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Elisabeth Rohr

Group analytic therapy, supervision, and counselling are completely unknown in Guatemala, Central America. But after a long and devastating war, an internationally supported peace and reconciliation process offered the opportunity to introduce new methods into mental health services, to cope with the psycho-social effects of a traumatized society. This article describes difficulties that were connected with the establishment of group analytic supervision training in Guatemala, focusing on aspects of trauma that emerged in supervisory case work.

Keywords: psychosocial work in post-war society, supervision training, trauma and casework, Guatemala, unconscious fears, death lists

Introduction

Guatemala is one of the most beautiful countries in Central America, with lush, tropical landscapes, breathtaking volcanoes, lakes, and famous Mayan ruins, hidden in the rain forest. But Guatemala is also known to have one of the highest crime and poverty rates in all of Latin America—shadows of one of the longest and most violent civil wars of the continent (Iriarte, 1994).

Since the signing of the peace treaty in 1996, many political efforts have been made to initiate a peace and reconciliation process under the guidance of the United Nations (Misión de Verificación de las Naciones Unidas en Guatemala (MINUGUA), 2001). But democracy is fragile in a country that has for centuries known only

authoritarian rule, military repression, and the power of the coffee plantation owners (Carmack, 1991). Therefore, many international organizations entered the country after the war to support the peace and reconciliation processes.

One of these organizations was the German Technical Cooperation, the official German government agency for international cooperation, which had been engaged in Guatemala for years. They decided to extend the program to include peace and capacity-building efforts. I was asked to join a German mission to evaluate the possibilities of establishing a community-based health program, supporting the peace and reconciliation process in the country.

In the spring of 2000 I arrived in Guatemala and was met by the driver of the agency, who was going to take me to Huehuetenango, a city in the north of the country, to meet the rest of the crew. It turned out to be a long five hour ride and the driver took the opportunity to introduce me to the history of his country. He began to talk about his brother, who, during the war had been ordered to participate in training for soldiers in the reserve army. The young men were asked to bring along a lot of food and their dogs. After a long walk through the woods, the soldiers finally arrived at a clearing where they were to stay for the night. They were told to empty their rucksacks, and put all the food in the middle of a circle. They had barely finished, when one of the officers lit a fire, and threw all of the food into the flames. The soldiers were aghast, not knowing what to do. Noticing their anxiety, the officer explained that this was part of the training, and that they now had to learn how to survive in the mountains without food in order to be able to fight against the guerrillas. Then he explained that they did not need to worry because they still had their dogs, which they could kill, roast, and eat. The soldiers stared at the officer in disbelief, and some of them started to weep, but their despair was met with contempt and laughter. When a few soldiers finally began to kill, roast, and eat their dogs, the others could not bear the sight, nor the smell of burning dog meat, and ran into the woods to vomit, and hide their shame, disgust, and tears. The brother of the driver tried to resist his hunger a few days, but when he could live no longer on roots and berries, he surrendered as well. 'This was the way they brutalized and dehumanized a whole generation of young men,' surmised the driver. 'They turned them into animals before they were sent out to kill in the war.'

The Origin of the Idea of Group Analytic Supervision Training in Guatemala

This story, I soon learned, was not unusual in a country that was still suffering from the aftermath of a war that had lasted for 36 years, killed 200,000 people, forced one million people into exile, and caused 626 massacres, and 45,000 disappearances (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), 1998). Trust and faith in society and humanity had been severely damaged. The 'tejido social'—the social fabric—was destroyed; this was the conclusion of two truth and reconciliation commissions (CEH, 1998, Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (REMHI), 1998), and the consensus of all the professionals with whom we talked during our mission.

One of our most disturbing meetings took place in Rabinal, a small town in the north west of the country, which endured horrific suffering during the war, including one of the worst massacres orchestrated by Rios Montt. After the war, these experiences led to the foundation of a strong organization for the victims of war, with whom we had arranged a meeting.

A group of Indian men and women greeted us. They talked about the projects they had initiated. A second cemetery had been build, a monument had been erected and a school was going to be reconstructed to host a future museum to commemorate the victims of the massacres. But, they added with sorrow, many of their ideas had been met with political resistance and disapproval.

Listening to all these stories of injustice and suffering produced severe feelings of shame. I noticed that I was shivering, even though it was a very hot summer day. I wanted to say something, to somehow acknowledge their suffering, but I could not think of anything. I felt paralyzed.

