

PSYCHOSOCIAL ACCOMPANIMENT TO LIBERATE THE SUFFERING ASSOCIATED WITH THE EXPERIENCE OF FORCED DISPLACEMENT¹

STELLA SACIPA*, RAÚL VIDALES, LUISA GALINDO, CLAUDIA TOVAR
PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD JAVERIANA, BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA

Recibido: marzo 5 de 2007

Revisado: julio 28 de 2007

Aceptado: septiembre 24 de 2007

ACOMPAÑAMIENTO PSICOSOCIAL PARA LIBERAR EL SUFRIMIENTO ASOCIADO CON LA EXPERIENCIA DE DESPLAZAMIENTO FORZADO

ABSTRACT

This article presents some results of the “Meanings of the ‘Reframing the Experience’ Psychosocial Accompaniment with People facing Forced Displaced”. It is centered on the analysis of feelings generated by the rootlessness, their transformations (reframing) and their permanence, through the participation of a group of people in an accompaniment process proposed by the Mencoldes Foundation together with the “Cultures of Peace” Practicum Project of the Psychology Department at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. Feelings associated to displacement were fear, embarrassment, sadness, uncertainty, lack of trust, homesickness and suffering. The accompaniment allowed the transit from suffering to hope and from lack of trust to trust. Feelings associated to the traumatized memory (Lira, 1990) couldn’t be reframed. The main factors for the permanence of these feelings are the continuity of the armed conflict and the scarcity of structural conditions for a dignified re-restoration. The text analyzes the way in which, despite adversity, participants overcame difficulties and rebuilt their lives in an unknown cultural context.

Key words authors: feelings, fear, rage, hatred, lack of trust, armed conflict, forced displacement.

Key words plus: emotions, displacement (psychology), armed conflict.

¹ Investigación del grupo: “Lazos Sociales y Culturas de Paz” del Departamento de Psicología de la Pontificia Universidad Javeriana.

* Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Edificio 95 - Manuel Briceño S.J. Carrera 5 No. 39-00 – Teléfono: (57 1) 320 8320, ext. 5757 Bogotá D.C. – Colombia. Correo electrónico: ssacipa@javeriana.edu.co

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta algunos resultados de la investigación titulada "Significados del Acompañamiento Psicosocial 'Resignificar la Experiencia' con Personas en Situación de Desplazamiento Forzado". Se centra en el análisis de los sentimientos que genera la situación de desarraigo, sus transformaciones (resignificaciones) y sus permanencias, a partir de la participación de un grupo de personas en un proceso de acompañamiento propuesto por la Fundación Mencoldes en asocio con el Proyecto de Prácticas "Culturas de Paz" del Departamento de Psicología de la Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. Los sentimientos asociados al desplazamiento fueron temor, vergüenza, tristeza, incertidumbre, desconfianza, nostalgia y sufrimiento. El acompañamiento permitió el tránsito del sufrimiento a la esperanza y de la desconfianza a la confianza. Los sentimientos asociados a la memoria traumatizada (Lira, 1990) no se lograron resignificar. Los principales factores para la permanencia de estos sentimientos son la continuidad del conflicto armado y la precariedad de las condiciones estructurales para un reestablecimiento digno. El texto analiza cómo, pese a la adversidad, los participantes se sobrepusieron y reconstruyeron sus vidas en un contexto cultural desconocido. Finalmente, se discuten los alcances y las limitaciones del proceso de acompañamiento psicosocial.

Palabras clave autores: sentimientos, temor, ira, odio, desconfianza, conflicto armado, desplazamiento forzado.

Palabras clave descriptores: desplazamiento (psicología), conflicto armado, emociones

The Colombian armed conflict has caused the displacement of large numbers of people and has had grave psychosocial consequences. A great number of people receive humanitarian aid, and a few receive psychosocial attention. However, only a very few receive formal accompaniment.

The research group "Social Links and Cultures of Peace" and our psychosocial practice of "Giving New Meaning" have taken the word accompaniment to mean to give the person: "human warmth, renew their confidence, and allow them to feel the presents of others, and that they are listened to lovingly" (Sacipa, Tovar, & Galindo, 2005, p. 11). In these sense, psychosocial accompaniment is "a process that is defined by respect and recognition of the human dignity of the displaced person" (Sacipa et al., 2005, p. 13). A process that accompanies the feelings of the persons in situation of displacement and that simultaneously provokes the emergence of new feelings.

According to Heller (1985) to feel means to be involved with something. That "something" can be another human being, a concept or yourself. Therefore, feeling is an inherent part of any action or thought and not a mere companion because actions, thoughts and feelings are manifested continually in everyday life; they can only be functionally separated.

In the same way, Castilla del Pino (2000) conceives of feelings as instruments that the subject has in order to related (emotional, affective) with people, animals, and things as well as him/herself. For Castilla del Pino, feelings serve as an affective link between people and both internal and external objects.

Besides being relational instruments, feelings are personal states in that they qualify and modify him/her

in a certain sense. They are instruments for use and as being used they modify the subject (Castilla del Pino, 2000). That is to say that Castilla del Pino is talking about a plural relationship between the subject and the object that is both affective, cognitive and has a retroactive effect on the subject. He continues saying that what is designated as being affected by a feeling is, and rightly so, recognizing that the subject has changed completely and not just emotionally.

Fernández (2004) considers feelings just as material as physical objects, only they be held or located. They are part of the atmosphere, important and true. They make up the most direct apprehension of reality, but there certainty cannot be verified. Fernández differentiates between feelings and perceptions by saying: literally, feelings just happen to people.

