates many of the dilemmas outlined above, nevertheless it evokes the expulsion pattern, a form of violence. I have my suspicions that some form of child abuse began to occur with the younger daughter.

In addition, the father finally received the first retirement payment, including many years' retrospective pay, a reflection of slow bureaucratic procedures. For the first time in many years, the family travelled and enjoyed holidays. They did not save any of the money received and it eventually ran out. After several months, the father began again to suffer acute pain, etc. The family's way of using the money had finally reconstituted the original family pattern, a pattern which appeared important for the family to re-enact. Had they solved the money "issues," they would have broken through this pattern, and been in a position to "forget their past." Many questions arise. Were they defending and being loyal to a cultural/political higher pattern? How is it that after so many "defeats" and context changes the family reacts as if things remained the same? What are the stories a therapist may co-construct/invent with them so as to empower and liberate them from such pervasive and oppressive past narratives?

### A final comment

From an ethical perspective (Tomm, 1989), the locus of therapeutic work with people who have suffered repression should emphasize personal agency and increasing their options. In other words, the central goal should be empowerment, where the locus of change is conscious, and liberation is associated with independence. The therapist acknowledges and values an open sharing discourse with the client. Sadly, agencies frequently foster the growth of dependence (for example, by only being activated and giving assistance or help in times of acute distress). They tend to act upon people rather than work with them and

thus do not generate a genuine participative dialogue.

Thus, in Foucault's sense, knowledge/power stays with the therapist and with the agency. In my view, to work in this way tends to reproduce and reconstitute the paternalistic and authoritarian power relationships through which the families have already been victimised, traumatized and dis-empowered.

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