Then I noticed some of the Indian women sitting next to me. They had not uttered one word throughout the long afternoon; it was as if they were mute. They were just sitting on their chairs, completely withdrawn, motionless, with arms resting in their laps, as if they were totally exhausted. Their faces seemed like masks of mourning. Their eyes had lost all signs of brightness; they just stared at the floor, not showing any interest in anything. A little girl came running to one of the women, leaned against her knees, and looked into her face, searchingly. But there were no arms to cuddle her, no eyes to look upon her, no gestures to show that she had been noticed, no signs whatsoever of caring. Finally, after hesitating a few seconds, the girl ran away. I followed her with my eyes, and suddenly saw that in a room, opposite from where we sat, hundreds of framed black and

white photographs of Indian men and women had been lined up on the floor. Were there 100, 200, or 300 photographs, or even more? It turned out that these were photographs of the people who had died in the massacre. The war victims' organization had collected them in anticipation of the museum that was yet to be constructed.

These impressions from Rabinal haunted me for quite some time, and I understood much later that what I had witnessed had been 'trauma,' embodied in these Indian men and women. It made me wonder how we would ever be able to design a project that could offer help to overcome this suffering.

Discussing these issues in our evaluating team, we realized that the German Technical Cooperation had insufficient resources to provide trauma therapy for hundreds of thousands of mostly Indian people, speaking more than 22 different languages. But rather than give up, we began to look for alternative approaches to the problems.

In the course of our mission, we spent hours talking to social workers, psychologists, and medical doctors about their professional activities, working in an environment that Becker (2006) defines as a 'traumatising situation.' This meant not only to be confronted eight hours a day with testimonies of massacre survivors, or dead bodies in mass graves, but to realize at the same time that impunity was the law, and that the majority of society denied the misery, the despair, and the extreme poverty of the victims of the war (Cabrera Pérez-Armiñán, 2006; Martín-Baró, 2000).

I asked myself if these professionals were not even more haunted than I had been by my visit to Rabinal. But they, in contrast, had nobody to talk to, because in Guatemala it was not possible to talk about such haunting experiences; such admissions would have been misunderstood as a symptom of professional deficiency. A concept of supervision, in the sense of counselling social experts, did not exist. But how could they continue with their daily jobs, when this meant to be confronted with the never-ending sorrow and pain of the survivors of massacres? How could they bear the violence in the villages, and in the families and the huge number of abandoned children? How could they help the traumatized young men, returning home from war, many of them disabled and psychologically damaged, not knowing what to do without a weapon, and not having learned anything but killing, torturing, and drowning their aggressiveness in cheap liquor and in violence against women?

From our talks with Guatemalan social workers and psychologists came an understanding of ways that we could support them in their

work on the project for peace and reconciliation. We could not offer trauma therapy as mentioned, but we could offer supervision, promoting supervisory skills and qualifying professionals working in the field of 'traumatising situations'. Almost all of these social and health care experts needed, as has been stated (Becker, 1992; Summerfield, 2000; Laub, 2000), continuous and professional support in order not to get contaminated by the surrounding trauma themselves, and to stay healthy and sane, capable of fulfilling their professional tasks. Therefore, we decided to train social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists to be supervisors themselves, and thus create a pioneer group of well trained professionals, capable of offering supervision to other professionals in Guatemala.

The Design of the Group Analytic Supervision Training

Since I was entrusted with the task, I began to work out a group analytic orientated training concept for supervision. It took five years, and a number of workshops before the first group analytic training course of supervision could be started in September 2005. The training was part of a community health project, financed by the German Technical Cooperation under the guidance of Dr. Vilma Duque, a dedicated Guatemalan psychologist, who turned out to be the heart of the project. Since I spoke Spanish, it was not necessary to work with translators. However, the theoretical readings and the learning exercises had to be translated before the courses began.

   The training courses took place in six five-day sessions, spread out over a period of two and a half years. They ran from Monday to Friday in a beautiful colonial style villa in Guatemala City, starting at nine in the morning and ending at five in the afternoon, with lots of coffee and snacks during the breaks, and a delicious lunch at noon on the terrace under a huge avocado tree.

   The morning sessions were all dedicated to theory and methodological questions, as well as to learning exercises, the aim being to present difficult theories in a more digestible form.