Heller (1985) affirms that fear is one of the most expressive affections. In general, humans can be characterized by the expression of fear, but what provokes feelings (stimuli) it is always socially. Fear comes from two sources: a) personal experience and b) social experience by means of communication.

Lira (1985-1986, as cited in Martín Baró, 1990) states that although fear is a subjective experience, and up to a certain point private, it can be simultaneously produced in thousands of people, in which case it acquires an unsuspected relevancy in the social and political conduct.

Martín Baró (1990) described four psychological characteristics of this subjective experience. The first is a feeling of vulnerability. The second is a feeling of heightened alertness. The third is a feeling of impotence or loss of control in one's life and the fourth is an altered sense of reality that makes it impossible to evaluate experiences or knowledge objectively (Martín Baró, 1990).

Heller (1985) believes that anxiety is a particular type of fear and, against diverse theories, she states that anxiety does have an object. When a person feels anxious he/she does not clearly see the significance of the stimulus and therefore assumes those stimuli to be dangerous, and he/she would place that anxiety and certain socially incomprehensible conditions in a relationship. We can say that the more obscure social relationships are, the more difficult it is to know what is dangerous and what is not. Therefore, the individual feels threatened by social forces that function independently of his or her control.

Inhibition has been studied by Psychiatry and found to be an element of depression. It was described by Lira (1990) as a behavior connected to fear and refers to paralyzed movements and mental slowness that generally incapacitate the individual. It is an internal incapacity that is directly related to the fear of annihilation.

Along the same idea, De la Corte, Sabucedo & Moreno (2004) speak about how these behaviors feed apathy and social withdrawal while reinforcing and naturalizing violence. Therefore, political violence achieves submission by means of the forced internalization of vital threats.

According to Martín Baró (1990) when psychology speaks about trauma it is referring to an experience that affects the individual in such a manner as to mark them. That is, it leaves a permanent residue. Using the term "trauma" means that the residue is understood to be negative and is understood to leave an unfavorable fingerprint on the individual's life.

Psychological trauma refers to an emotional wound, a difficult experience, a situation of particular tension or suffering, or a painfully frustrating fact that concretely affects the individual. By using the term "psychosocial trauma", this author emphasizes the essentially dialectic nature of the wound, which can be caused by prolonged wartime experiences. The dialectic nature of psychosocial trauma makes emphasis on the fact that the wound or affectation depends on the particular experience of the individual; and this experience is conditioned by their social extraction, by their degree of participation in the conflict and other characteristics of the experience and their personality.

At the same time, to talk about psychosocial trauma is to give emphasis to two other ideas: a) the wound that affects people is socially produced which means that its roots are to be found in the society, not in the individual; (b) by its very nature the wound is fed and maintained in the relationship between individual and society, mediated by institutions, groups and individuals.

As Correa and Rueda (2000) affirm, the scenarios of expression and elaboration of traumas, and the losses that

take place in a wartime context, caused by the systematic violation of human rights, do not permit a psychological time to be elaborated. During displacement, the elaboration of grief is more complex because the loss of family members and friends by means of repressive strategies, assassination, disappearances and massacres must be added to the original trauma. These strategies are used as a mechanism to generate displacement, but they also break down organized resistance after displacement.

On the other hand, Castilla del Pino (2000) defines confidence as the basic attitude that presides over all interactions and through which we are disposed to participate in, and maintain, interactions. In all interactions there is a moment in which we have to bet, based on confidence, how much we are going to participate in the interaction. People can bet at the beginning of the interaction, or later, people bet on something that has already happened. If there is no confidence at the beginning of the interaction, it is broken off as soon as it starts because the subject will not tolerate the uncertainty of the situation. Betting on confidence is risky and being reserved can be a test of wisdom. However, when an individual decides not to trust, the interaction is not cooperative; it does not provide the needed information and can deprive the individual of fundamental relationships. Furthermore, it is important to remember Castillo del Pino's position that the processual nature of interactions makes confidence dynamic, that is, unstable and continually modifiable.

We accompanied forcibly displaced persons at Fundación Mencoldes. This institution in Bogotá provides emergency humanitarian attention to displaced populations. When we arrived, the foundation had a humanitarian program to support forcibly displaced populations. This program used a strategy of psychosocial recuperation (Life with a purpose). One of the first psychologists that participated in the program described it in this way:

It offers people the possibility to participate in different job skill programs in offices. They can further participate in support group sessions that offer them the chance to address the psychological effects of displacement. This allows each participant to elaborate their pain, cure their emotional wounds received from violence, and reinforce their values and principles such as solidarity, responsibility and justice. They can change the direction of their lives for the present and near future. (Díaz, 2004, p. 208)

The familial and communitarian attention that Mencoldes has provided gives a great deal of attention to recognizing the complexity of each individual as well as the social, psychological, political and economic factors

involved in recuperation and in their decisions that allow them to continue with their lives (Díaz, 2004).

During this program of individual and collective accompaniment, the displaced people were offered help by means of reinforcing psychosocial links and the construction of relationships based on confidence. They were helped to foster spaces where they could give new meaning to the feelings associated with fear, anger, pain and hate.

Methodology

The investigation was guided by the narrative methodology proposed by Bruner (1995), and used by Sacipa (1995, 2000), Galindo and Sacipa (2001), Muñoz (2003), Muñoz and Sacipa (2001), Bonilla, Triviño and Sacipa (2002), and Vidales, Martínez and Sacipa (2004).

The study was centered on the significance of psychosocial accompaniment and its ability to help people give new meaning to their experiences. The subjects were accompanied between 2001 and 2004. Their narrations served as a means to situate the subjects as the spokespeople of their experiences, and at the same time, they became builders of stories that explained to us their experiences during psychosocial accompaniment. This made it possible to “read” the diverse possible worlds from which the subjects understood their accompaniment and to analyze how much they were able to give new meaning to their experiences of forced displacement.

The research was done with the work of Lieblinch, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) in mind. They proposed that when researchers study, or interpret, narratives, they can understand a great deal about the subject's identity, their system of meanings and their social and cultural world.

Participants

Six subjects were chosen according to the following criteria: a) they were forcibly displaced; b) they had spent six months in the program at Fundación Mencoldes and c) they were adults over eighteen years old.

Results

After being expelled from their lands, people who have been forcibly displaced arrive in an unknown place, a place where they do not know how to act. In the words of a narrator: *the moment in which I arrived in this city was a moment of uncertainty.*

The narrators clearly express the feeling of sadness they experienced when they arrived in Bogotá due to the

lack of means to cover the basic necessities of life for themselves and their families. This is how two narrators narrate themselves:

for me it was very sad to have three daughters to feed and nothing to give them.

I arrived in Bogotá very sad. I said to myself, “What am I going to do?”. My husband does not have papers and here they ask for your papers everywhere. You begin to worry when you are running to find shoes and papers. Then you hug your children and wait to see what happens.

We could also identify the feeling of shame when facing displacement: “The truth is that when I first arrived I felt ashamed. When people asked me where I had come from, I told them the place, but I never told them I had been forced to leave”.

Similarly, the narrators make reference to the uncertainty and anxiety they must live with everyday as part of a traumatic experience: “The uncertainty and this life style are hard. You live with anxiety everyday. It's horrible”.

In the narrations, we found various allusions to the fear felt in situations of threatened social political violence or in situations of extreme danger. Furthermore, the narrators spoke about the fear caused by the uncertainty of their new surroundings and not knowing what to do. One of the narrators spoke about the fear and the need to be constantly alert in the face of possible spying by the actors responsible for their displacement: “They took us to the park and I was looking everywhere to see if someone from this mess was there. But no! The park generated fear because you never know if someone is spying on you”.

The fear of being watched and chased after is constant even in different locations of the city where they should be able to relax: “At first, when taking a bus, if someone was looking at me, I preferred to take another bus. I got away thinking that they were paramilitaries that had been sent to kill me”.

The same narrator recognized how fear, and its accompanying immobilization, made it very difficult to participate in programs offered by the foundation. “We did not do anything more because I was closed. We did not look at things any further. I could have done other courses and now I am, but with that fear, I could not do anything”.

Another narrator expressed how difficult it was for him to share his experiences and feelings in the accompaniment activities. He is explicit about his fear of talking about his experiences: “For me it was very difficult (...) the others told their stories and cried. This made me feel very unsure of myself and I decided not to

come back to the foundation because of my fear to talk about things”.

In the same vein, a narrator talked about how, during an accompaniment activity, she associated the activity with a traumatic experience. She had to ask to leave the activity because of the fear she felt as she re-lived her experience. “[During the activity] We were holding hands, but I told them that I was going to let go because I had done this before. The first time it was not a game, and it was not good. Your head can send you to hell”.

A narrator told us how in psychosocial accompaniment he could lose his fear to express himself.

Finally, I became confident and said to myself “I have to move on”. The help that they gave me showed me how to solve my problems by talking about them; today I can talk about anything that happened. It does not scare me. I learned to live in the present. If you live in the past you can't do anything.

The same narrator also talked about how during the accompaniment activities he could lose his fear and begin to relate to other people. He recognized that the possibility of trusting other people existed: “[About an activity where a person is guided by another while blindfolded] that activity made me lose my fear. It helped me to feel secure. I said to myself ‘I can do what I have to do with this person's help’”.

One of the achievements of the program was that the persons passed from the condition state of suffering to feel hope. One of the narrators interviewed talked about the intense suffering she felt when she was displaced:

I felt like I was going to die. It was extremely difficult... When I left my village my husband was not with me. He had been missing and I had not heard from him for 20 days. He had disappeared, so I left with my three daughters. It was very difficult because that day they had put a bomb in a bus and nobody could leave town.

Another narrator expressed how the frustration and the devaluation of people she experienced while being displaced, along with the loss of identity references, generated a subjective experience that produced a very deep feeling of insecurity: “It's a feeling of impotence. You feel wiped out. You don't have the strength to get up (...) it's like losing your identity. It's losing 16 years of your life in a place where everybody knows everybody and you felt yourself to be at the center of everything”.

One participant made reference to the suffering they experienced because of the hard conditions in their new location:

Arriving in the city was a difficult thing to do (...) it was a moment of uncertainty, sadness, and pain because of all the things I had left behind. It's very

sad to know that you had a job, a place where you belonged, and a future. You could give a dignified life to your children. But here they have to sleep on the floor, and you have to watch them go hungry. They weren't used to that. It was very hard for me.