   The first training week was organized around certain central questions. What is supervision? A method to analyse, reflect on, and understand the dynamics of working relationships. How does it work? By establishing a secure space, and a setting with well defined boundaries, by applying group analytic techniques for interpretation of the dynamics, and by relying on a conductor who is capable of containing the process and promoting confidence in the group's own

resources. What are the historical roots? They are found in casework, as known in social work, and clinical application in psychotherapy. In which fields of work is it applied to? Supervision can be found in profit and non-profit organizations.

Within the second training course, we focused upon group theories, starting with Freud, Lewin, Bion, Balint, Schindler, Cohn, and Foulkes, trying to understand differences, as well as similarities. In all of our training courses, it was important to draw attention to transcultural elements of group analytic theory (Brown, 1992; Dalal, 2002), thus contributing to the acceptance of a group analytic orientated supervision training in a non-European country like Guatemala. Participants connected easily to the idea that all of the group therapists mentioned were refugees, and that in Argentina a group of psychotherapists (Grinberg et al. 1957) had applied group analysis very successfully, even with workers in factories. It was also easy to show how Foulkes systematically included family and social structures, as well as legends in trying to understand unconscious levels of group processes. In the course of our training, I would always encourage them to look at supervisory cases with Guatemalan eyes, introducing figures from songs, legends, and poems, which might help them to understand the undisclosed meanings of conflicts.

Throughout the third training course, we concentrated on the essentials of psychoanalytic and group analytic theory and method, explaining basic elements like the unconscious, projection, splitting, identification, mirroring, multiple transference, matrix, etc. In the fourth training course, we emphasized methods of conflict resolution, such as mediation, and explored how the very structured techniques of mediation could be applied within the context of supervision. In the fifth training course, team diagnosis and organizational dynamics were the main subjects. Finally, in the sixth course, we focused on the role of the supervisor, and the specific skills needed, reinforcing the idea of abstinence, stressing the importance of empathy, psychohygiene, and own supervisory support.

The design of the training was basically group analytically orientated, open for the cultural context in which the training took place, and taking into account the conflict-burdened history of the country. The training combined an integrated course in supervision and conflict-resolution methods. It did not include experiential elements. They would have been helpful, of course, but since I was the only person available, it was not possible to mix the role of a teacher and a therapist. But a number of participants did have previous experiences of psychotherapy.

Teaching Elements

Even though the morning sessions were dedicated to theory, some learning exercises were integrated, which proved vital for the training process. One of these elements was the learning diary, offering the participants an opportunity to write down everything that was important to them from the previous day. Thus, we were able to connect to the previous day easily, recall what we had discussed, answer unanswered questions, and get ready for new theoretical issues. But before diving into new theories, I would always read a story, or tell an appropriate joke to deepen the understanding of the unconscious in group analytic supervision.

The story they liked the most was based upon a North American Indian proverb: 'When you notice that you are riding a dead horse, get down.' After the story, we discussed related questions, starting with: What do you do when you notice in your professional life that you are riding a dead horse?

Do you look for a stronger whip?

Do you say, 'But this is the way we always used to ride a dead horse?'

Do you decide to visit other places in the world to find out how they are riding dead horses?

Do you book a training course to learn how to ride a dead horse?

The story produced serious reflection, as well as a lot of laughter. In Guatemala, I was told, almost everybody would stay on the dead horse, trying to keep on riding, ignoring the fact that the horse was dead. People did not want to think about the horrors of the past, and the horrors of daily life. But trying to continue as if nothing had happened produced frustration and feelings of impotency. Even though many people suffered under these circumstances, nobody would try to look at a reality that was devastating, hopeless and extremely painful.

Taking this attitude of defence into account, I thought that perhaps the supervision training could be an experimental but secure space, to say farewell to a dead horse, to mourn the losses experienced throughout the war, and to look for ways out of a history full of dead solutions. Maybe the training, with its nice facilities, plentiful food, safe environment, continuity, and long duration, would be experienced as a caring and curing space, helping to transform despair into hope. Supervision training could be in this sense a 'transitional space' (Winnicott, 1971), exploring ways to get down from the dead horse, to create a new future.

This metaphor of the 'dead horse' turned out be one of the main images in our training activities, always highlighting situations, which were difficult to understand, and difficult to bear. With the help of this image, the group's resistance to leaving the dead horse behind, to mourning, and to opening up to new perspectives (a foreigner as teacher, new theories and methods) surfaced, and within the course of two and a half years, the group was able to work through this resistance—not entirely of course, but partially.