The political threats, the loss of hope, the impotence to alleviate the suffering of their loved ones, and being uprooted can cause the displaced to lose the will to live and consider suicide. This was how narrator expressed this feeling in an interview:

I have tried to take poison, and I tried to give poison to my husband and child because what can you hope for from this situation? In various moments, I have thought absolutely horrible things. To compare how we live now with how we lived all our lives has been very difficult for us. My children have said that they want to kill themselves. My son, who drives a taxi, drank a few beers and then crashed the taxi into a post trying to kill himself. My other son, who is in the army, carries a rifle and was going to kill himself. An officer saw him and punished him... They said we prefer to kill ourselves rather than to ask for charity from anyone.

However, we can recognize in the narrations the way in which accompaniment permitted the narrators to give new meaning to their pain. This is how one narrator expressed herself:

The psychosocial part was a space to cry, to feel the pain of the situation, and remember difficult moments. However, remembering those difficult moments gave me the strength to move on. I said to myself, “I can't hold this in”. The first support group session was very painful. I got home that night absolutely drained. I cried a lot that day, but afterwards, even though moments of pain or memories still come to mind, I know that this pain is something I can bear. I know that I am not alone.

Another narrator made reference to the way in which accompaniment gave her a space to release and express her suffering in the company of those who shared and understood her pain:

I cried all the time during that session in the support group. This time was extremely difficult because I had to express on a piece of paper everything that had happened to me. I had to write about the death of my son, the death of my husband... all of that was very painful. We all had to write about things like that and we all cried. It was a very intense experience and a very hard day. However, it brought us together to know that we had similar experiences. Some didn't lose their family members, but they lost their houses, their farms or their cattle. It is comforting to be with these people because we all

have the same pain whatever it might be and wherever it comes from.

Two of the narrators recognized the transcendental nature of accompaniment as a way to alleviate suffering:

When you are in those support group sessions, you forget what has happened. I felt a kind of relief like when your body hurts and they give you an injection and the pain calms down. Slowly, I began to feel relief like I had been relieved of so many things that had happened in the past. I began to feel like I was recovering.

The psychologists shared all of our problems with us. They gave us advice and that advice counteracted our pain a little. They alleviated our sadness a little.

A woman narrated the way in which she recognized that there was hope as she tried to deal with her painful experience. She was able to identify the positive aspects in her life:

It was always painful, but in those moments, I thank God. He took me out of there because He needed me someplace else. So in those moments, I give thanks for the opportunity that He gave me by taking me out of there. Now I see things more clearly and with more objectivity. It was a hard, painful road, but positive in many ways.

When civilians are a military objective, armed groups use social political violence to, among other things, try to destroy social systems and weaken the links of confidence between people. At the same time, traumatic experiences keep the population in a constant state of alert. They must always be on the lookout for a new form of aggression. One narrator stated things like this:

You trusted no one. If somebody got close to me too often, I began to wonder, 'Are there paramilitaries here?' They are in the mayor's office of my town and in the government of my department. Why wouldn't they be someplace else? I had to decide whether I was going to talk or not. Was I going to tell my problem or not. You don't trust people because of what you have gone through.

At the beginning of the program, feelings of mistrust about the program and the other people in it were evident. This is what the same narrator remembers: "That first day, I looked at all the new faces and tried not to talk. I didn't say anything because I didn't know who was there".

However, the confidence between the participants was gradually strengthened. This is how one of narrators described how they felt:

Those first days were chaotic and filled with mistrust. I felt that there was no one to protect me. You trust nobody and you see the enemy in every

face. You don't see good in anyone. Now that I have been to the support groups, participated in the dialogues and everything, I am beginning to see that there still are good people in the world. There still are people who can help you to overcome your problems. People who will listen to you and can give you advice.

It was great to find a place where you could not only receive help, but also share your experiences with others. Everyday was better than the last. I got to know the people around me and now, afterwards, I have gained confidence.

When you recognize that others have similar stories, that their suffering is similar to yours, you discover confidence and the possibility to strengthen feelings of solidarity. Two narrators confirmed this:

[At the foundation] there is confidence. Everybody knows that we are displaced. That is, they know which town we came from and that the guerilla made us leave. In other words, there is a little bit of confidence because everybody goes there for the same thing (...) help.

You feel comforted when you are with people who understand you because everybody feels the same pain. It doesn't matter where you come from or what has happened (...) this helps you. You feel like a weight is slowly being lifted because whenever I tell my story to someone, I know they won't ask me for help, but will listen to me. It's the listening that helps you.

One of the narrators made reference to an activity that was specially designed to reinforce confidence among the participants:

The activity in which we had to cover our eyes I had to do with an older woman. I felt a great deal of responsibility for her (...) I told her that we were going to do the exercise and they are making us cover our eyes. If I have to guide you, don't worry because I am not going to let you fall. If you have to guide me, I hope that you don't let me fall. I trust you. This helped her confidence and we had a lot of fun. We laughed about everything along the way.

It is important to recognize that this process of renewing confidence was limited to the context of the foundation and the people there. One narrator told us this: "It is difficult to relate to people you don't know because they are going to ask if you were displaced. Here you feel more confident and more relaxed".

Discussion

During the investigation, we found that the narrators expressed various feelings including: shame, sadness,

uncertainty, fear, and mistrust. All of these feelings were related to experiencing political violence.

Heller (1985) says that shame is an excellent example of a social affect, in that there is a feeling of being watched and object of fun by others. This is how one narrator describes his shame: "The truth is that I felt shame. I told people where I came from, but I didn't ever tell them I was displaced".

In agreement with Lira's work (1991), our investigation found that people displaced by armed actors suffer uncertainty on a daily basis.

Similar to Lira (1985-1986, as cited in Martín-Baró, 1990) and Martín Baró (1990), our research revealed that the narrators live in a constant state of alert that produces feelings of vulnerability. Therefore, when they express feelings of uncertainty it implies they are living in fear. Furthermore, we found that after living an extreme experience, fear altered their sense of reality in such a way that they live in chronic fear. This chronic fear corresponds to the one defined by Lira (2004).

In the narrations of the participants, we found that they experienced anxiety as a particular type of fear just as Heller (1985) mentioned. They expressed anxiety about public places, and encounters with strangers, including people who looked at them or asked questions, being in a store, on the street corner, or on the bus. All of these people and events were related to the armed actors who had taken away their old life.

Similarly, the participants expressed the inhibition they felt when situations evoked memories of danger, fear and annihilation (Lira, 1990). We cannot skip over the other "subjective effects" (Lira, 1991) of repression: an effect called "the great scar" by Martín Beristain (1999), produced by silencing the daily cause of fear that maintains communities paralyzed and without recourse to action under extreme circumstances: "It's difficult to talk", says a narrator.

According to Samayoa (1990), Martín Baró (1990) and Lira (1990), whose work our investigation corroborates, the psychosocial impact of social political violence, in contexts of repression and war, destroys the possibility of relating to others; It breaks the social fabric and generates the conditions for mistrust, polarization and dehumanization. This occurs because the permanent state of fear confuses and defeats all attempts to change.

In our investigation, we found that only one of the six participants explicitly narrated their transformation of fear. The fact that the other people did not experience the same transformation is understandable because in Colombia we are living a prolonged and escalated armed conflict, and the displaced, with whom we work, live in areas of Bogotá where this conflict is part of everyday

life. In other words, fear is survival. We believe that it is important to move towards a better management of fear, instead of its suppression.

From our findings, we agree with the statements of Navarro and Sarti (2001) relative to the potential of narrative research to understand and manage fear. For the displaced people, their narration can lead to new understandings of the contextualized threat and adversity.

Furthermore, we have to recognize the intimate character of fear as stated by Castilla del Pino (2000); we believe this to be an important area for future investigations to make the invisible visible, the incommunicable communicable, and mitigate the "weight of accumulated fears and their consequences in every day life" (Lira, 2004, p. 242).

In this investigation, the same as in others (Sacipa, 2001, 2003), we have found that forcibly displaced people have been exposed to an intense and painful experience, due to the violence upon their bodies or upon their loved ones. Simultaneously, they must confront material, psychosocial, and cultural losses. Camilo (2002) suggested that we should consider displacement as a traumatic event, which tests the personal and/or social stability of the displaced person. In other words, the displaced person is forced to renounce a series of familial or communal conditions that have been used to build his or her life. Added to the traumatic effect caused by political violence, the displaced persons suffer after displacement as well, and they also suffer the loss of their identities and the loss of their lives, which they were violently forced to leave behind.

The narrations are accord to Correa and Rueda (2000). The frustration and personal devaluation that is implied by political violence generates a subjective experience in which the person finds themselves having to deal with profound insecurity. One narrator told us: "It has to do with impotence. You feel wiped out and without the strength to get up in the morning".

Besides suffering the loss of their identity, of their life as they remember it, longing for what they had to leave behind and suffering for that loss, after arriving in Bogotá the displaced person has to confront a drastically different life, which can be unpleasant and hostile. Daily, they must endure anxiety, and pain as they struggle to find the necessities of life. One of the narrators told us: "to arrive here and to have to watch your children suffering".

The Peruvian poet Chirinos (as cited in Lima, 2005) spoke about the implacable solitude caused by the political violence in Peru during the 80's and 90's, which was reflected by two of our narrators: "I felt very lonely (...)

I cried and I cried. Who could I ask for help? one narrator said. Another said you suffer when you are alone”.

In this complicated form of grief, the displaced suffer multiple losses and frequently they lose hope, feeling that there is no point in staying alive. Some attempted suicide to escape their suffering. One narrator said “I tried to take poison”. Another said “my son took the car and drove it into a post trying to kill himself”. A third narrator said “I wanted to die. I did not want to live anymore”.

When Castro Soto (1998) analyzed what had happened to the more than fifteen thousand forcibly displaced in Chiapas Mexico, he found these same feelings of loss in the population and showed how they produced passivity and paralysis; this dynamic is one of the objects of war.

Along the same lines, Lira (1990) states: war is not just an armed confrontation, it is a total strategy that utilizes fear, dread and frustrations to control the mind of the population by transforming threat and danger into permanent situations.

However, despite the cruelty of war and its perverse strategies to persuade the population, people do not give up. They do not become passive when confronted with armed barbarians; their tears do not disappear in the rain. Their anxiety and pain help them to recover their sense of existence.

According to Frankl (1979), you can take from humanity everything except the most important liberty: the ability to make personal decisions according to circumstances. This spiritual liberty is what gives life meaning. In other words, the way that someone confronts the uncertainties of life, accepts their destiny, and all the pain and suffering that goes with it, presents many opportunities –even in the worst circumstances– to confer a deeper sense of meaning to life. The uncertainties of life provide you with a chance to grow and prove yourself.

Frankl (1994) understood pain as a feeling that any living being can and will have, but it is different from the human. Therefore, to suffer implies taking a stance on your own pain and this is the same as overcoming it, and this has an existential relevance. This spiritual connotation of suffering is different from pain, anxiety and rage.