The training was focused on the supervision of groups, since almost all of the participants worked with groups within communities, or institutions. Group analytic case work allowed them to understand the dynamics of group processes, and helped them to find different ways to address issues, such as the scapegoat, or the outsider, or the hero of a group, and pairing and splitting tendencies.

Casework in a Traumatized Society

Throughout the training, I had been wondering how the trauma of the Guatemalans, their psychosocial wounds and vulnerabilities (Martín-Baró, 2000), would emerge during our training. And indeed, the trauma exposed itself in many ways, even though it took me some time to recognize traces of it. For example, participants would arrive late in the morning, or not at all, or would disappear in the middle of the session for half a day, or even two days, without any excuses. After some time, and a lot of interventions, this attitude did change slowly, and people would come and let me know when they would have to leave, and when they would be back again. I assume that these disruptions, and the lack of cohesiveness in the group were a product of their trauma, and not a symptom of their Latin personality. For many years they had known nothing but war. Almost all of them had lost relatives and friends. Therefore, to develop cohesiveness was something quite frightening to them, because cohesiveness could always be lost again (Wardi, 1992). But at the same time, it was what they longed for, and, I think, it was one of the unconscious reasons for staying in the training, because it promised a secure space to explore, and to restore bonding, reliability, and trust within a group.

But trauma showed not only in the missing cohesiveness of the training group, but also in the cases that were presented for supervisory reflection and discussion.

Vignette

One day, one of the few Mayan social workers present in the workshop offered to talk about an experience, which still disturbed her very much, as she mentioned at the very beginning of the training.

She and three other social workers had travelled to an Indian community, far away in the mountains, to organize a workshop about women's rights. When they arrived, about 40 women were already waiting for them, eager to start the workshop. Happy to see this crowd, the social workers unloaded their car and started the workshop. Everything went smoothly until noon, when four women from the workshop came, and asked to talk to them alone. The social workers were ushered into a small room, and there they faced a screaming group of women, who locked the door, and demanded very aggressively that the social workers hand over the 'lists'. The four social workers were completely surprised, and unable to understand, even though they spoke the Indian language of the villagers. They became very scared, knowing that this could be the beginning of a lynching. The women kept on screaming at them, telling them that none of them would leave the room alive, if they did not hand over the 'lists'. Finally, not knowing what else to do, one of them handed over the list of workshop participants. The village women grabbed the list, tore it apart, threw it into pieces on the floor, and stamped on the pieces of paper. When the door was finally opened, there were 40 women standing outside, lined up on either side. The social workers realized that this was the typical set-up for a lynching. Although they were afraid to move forward, they managed to go through the gauntlet, get into their car, and leave the village. After a while they stopped the car, got out, and threw themselves onto the ground, crying desperately. Still shaking, they arrived back at their office, and told the head of the office what had happened—but she was only concerned about the car, asking if it had been damaged, and failed to ask if they needed any help.

The Mayan woman closed her story by saying that since that time, she had not been able to work in an unknown community without tremendous fears, and that she could not forget this incident and her anxieties.

When we started to take a closer look at the case, many of the participants tried to console the woman, giving her advice on how to behave the next time to prevent such a situation. The Mayan woman accepted all the advice gratefully, but at the end she said that her anxieties were still there.

The case left me in some despair. I could not understand why this confrontation had happened. What were these 'lists', and why were the village women so upset with the social workers? When I shared my difficulties with the group, I was told that as a foreigner, I might not understand, but the 'lists' were part of their voting system. Just recently politicians had travelled throughout the country with 'voting lists,' asking people for their vote. But people were very suspicious of these lists, refusing to vote, since politics had lost all credibility. Even though the group tried very hard to convince me that this was the explanation for what had happened, I kept on having doubts. The group continued to work on the case, until finally there was nothing more to say. But the Mayan woman insisted that her feelings of anxiety had not yet vanished. Finally, I spoke up again, saying that I still did not understand, but felt a lot of anxiety in the group, anxiety about an issue that obviously was quite scary. A long silence followed until one woman spoke.

> You are right; you are the only one here not to understand. During the war, army soldiers invaded Indian villages, carrying with them lists of names, and everyone whose name was on a list had to die. Many were shot right away, often together with their relatives, wives and children. These lists were called death lists.