Furthermore, Frankl (1979) himself found that the principle interest of man is not to find pleasure or to avoid pain. It is to find some meaning to life, for which man is willing to suffer, provided that suffering makes sense. In other words, man’s suffering will stop being an injury in the moment that it makes sense. Martin Baró (1990) affirms that even the suffering of war offers the opportunity to grow for some people. This is how we

found that the forcibly displaced were able to find the meaning of their traumatic experiences and give new meaning to their pain during psychosocial accompaniment.

From the importance given to the support groups, it was evident how much the participants appreciated psychosocial accompaniment. They appreciated how it gave attention to pain that needed to be released and suffering that needed to be expressed. Accompaniment allowed the participants to make sense of their suffering through their stories and narrations. They were able to feel that someone was sharing their pain, and to realize that they were part of a population that has been affected by the absurdities of war. They were able to see themselves as part of a social network that allows them to reconstruct the sense of their lives and come to grips with the senselessness of war. By reconstructing the meaning of their traumatic experiences and suffering, that make up their present reality, it is possible for the forcibly displaced to dream and believe that they can create a new life out of the ashes.

As López (1998) states, the only thing that relieves pain is hope, a flame that projects the power to animate the fight for life and opens the door to future accomplishments. At this point, it is important to note that psychosocial accompaniment has clear limits when trying to give new meaning to suffering. One of these limits is found when the displaced person’s suffering is not relieved by their new environment, in many neighborhoods of Bogotá, where, the forcibly displaced are forced to live with forms of urban violence that depend on the same principles of structural violence and exclusion.

In our investigation, we found that people who have been forcibly displaced have had their social links forcibly broken and, therefore, they have lost their confidence in others. The mistrust that has been generated by political violence breaks down communication because unguarded conversation becomes impossible: “There are things you can not say because you don’t know who is there. You don’t know if they are there to help you or kill you”.

Fear generates mistrust and simultaneously isolates the person. In the words of Castilla del Pino (2000) the person who does not trust is deprived of all interaction that is reliable and conscientious. This is what we found in the displaced that participated in our study; their mistrust made it impossible to talk to others about what had happened. They could not find someone with whom they could share their painful experiences. One narrator said: “without knowing whom to talk to or who you could trust”.

Lira (1991) stated in her work that political violence produces psychosocial consequences such as the

weakening of personal autonomy and self confidence. People are always looking for clues and indications about how they fit into a social group so they do not have problems. We found various statements in our study that support Lira's position. One narrator told us: "The first day of the support group I saw the new faces and tried not to talk because I didn't know who was there".

In the same text, Lira (1991) says that the impact of a political threat is found in internalized fear. It is found in the lack of confidence in personal relations and the impotence produced in vast sectors of society in terms of its ability to react to governmental policy or things in their own lives.

One of the narrators supported this idea when they said: "You don't trust anybody. At least that's what you think. You're always asking yourself 'Are there paramilitaries here?'".

Unfortunately, this is not a new circumstance in Colombian history. One study about the oral history of the Colombian conflict and political violence looked at the circumstances of a Colombian town during various decades of the last century, Muñoz and Sacipa (2001) found that strategies of violence were used by a political party to instill fear and thereby gain unconditional control over the population. The threats and hostility that permeated social relationships created an atmosphere of insecurity and vulnerability for the population, forcing the population to defend itself with mistrust but protecting their own integrity.

In relation to the political culture constructed during war, and its effect on people, Bettelheim (as cited in Lira, 1991) stated that personal integrity can be completely devastated if the belief system on which not only personal integrity is based but which is also used as protection against anxiety and death, does not fulfill its function. It is even worse when it begins to psychologically and physically destroy integrity. Then you feel as though there is nothing left which can offer protection, and you feel as though you cannot be sure of ever finding a concrete, reliable defense ever again.

This statement was corroborated by the narrations in our study that spoke about feeling unprotected by, uncertain about and mistrust of social institutions, which are part of everyday life and might contain armed actors. This is what they said: "Every day was filled with anxiety. They spied on us. I ran away from there thinking these are paramilitaries. I was very uncertain". In this and other narrations, the narrators have internalized political threats, and they have the loss of everything they love or their own death hanging over them like a sword of Damocles: "Sometimes you don't know what to do, where to run, or what you can say". In Lira's words (1991), interpersonal relationships are overrun

by a accusation, mistrust, of authoritarian actors, dependence, submission, apathy, individualism, instability and uncertainty.

People arrive at Fundacion Mencoldes in the emergency phase, which has been documented by López, Pavajeau, Rodríguez and Sacipa (2003). Humanitarian actions are carried out under circumstances in which the recipients are experiencing grave situations of social disruption and material, social and cultural loss. Emergency situations produce emotions such as fear, and affect people's behavior and their manner of confronting reality. Furthermore, they provoke social isolation and withdrawal that makes it very difficult for humanitarian organizations to help. Because of their fear, people do not trust anybody to the point that they restrict their communication and hide their emotions and thoughts. The forcibly displaced are a major challenge for the institutions trying to help them. However, when institutions offer complete and processual support like Fundación Mencoldes, the results can be very important for the displaced affected by political violence.

Accompaniment at Mencoldes helped to renew confidence in several ways. In the first place, basic confidence was renewed through the program that was initially called "Life with a Purpose". Later the name was changed to "Psychological Accompaniment". In either case, confidence was renewed by therapeutic conversations, group therapy techniques and thematic orientations that helped to provide an emotional catharsis in an atmosphere that provided psychological containment. Secondly, the support group sessions were designed to generate reflections about the participants themselves. In this way, they came to realize their common pain and solidarity of suffering. The narrators told us: "It was very comforting to recognize that we were all in the same situation because we all shared the same pain".

The narrations of the participants give support to the theoretical formulation of Erich Fromm (1982) when he states: There is only one creative solution possible that will lay the foundations for relationships between man and his world. That is solidarity with other men and their activities together. Work and spontaneous love are capable of reuniting man with his world, not by primary links but by rescuing his free and independent character.

The third and final dimension of the rebuilding of confidence is the open, committed and humane attitude of the accompanying psychologists. We found various comments like this in narrations: "I admired the sensitivity, commitment and warmth of the psychologist. He made us feel important. Another narrator said: You did not put any barriers".

According to these comments, the way in which the psychologist provides the opportunity to interact closely with others, and establishes an environment in which the participants can express themselves, depends on confidence and confidentiality (Bolívar & Ordóñez, 2004). In these way, we found active listening to be particularly important to the narrators because it made them feel valued. Furthermore, this was how we were able to achieve deep communication with narrators: "When I spoke with them [the psychologists], I felt an inner peace. I let it all go without worrying about what would happen afterwards". Through open communication the narrators could share their understanding of the suffering that political violence and war cause.

Conclusions

This research on the meaning given by forced displaced benefiting from the Mencolde Foundation to the 'Reframing the Experience' Psychosocial Accompaniment process summons narratives and this call turned out to be a space of acknowledgement of the process experienced by the participants. In these narrations, personal changes of the participants during the accompaniment process were made visible, as was also the construction of new forms of interaction (Payne, 2000).

When we analyze the ways people spoke about the "Reframing the Experience" process of psychosocial accompaniment, we concluded that this process meant a field of loving reception for them; a recognition of their dignity as people and the creation of spaces of trust and emotional expression. It also meant an opportunity to reflexively share with other people who had gone through similar experiences, and to learn, from them and with them, ways of coping with their situation.

The accompaniment was recognized as a possibility to strengthen affective bonds inside the families, with the other participants and with the psychologists in charge of the process. It also meant a nice alternative to a daily routine of scarcity and brought special moments of celebration and novelty.

In this process, methodology was positively evaluated by the participants in several aspects; one of them, the successive approach strategy as a meaningful element to create trust. The researchers consider that creativity, a quality that was featured during the whole process, was a valuable asset in the potentiation of the possibilities of reframing of painful feelings that arose from the forced displacement.

Emergency of feelings experienced as a result of the forced displacement and their reframing were elements of strong meaningful force in the process. Fear, suffering, lack of trust and uncertainty thus played a

main role in the visibilization of meanings constructed by displaced people upon starting their narratives. In contrast with these feelings, the research team found the wonderful transformation ability of the forcibly displaced people throughout the narratives, their fabulous capacity of being born again from the ashes of pain, the renewal of hope, all expressed in different ways of reframing the feelings.

People interviewed also identified gains in emotional welfare as achievements of the psychosocial accompaniment, as well as changes in their family life, their relationships with others, their points of view in their own lives and their identity.

Participants in this accompaniment expressed a renewal of their self-recognition, which involved identification of their qualities and the elevation of their self-esteem. The researchers believe that this is a very important achievement if we consider that several authors (Lira, 1991; Martín Baró, 1990) have reported silencing of the people's voices as one of the psychosocial effects suffered by victims of armed conflicts.

Achievements of the accompaniment process are evident and coherent with their intention. For the researchers, nevertheless, the reflexive exercise of asking ourselves about the scope of the process of the "Reframing the Experience" psychosocial accompaniment was a critical practice that allowed us to identify mobilizations and transformations to be done to the process and that set the limits of the accompaniment.

We therefore understand that reframing of fear and problems associated to the "traumatized memory" (Lira, 1991) require a longer and deeper intervention, since personal upheaval is severe in many cases.

Once again, we confirmed that local psychosocial spaces of reconstruction must go together with socioeconomical and political processes that can rebuild life in the country.

Finally, we renew the option of an understanding Social Psychology, which may be called therapeutical, basically committed to victims of war, and in the same vein, a liberating Political Psychology committed to life and to opening roads of humanization. A Psychology as the one envisioned by Martín Baró (1990), which gives way to love, as mutual union and devotion, thus making social coexistence possible.

References

- Bolívar, T. & Ordóñez, X. (2004). *Plan de acción elaborado para acompañar comunidades en situación de desplazamiento* (Informe de trabajo semestral. Proyecto de Práctica Construcción de Culturas de