It had taken the group a long time to finally dare to express these horrible words. There had been a lot of silence, a lot of 'wrong' information to avoid the thoughts and images connected to the 'death lists'. The trauma was alive, a continuous process as Keilson (1979) pointed out, not part of the past, or outside somewhere. It was right here in the group. It had entered the training course in disguise at first, fragmented, slowly uncovering itself, and finally coming to the surface, showing its ugly face, moving me deeply.

Several correlating factors had been necessary to break the silence. As a foreigner, I did not share their trauma, but showed empathy as a witness to their trauma. Additionally, I could not be seduced to ally with their anxieties; instead, I protected the secure space, containing threats and fears, offering reliability, and a desire for truth. Now the Mayan woman who had spoken about this experience could feel support and understanding in the group; support and understanding which the chief of her office had denied her.

Together, we could look at the experience in the Indian village in a different way. We were now able to understand that, even though the behaviour of the Indian women originally seemed strange, threatening, and aggressive, they had in fact demonstrated power and

endurance. They were no longer willing to accept the role of a victim. They would not surrender to any lists. Their manner of defending themselves was frightening to outsiders, but who could blame them for that? Now the Mayan woman not only understood the behaviour of the women in the village, but she could acknowledge it as a sign of empowerment. With a lot of relief, she said that now she and her colleagues would know how to enter the next Indian village. They would not simply arrive, and expect to be trusted; they would take into account the traumatizing experiences of the people with whom they were going to work, and that meant talking to local authorities beforehand, explaining their mission, and the reason for participation lists, asking them to vouch for their good intentions and their desire to help.

Summary

Group analytic supervision training in a traumatized society can have healing effects, even though it is not intended as a therapeutic experience. Long lasting training in a group, clear boundaries, and a protected space will help to overcome traumatic experiences of fragmentation and splitting, re-creating a 'sense of belonging to a supportive and capable professional group' (Hanson, 2007: 197). Thus, primary trust, and the ability of bonding are—partially and slowly—restored. It was helpful, of course, that they could experience the benefits of the training immediately: they felt the empowerment of confronting traumatizing situations, since we always focused on casework, opening up new perspectives of understanding, and handling disturbing situations. But throughout the training, regressive tendencies could be felt, as well as anxieties to meet, or to be confronted with traces of their trauma. By coming late and leaving unexpectedly they made sure that I never forgot their fears, anxieties—and their trauma. But keeping up the boundaries, not surrendering to overwhelming feelings of guilt, working through powerful counter transference feelings—being too much of a disciplined and rigid German, and not enough of a flexible, and warm hearted Latin—I managed to establish enough of a secure space, and to be enough of a good and holding conductor to gain their trust, and to overcome their initial fears and inhibitions. And even though their resistance was strong and long lasting, and their transferences towards me as being a colonizer and imperialist were quite difficult to bear, I always sensed their hidden desire to leave the dead horse behind, wanting to belong to a trustworthy group of

professionals, sharing thoughts, and questions, but suffering, despair, and hope as well.

Supervision does offer a limited, but nevertheless secure space to talk about painful and threatening experiences; it can help to restore and re-establish cohesiveness and bonding in a long-lasting supervisory group. During this process, paralysing feelings of resistance, of fragmentation, and splitting are minimized, and new and empowering perceptions and desires are generated. Therefore, supervision can be considered a 'transitional space' where members mourn dead solutions, explore new ways of understanding, and experience a new sense and new ways of belonging. By opening up new and creative perspectives on reality, group members may be able to restore trust in themselves, in others, and in society. Because 'a sense of belonging to, and participating in something larger, and more meaningful than just oneself, like a group of colleagues, is instrumental for one's sense of self-esteem and personal worth' (Berman and Berger, 2007: 239).

Postscript

The training course ended in February 2008. The majority of the participants have since worked very successfully as supervisors with 16 teams (160 people) for three months in the national programme for reconciliation. In addition, 13 of them started supervising 163 workers who were cleaning, scanning, and evaluating the documents of the old secret archive of the national police, helping the workers to bear the horrific photographs and reports, to which they were exposed on a daily basis. These experiences have been supervised by the only psychoanalyst in Guatemala, and recently evaluated.

Unfortunately, supervision in the archive has stopped for the moment, since the German agency decided, for unknown reasons, to withdraw support from the project. However, the director of the archive is absolutely convinced of the benefits of supervision, because cooperation and communication have improved, and democracy has gained over hitherto authoritarian rule—as he pointed out. Therefore he is trying very hard to find other sources of financial support.

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