- Paz). Manuscrito no publicado, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombia.
- Bonilla, G. I., Triviño, J., M. A., & Sacipa, S. (2002). *Significados culturales construidos por jóvenes desvinculados de grupos armados*. Tesis de pregrado no publicada, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá.
- Bruner, J. (1995). *Actos de significado: más allá de la revolución cognitiva*. Madrid: Alianza.
- Camilo, G. (2002). Impacto psicológico del desplazamiento forzoso: estrategias de intervención. En Universidad Nacional, Fundación Dos Mundos & Corporación AVRE. *Efectos psicosociales y culturales del desplazamiento*. Bogotá: Unibiblos.
- Castilla del Pino, C. (2000). *Teoría de los sentimientos*. Barcelona: Tusquets.
- Castro Soto, G. (1998). El desplazamiento forzoso: los dedos que mantienen las heridas abiertas. *Chiapas al Día, 135*, CIEPAC. Recuperado el 19 de octubre de 2005, de <http://www.ciepac.org/bulletins/100-200/bolec135.html>
- Correa, C., & Rueda, D. (2000): La barbarie irracional de la guerra: el desplazamiento. En M. Bello, E. Martín & F. Arias (Eds.), *Efectos psicosociales y culturales del desplazamiento* (pp. 72-99). Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia.
- De la Corte, L., Sabucedo, J. & Moreno, F. (2004). Psicología de la guerra: causas y efectos. En L. de la Corte, A. Blanco & M. Sabucedo, (Eds.), *Psicología y derechos humanos* (pp. 145-187). Barcelona: Icaria.
- Díaz, R. (2004). Atención psicosocial en la ciudad de Bogotá: un caminar de aprendizajes y desafíos. En: C. Martín Beristain (2004), *Enfoques y metodologías de atención psicosocial en el contexto del conflicto socio político colombiano* (pp. 205-222). Bogotá: Terre des Hommes, Italia y Unión Europea
- Fernández, P. (2004). *La sociedad mental*. Barcelona: Anthropos.
- Frankl, V. (1979). *El hombre en busca de sentido*. Barcelona: Herder.
- Frankl, V. (1994). *El hombre doliente*. Barcelona: Herder.
- Fromm, E. (1982). *Miedo a la libertad*. Buenos Aires: Paidós
- Galindo, L. & Sacipa, S. (2001). *Construcción de significados culturales en la tramitación de conflictos, la comisión de derechos humanos y paz: ECOPEPETROL – USO*. Tesis de pregrado no publicada, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá.
- Heller, A. (1985). *Teoría de los sentimientos* (3a ed.). Barcelona: Fontamara.
- Lieblinch, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R. & Zilber T. (1998). *Narrative Research*. California: SAGE.
- Lima, P. (2005). *La violencia política en el Perú: globalización y poesía de los 80 en los "tres tristes tigres"*. Universidad Católica. Recuperado el 19 de enero del 2006, de http://www.andes.missouri.edu/andes/Especiales/PdLTigres/PdL_Tigres1.html
- Lira, E. (1990). Psicología del miedo y conducta colectiva en Chile. En I. Martín Baró (Comp.), *Psicología social de la guerra* (pp. 176 -195). San Salvador: UCA Editores.
- Lira, E. (1991). *Psicología de la amenaza política y el miedo*. Recuperado el 24 de mayo de 2005, de <http://www.dinarte.es/salud-mental/pdfs/Lira>
- Lira, E. (2004). Consecuencias psicosociales de la represión política en América Latina. En L. de la Corte, A. Blanco & J. M. Sabucedo (Comp.), *Psicología y derechos humanos* (pp. 221- 247). Barcelona: Icaria.
- López, M. (1998). El dolor: la sede del conflicto. En I. Cepeda Castro & C. Girón Ortiz (Comps.), *Duelo, memoria y reparación* (pp. 49-59). Bogotá: Fundación Manuel Cepeda Vargas
- López, S., Pavajeau, C., Rodríguez, M. & Sacipa, S. (2003). *Construcción de significación en una población desplazada beneficiaria de la ayuda brindada por el SJR*. Tesis de pregrado no publicada, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá.
- Martín Baró, I. (1990). La violencia política y la guerra como causas del trauma psicosocial en el Salvador. En I. Martín Baró (Comp.), *Psicología social de la guerra* (pp. 65–84). San Salvador: UCA Editores.
- Martín Beristain, C. (1999). *Reconstruir el tejido social: un enfoque crítico de la ayuda humanitaria*. Barcelona: Icaria Antrazyt.
- Muñoz, D. (2003). Construcción narrativa en la historia oral. *Revista Nómadas: Desafíos de la investigación cualitativa, 18*, 94-102
- Muñoz, D. & Sacipa, S. (2001). *Construcción de significados acerca de los conflictos sociales en la historia oral de Caparrapí*. Tesis de pregrado no publicada, Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá.
- Navarro, S. & Sarti, F. (2001). Desenredando el miedo. *Revista Reflexión, 26*, 205-213.
- Payne, M. (2000). *Terapia narrativa*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Samayoa, J. (1990). Guerra y deshumanización: una perspectiva psicosocial. En I. Martín Baró (Comp.), *Psicología social de la guerra* (pp. 41-65). San Salvador: UCA Editores.

- Sacipa, S. (1995). *Construcción de significados por una organización política*. Tesis de maestría no publicada, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá.
- Sacipa S. (2000). Los caminos que suscita la historia. *Universitas Humanística*, 28 (49), 77-83.
- Sacipa, S. (2001, julio). *Hacer la paz en medio de la guerra*. Ponencia presentada en el 24 Congreso de Psicología Política, México.
- Sacipa, S. (2003). Lectura de los significados del desplazamiento. *Universitas Psychologica*, 2 (1), 49-56.
- Sacipa, S., Tovar, C., & Galindo, L. (2005). *Guía de orientaciones para el acompañamiento psicosocial a población en situación de desplazamiento*. Bogotá: CHF Internacional, Colombia.
- Vidales, R., Martínez, D. & Sacipa, S. (2004). *Significados culturales sobre participación ciudadana construidos por personas en situación de desplazamiento que conforman la mesa de interlocución gestión y desarrollo de Soacha y Cundinamarca MIGD*. Tesis de pregrado no publicada, Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá.