From Parent Education to Collective Action: ‘Childrearing with Love’ in Post-war Guatemala

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the implementation and effect of group-based parenting workshops oriented by the principles of liberation psychology in a low-income, hispanicized community in Guatemala City. The objective of this initiative was not only to improve outcomes in the parent–child relationship, but to galvanize the formation of community-based support groups that could have multiple ends. The theoretical foundations of the project are introduced, before illustrating their practical application. Sixteen months post-intervention, largely positive effects were being sustained in parent child relations. The project was also successful in generating social action through the formation of grass-roots women’s organizations. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: parent education; liberation psychology; critical pedagogy; child maltreatment; Guatemala

INTRODUCTION

The challenges facing poor urban families in Guatemala City today have complex roots. In spite of being defined by the World Bank as a middle-to-low income country, Guatemala has one of the most extreme levels of economic and social inequality in the world. Between 1960 and 1996, centuries of conflict erupted into an armed conflict between military and insurgent groups which left approximately 200 000 people dead, 40 000 ‘disappeared’ and perhaps a million internally displaced. Prolonged war has profoundly undermined social institutions and all aspects of civil society, including the very grass-roots organizations that have brought about democratic social change elsewhere in Latin America (Delli Sante, 1996). Although the armed conflict ended in 1996, decades of violence have prevented the consolidation of an independent judiciary and eroded social capital. The post-conflict
period has witnessed a huge surge in organized crime linked to the former intelligence apparatus, murder, robbery and the growth of gang culture. While these factors affect all sections of society, social violence is highest in the ‘precarious settlements’ in the metropolitan area where this study is set. Here, the urban poor live in congested conditions, facing constant financial insecurity and with limited access to health and education and youth gangs, maras, are most active (see AVANCSO, 2000; Winton, 2003).

In 1998, the Archbishop’s Office of Pastoral Care (Oficina Pastoral Social del Arzobispado de Guatemala, OPSAG) undertook a national survey in which 52,000 Guatemalans were asked what they believed to be the causes of violence; what forms of violence they had experienced; what government and society should do to end it; and what the population interviewed was willing to do to create a less violent nation (OPSAG, 1999). This study generated a 20-point action plan which included demilitarization, professional training of the police, inter-ethnic dialogue and the generation of employment. High priority was given to the creation of educational programmes aimed at preventing and eradicating violence within families (male violence towards women and adult maltreatment of children) and promoting self-help groups within communities. This implicitly recognizes that the political and personal occur in a relational and discursive context, which justifies acts of violence or denies their existence (Barudy, 1998). In a highly repressive context, childrearing will tend towards the authoritarian and the punitive (Estrada, Ibarra, & Sarmiento, 2007; Rodas Pineda, 1994). This in turn foments acceptance of violence: there is substantial evidence of the relationship between child maltreatment and gang membership (AVANCSO, 2000; Thompson and Braaten-Antrim, 1998).

Between 2002 and 2004, I undertook doctoral fieldwork on the prevention of child maltreatment in Guatemala (all references in the first person are to ASM, the first author). I focus on this, not because it is the only or the most important pathway towards the reduction of social violence, but because of my prior professional experience as director of an NGO for street living and working children. I am also partly Latin American, which led to my interest in Guatemala and made it easier to conduct research in this complex context.

The paper begins by outlining the principles of liberation psychology. The field context and principal protagonists are introduced before illustrating the way in which these principles have been incorporated into ‘Educando con Amor’, a form of parent education developed in Guatemala. This is followed by a discussion of the effects of the project on participants’ parenting practices and on their engagement with community organizations 14 months after the intervention ended.

PARENT EDUCATION FROM A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Today, the most widely accepted model for understanding child maltreatment has evolved from Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory of human development. The way in which children are raised ‘is multiply determined by forces at work in the individual, the family, as well as the community and the culture in which the individual and the family are embedded’ (Belsky, 1980, p. 320).

In spite of widespread recognition of the ecological model, both the literature and prevention models focus almost exclusively on the individual and inter-individual levels of analysis with a heavy emphasis on the mother and mother–child dyad (Black et al., 1999). This is evidently the case with parenting workshops, which have become a key strategy in the eradication of violent disciplinary practices in the UK and US. Since 1996, the UK
government has made a substantial investment in ‘parent training’ based on behavioural and cognitive principles. Empirical evidence from North America suggests that these programmes have limited medium and long-term effect on the parenting of those who need most help—parents who have histories of maltreatment and who are multiply disadvantaged, poorer, socially isolated and/or single (Barlow et al., 2001; Kane et al., 2007; Morrison Dore and Lee, 1999). Intervention effect sizes tend to be modest, with less change among parents with more challenging personal and/or socio-economic circumstances (Reyno and McGrath, 2006).

The second approach, ‘parent education’, is developed on relational foundations. While they may incorporate a behavioural component, they go beyond this to explore the way in which past experience informs the present (Smith, 1996). Yet with rare exceptions parent education programmes—in the UK at least—rarely encourage parents to act on their immediate, let alone their wider, social environment (Wolfendale and Einzig, 1999).¹

In contrast, certain models of parent education that are emerging in Guatemala are oriented by Latin American liberation psychology (Burton, 2004; Burton and Kagan, 2005). Liberation psychology can be regarded as a set of guiding principles that orient quite diverse theoretical approaches and practices (Montero, 2002). First, a liberation psychology does not abstract people from their social and political contexts. Attention is paid to the way in which social structures (economic, political and cultural) and the ideologies in which these are grounded, are a source of psychological problems (Martíñ-Baró, 1996; Moane, 1993). Consequently, liberation psychology seeks to enable people to move beyond the resolution of their particular personal problem or traumatic event to the assumption of an active role in the transformation of social life (Lira and Weinstein, 1990). Thirdly, it is methodologically eclectic. Liberation psychology ‘both defends the specificity of psychological practice, and the belief in socio-historical determination of social phenomena . . . it employs both the use of psychological techniques already existing in psychology and the creation of new ones in a joint process of participation with the people concerned’ (Burton and Kagan, 2005, p. 71). This diversity is exemplified by comparing the work of psychoanalytically oriented Elizabeth Lira with victim-survivors of torture with that of Brinton Lykes, who used photography to enable a group of highland Maya women to remember, understand and begin to resolve the legacy of war (Lira and Weinstein, 1990; Lykes et al., 2003). Applied to the primary prevention of child maltreatment, then, an intervention grounded in liberation psychology aims at enabling parents to understand the wider context in which they are rearing children, change certain maladaptive parenting practices and help create local community groups ‘at . . . the juncture of private and social life (Barudy, 1998, p. 268). It seeks to be transformative rather than ameliorative, and draws eclectically from different theoretical sources and practices to this end.

Miguel Lopez and his colleagues at the national Association Against Child Abuse (Coordinadora Nacional contra el Maltrato Infantil, CONACMI) who co-designed ‘Educando con Amor’ are oriented by constructivist learning theory. Their work draws primarily from Freire (1970), but also from Vygotsky (1962) and Kolb (1984). Freire’s pedagogy was born out of his experience—in the 1940s—of working as an educator among the subsistence farmers and landless peasants in northeast Brazil (McLaren, 2000). Freire’s educational methods aimed to enable learners to identify, understand, respond to

¹Exceptions include interesting initiatives in Belfast—which ironically, and like much of Central America, is emerging from prolonged internal conflict (Bunting, 2004; Wolfendale and Einzig, 1999).
and combat the oppression that bore on their lives. In this process, the role of the educator is to provoke, or instigate, ideas ‘where educators create a happening . . . designed to engage learners ‘experientially’ and thus encourage construction of knowledge’ (Fenwick, 2001, p. 17). This has a constructivist orientation, since it presupposes the active engagement of participants (Shor, 1987).

Central to Freire’s critical pedagogy are the concepts of problematization’ (a cognitive process by which people begin to treat as ‘problems’ certain phenomena—such as ‘private’ violence—that they have taken for granted) and the development of a more critical consciousness (conscientization). Conscientization is achieved through iterative cycles of praxis—action and reflection—that have as their objective the discovery of that which is good, not just for oneself but for others as well. Aristotle’s ‘Ethics’ (1976) call this phronesis. In the process of critical pedagogy, there will be a teacher, animator or facilitator who enables the refection to take place: the notion is similar to the Vygotskian concept of mediated learning in a ‘zone of proximal development’ (Newman and Holzman, 1993)—the critical reflection is the property of the participants but at this stage they could not attain this depth of reflection without the presence of the facilitator.

Kolb (1984) proposed that action-reflection takes places in four stages. These can be galvanized by an educator. In the first stage, people take part in an action, or have an experience, which ideally has the power to evoke an emotional response. The second stage involves reflective observation on what they have observed and the feelings this has evoked. They should be able to anticipate the effects of acting in a similar way, in another situation. In the third stage, participants create theories about the general principles underpinning their experience. In the fourth, they use the ‘theory’ to guide their action in a new situation. The role of educators (and the term extends here to therapists) is to facilitate dialogue between people, which enables them to re-interpret experiences (such as violence and gendered discrimination) that they have taken for granted and may even have perpetuated. This role is never neutral.

FIELDWORK CONTEXT

Los Cedros is an area of nine villages that are gradually being absorbed into Guatemala City. The majority of the population are working class ladinos (Hispanic or assimilated Maya) who live through a combination of subsistence farming and day labour in the city centre. Half the population lives in extreme poverty, defined as difficulty in meeting basic nutritional needs. However, the area has certain advantages. It was not targeted during the armed conflict, although small numbers of refugees were resettled there. It has built some formal community organizations and has levered services from the municipality. Two aid organizations have had an active role in community development and health promotion: a Spanish-funded agency which had left before I arrived in 2002. A key role had also been played by the ‘Association for Unity and Progress’ (Asociación Unión y Progreso, Asunpro), which used funds raised by World Vision Guatemala (VMG) to promote health, education and income generation in the area. With offices based in a rented house near the main municipal park, six of seven staff of Asunpro were local women who shared similar backgrounds to the very poor families with whom they

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2Names, location and some identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of participants.

worked. The director, Jacobo Torres, was a paediatrician who preferred to spend the bulk of his time in community development rather than in endless treatment of preventable diseases. After visiting two other grass roots partners of VMGs that were stretched with existing work, Miguel and I were given a keen welcome by Jacobo Torres and Miranda Ariosto, a lone mother who was also Asunpro’s health promoter, as well as other community leaders. As Dr Torres said: ‘in 7 years we have installed lighting in the streets, yet we cannot walk down them for fear of being mugged...and these are [boys] we knew, good kids, but the way they treat them at home.’ The Asunpro team were keen to run a pilot parenting programme, as long as there was local support for it, Miguel and I were invited to present our ideas at the health centre the following week. Although this meeting was open to all comers, the health promoter, Miranda, made a particular effort to contact young mothers who often volunteered to help her in activities such as classes on nutrition. A week later, Miguel ran a dynamic workshop on the causes and consequences of violence in which around 50 adults (the majority women) took part. As Miranda would observe a year later, ‘people came out of curiosity’ but their increasing involvement evoked greater commitment and interest. In October and November 2003, 14 women became encuestadoras undertook a household survey on parenting practices in Los Cedros. These women (who came be known locally as the encuestadoras, or research team) were unsettled to discover that near their own modest houses there were newly arrived settlers who lived in extreme deprivation and whose children were clearly undernourished and out of school (see Schrader McMillan, 2007). Uncertain about how they could get involved with these vulnerable families, the encuestadoras decided to take part in the parenting workshops.

The use of severe forms of disciplinary violence, and even of ‘belting’ children, was fairly widespread with one in three parents reporting using the belt (‘cincho’) (Schrader McMillan, 2005). Of the remaining population, one in three smacked children. A fraction of the Los Cedros population (1.5 per cent) reported extreme disciplinary violence, whipping children or hitting them with wooden sticks. One per cent of respondents were evangelicals who use the ‘rod of correction’, generally a flat wooden stick. Interestingly, in spite of the prevailing norms (or perhaps a sign that these are changing), one in four respondents (26.7 per cent) did not practice smacking or ‘belting’. Some had smacked children in the past, but had ceased to do so as children passed infancy.

‘CHILDREARING WITH LOVE’ (‘EDUCANDO CON AMOR’)

In November 2002, 2 men and 25 women arrived for the first session of ‘Educando con Amor’ in the large, covered patio of the local primary school. As they settled in a large circle, their children decamped to the playgrounds where they were watched and encouraged by teenage volunteers. Miranda organized food and kept an eye on younger infants, who would occasionally return to the circle of adults. I had wanted to involve children in planning this project, but soon realized that this would threaten adults profoundly and abandoned the plan. At this stage, children took a passive role, but (as we would discover later) watched and discussed what was happening with each other.

Of the 27 adults who came to the first meeting, 21 would complete five or more workshops. The majority were women in their early 30s, and married or in de facto unions

4Findings have a margin of error of <.010. See Schrader McMillan (2007) for an account of the research process.
with men who worked as seasonal construction workers, with a household income that ranged between US$100–$250 a month, although this was sometimes supplemented by subsistence farming. However, more than half of those who completed the workshops were active in Miranda’s informal women’s network and a few were actively involved in community groups. Although four women were illiterate, the majority had a few years of primary education. All had grown up in poverty, most had experienced bereavement young, most had been physically punished as children and some spoke of severe and sustained physical and emotional abuse. However, all would refer to an emotional attachment with at least one supportive, mature person—a mother, father, grandparent and/or teacher and in one unusual case, a constant childhood friend: the ‘boy next door’ whom the narrator had married.

*EcA* consisted of eight sessions, which lasted about two and a half hours each. A variety of methods was used including facilitated group discussion, diagrammatic mapping of relationships, drama techniques and craft work. The objective of the first session (called ‘the Guatemalan family’) was to help participants to accept that their own family—whatever its configuration—was just as valid ‘a family’ as the nuclear family presented in all manner of advertisements, religious material, NGO material and textbooks. The next sessions dealt with communication, self-esteem, how children learn through play, disciplinary practices and positive reinforcement and adolescence. The sessions built on each other (e.g. the session on positive reinforcement referred back to earlier work on self-esteem). The themes covered are standard fare in many forms of parent training.

One of the key principles of critical pedagogy is that learning must be grounded in people’s own experience, and Miguel took care to communicate to participants that their opinions were important, respected and welcome. This is illustrated by one of the first activities in session one, ‘The Guatemalan Family’.

Miguel asked participants if they would like to describe their family. Jimena, whose family was *ladino* from Verapaz, described her parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts and siblings, while Rosa drew pictures of them with a marker on the whiteboard. As Jimena told her story, Rosa illustrated how new children were born and other people got married or died, and how Jimena moved from the mountains to the city, had children and was left by her husband (Field notes, November 2002).

This simple activity had several objectives. One was to help participants accept the dignity of their own family, whatever its configuration. It would also illustrate how families change over time and introduce the idea that conflict is a part of family life, as when the wishes of children and adults diverge. Conflict, Miguel would suggest, does not need to be expressed as violence. But above all, the activity helped ground the workshops firmly in participants own lives, and show that this time and space belonged to them.

Following a plenary discussion, in which participants told stories about their own families, Miguel threw out the innocuous question: ‘what are families for?’. Participants gathered in small groups to discuss this. They agreed that families existed to enable survival, for mutual support, to give and receive love and to raise children. In theory, everyone agreed that all members are equally entitled to love, respect and the satisfaction of material needs. In practice, this had not been their experience. As 24-year-old Carmen recalled ‘I was told: serve your father, serve your brothers. So when I was 14, I met my lovely boy [mi chavo querido, her husband] and I ran away’ (Field notes, April 2003). The idea that needs of some family members should be entirely subsumed to those of older men began to be problematized.
The next section illustrates the way in which stages of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) applied to one particular workshop session—the afternoon in which we focused on the needs of adolescents in the area.

Miguel asked five volunteers who could read to meet and imagine that they were planning an excursion. Each person had to go round the group proposing plans for this event. However, before doing this, he stuck a piece of paper (with tape) on each of their foreheads. These had the words ‘thief’, ‘lazy bum’, ‘gang member’, ‘liar’ and ‘responsible’. The rest of the group was asked to respond accordingly (Field notes, March 2003).

Each person had the opportunity to wear a badge on his or her forehead. At the end, they reflected on the experience (the second stage of the cycle of action-reflection). People were astonished to see that being treated aggressively or with mistrust motivated them to behave in violent or antisocial ways. In this simple exercise, people engage in an activity that evoked emotion (stage one). The facilitator then encouraged them to stand back and ask ‘why did I feel anger/resentment/confidence/fear?’.

Once the group had discussed this, they could relate their experience to the wider context. Referring back to an earlier workshop on verbal and non-verbal communication, Miguel asked what messages might be implicit in adolescents’ dress and behaviour. ‘Why do adolescents join maras? What other groups might they join if they wanted to be part of one, he asked. None? Why?’ (Field notes, March 2003). People began to discuss local problems—the way in which the football pitch was dominated by older youth and the municipal playground covered with mara graffiti. Miguel read some statistics that illustrated absence of investment in schools and youth employment. The women in the group had little interest in speculating on what central government could or should do, since they felt it had no bearing on their lives—something which is consistent with Booth and Bayer Richard’s (1998) observations about Guatemalan women’s perception of national politics. They did believe it was (just) worth engaging with the Municipality, which had delivered certain basic services when enough pressure was put on it. Fine and Torre (2006, p. 260), sociologists who undertook action research in prison, observed that ‘those of us from the Graduate Centre were much more likely to speak about structural explanations of crime ... while the women in prison [used] the language of personal agency, social responsibility and individual choice within structural inequality.’. Miguel (and I) observed the same in our discussions with the Los Cedros group. It is important here to recognize that the role of the critical educator is not to tell participants ‘how it is’, forcing them to adopt their (structural) theorization, but to work with their developing and situated understandings. Among other considerations, participants may have very good practical reasons for wanting to limit the scope of their analysis, or at least the public voicing of their growing consciousness.

Miguel attempted to draw together the thematic threads of every session into the question ‘where do we go from here?’. The fourth stage of action-reflection involves a commitment to the application of what has been learned to everyday life. In practice, people needed time to think about this. As will be seen later, they gave much thought to the application of what they had learned in everyday life.

_Educando con Amor_ ended in March 2003, 5 months after we had begun and after several interruptions for holidays. Although health promoter Miranda had overseen logistics and (delicious) food for all the workshops, participants told us that they were organizing the graduation party. With hindsight again this was a symbolic milestone, a move from co-ownership of the project to its being led by members of the group. The venue
was decorated with bunting, balloons and homemade posters that referred to the workshops. It was intriguing to observe that the posters (made with the creative exuberance that distinguishes crafts in Guatemala) often referred to subjects such as health and nutrition (key themes in Asunpro’s and VMG’s) work that had not been covered in the workshops.

Every person who had taken part in five or more sessions received a diploma; for the illiterate women it was the first certificate of its kind they had ever received. They became—and referred to themselves—as the graduados/as, the graduates. The final party was a terrific occasion, but it was followed by a period of uncertainty.

During the final workshops, participants made a commitment to continue parent education in the Los Cedros area. Miguel asked colleagues at the psychology department of the State University (Universidad de San Carlos, USAC) if they might identify an intern—a final year student—who would like to facilitate parenting groups, and Rosalía Chuc, a young highland Maya woman, took up the challenge. (USAC psychology students need to complete a thesis, or undertake and report on fieldwork, in order to graduate.) Asunpro offered a modest living allowance. By the time I returned to Guatemala, over a year later, Rosalía was running nine lots of workshops in different parts of the Los Cedros area while Dr. Torres ran training for trainers.

After the workshops ended (in May 2003), I felt that I knew participants well enough to interview them in depth, about their past histories, family life and what they liked and disliked about EcA. We met, for up to 2 hours at a time, in Asunpro’s meeting rooms since their modest homes were too crowded. I also interviewed key local people, such as Miranda, other health promoters and community leaders. Sixteen months later (in July 2004), I returned and interviewed 19 of the original 21 people a second time. Interviews focused on three things. First, what had participants learned from EcA? Secondly, how had their parenting practices changed? Finally, had EcA turned into a sustained, community-based ‘self-help group’ of the kind advocated by respondents to the OPSAG (1999) survey?

‘CHILDREARING WITH LOVE’ 16 MONTHS LATER

The following section presents the main effects of EcA immediately post-intervention and a year later. We have opted for a summary description of the main effects based on interviews with workshop participants, health extension workers, and community leaders as well as observations recorded in field diaries. The intention here is to present an integrated picture of the process and outcomes of change, reflecting the ethnographic reality while recognizing that it is difficult to tease out these elements in a simple empiricist pre-post analysis: in some ways the complexity of change in a community context over time remains mysterious, not because it is inherently so but because of the complex, systemic nature of change and because possible key elements are unobservable.

**Childrearing attitudes and practices**

When in 2003—immediately after the workshops ended—I asked participants: ‘What did you like best?’ all respondents concurred that they liked activities that involved active listening and giving (and receiving!) positive reinforcement. It was not surprising that
when over a year later, I asked what if anything had changed in their relations with children, people immediately described the pleasure and benefits of having increased verbal and physical expressions of encouragement, approval and affection for their children (and, for that matter, their partners and friends).

But what of harsh traditional physical ‘punishments’? In the session on ‘correction versus punishment’, Miguel had asked: ‘What constitutes maltreatment’? Arguments ricocheted around the circle between participants who reiterated that ‘sometimes children just ask for it’, while a minority said that they had made a decision from the time they were children themselves never to hit their own, and had benefited as a result. But over the course of 2003–2004, it was clear that the graduado/as had given the matter much thought. Many women were to tell me later that they recognized that what they had called ‘punishment’ (grabbing the belt, pulling children’s hair and hitting them hard) was often a vent for their own anger—anger exacerbated by worries about money. They also saw that children were more likely to fight when in a confined space. They appeared to stand back and observe their own action and effects these had on children. Although no one had made a commitment to give up the ‘belt’ during the workshops, of the 15 who had ‘belted’ their children, 12 had not only given it up, but preferred not to resort to any physical punishment (even smacking) by 2004. However, this had not been easy. Not only did in-laws, parents and partners accuse them of failing their duty (of being an ‘alcahueta’, literally a pander), but they encountered unexpected hostility from children themselves. For a period of around 2 months (varying from child to child), the mothers who ‘gave up the belt’ found that children pushed them as if testing the new regime and often rejected affectionate overtures (see Schrader McMillan, 2007). To their surprise (and mine), women would say this rejection and ‘provoking behaviour’ helped them understand children’s fear and pain. In an astonishing inversion of traditional (authoritarian) power relations, many sought their (young) children’s forgiveness. Once the transition was over, these tenacious parents found that the nature of the relationship with their children had acquired new depth and that children were far more helpful and compliant.

Problems and challenges: the limits of group-based interventions

In spite of these changes at the level of parent child interaction, two of the graduates of the first group stuck to their right to use the cincho. In one case, a 7-year-old boy was said to ‘provoke’ his parents (particularly his mother) incessantly, although schoolteachers spoke warmly of the child. The boys had been born a twin, and his sibling died within days of his birth. The other person (‘Mirna’) who clung to her cincho was the desperately poor wife of an alcoholic, who also tenaciously defended her belief that washing children made them ill. Mirna became active in the community and in 2004 started work as a care assistant in an old people’s home. However, this entailed taking her 14-year-old daughter out of school to look after younger siblings. EcA and the year that followed has not made any difference to Mirna’s chaotic surroundings and improvised survival strategies and her affection for her children may not prevent another one from dying from deep-rooted neglect, despite years of effort by Asunpro and increasingly exasperated relatives and neighbours.

Both situations are a salutary reminder of unconscious and internal resistance to knowledge in the learning process (Brizman, 1998a), a fact which may be overlooked by critical pedagogy. Educando con Amor (or similar initiatives) needs to be complemented with therapy and/or material support for families with more profound problems.
Finally, EcA had not engaged men. Many fathers were construction labourers whose only free day was Sunday (and workshops were on Saturday or weekdays). Men’s non-participation was not a problem when couple had a good relationship, but aggravated bad relationships. In 2004, two women who had had particularly turbulent marriages (with endless reported ‘put-downs’ from their husbands) described (somewhat triumphantly) how children complemented their mothers parenting and contrasted it unfavourably with their fathers. Family systems perspectives throw light on the way in which children can be drawn into the rival ‘camps’ of conflicting partners (see, e.g. Cirillo and di Blassio, 1998). There is the danger that interventions that involve only one parent can exacerbate such coalitions. Miguel and I discussed this with the group and he decided to deal with this more explicitly in future workshops. It is clearly necessary to find ways of engaging men and tailoring learning opportunities to their needs.

**Action based on experience**

Experiential knowledge, applied in real life, appeared to galvanize graduates’ confidence that they could help friends and neighbours. In 2004, I joined women who gathered over fizzy drinks and snacks under Asunpro’s pleasant awning and described how they had approached cases of maltreatment. If the situation involved a family member or close acquaintance, women acted alone; if a neighbour, they generally teamed up with another friend in the group to address the problem. I would learn later and in confidence that they did not discard the option of informing the courts responsible for child protection, but did so as a last resort. Three cases of sexual abuse were reported, in secrecy because of the grave danger of reprisals.

Drawing on their own experience, informants intuitively recognized the need to ‘knit’ networks around vulnerable families. They frequently referred to a ‘carrot and stick’ approach when confronting maltreatment (incidentally showing the value of knowing the law; this point is made by Herzberger, 1983). Manuela describes this:

> In front of my house, there is a family in which the father really maltreated his children because he took out his frustrations on them . . . I went to see them. I told them about what a good family relationship is, I even told them about laws and that the law had the right to take their children away . . . I told them ‘I used to beat my children, but one learns. Before, I used to grab them by the hair’ (Field notes, August 2004).

Whether Manuela’s (or her networks’) involvement with this obviously troubled family led to any substantive improvements in their lives remained to be seen. But these women’s willingness to intervene suggests that they are feeling an increasing sense of authority: they are entitled to speak of what they know from experience. Curiously, neither English nor Spanish contains a word that signifies ‘knowledge grounded in experience’.

**From personal development to social action**

Several women decided to resume their education or take up opportunities for training. Two of the three illiterate women enrolled for adult literacy. EcA even appeared to have influenced women’s decision to take part in vocational training courses. Four of the five women in Asunción decided to go back to work in low-paid jobs, typically in maquilas, textile factories. Whether this was in their best interests or not would remain to be seen; two
gave up after a few months. After a few months in a maquila, Marina reflected on the dream she shared with her husband: to open a comedor (the modest restaurants in which workers eat lunch). Experiential learning continued as they tested new ideas—even if these did not succeed as they might have wished.

By August 2004, four of the five groups facilitated by Rosalía Chuc had evolved into formally constituted women’s associations. This was an astonishing step because, although it built on the experience of neighbourhood committees, Los Cedros had never had grass roots women’s organizations. Moreover, some of the projects they decided to embark upon entered what would have been considered men’s space. For example, one group of women decided to fix some gaping holes in the road ‘for the good of our children’. Miranda observed: ‘Before, we thought development was about men discussing the sewage system while women sat at home. Now they see that women have a responsibility too.’. This development has certain analogies with the early stages of women’s organizations elsewhere in Latin America (Jelin, 1990).

There was also evidence of a wider sphere of engagement within the city and indeed, at national level. Antonio was elected to the board of a growing, city-wide network of grass roots organizations. Encouraged by Rosalía, two women from Los Cedros took part in a peace and reconciliation meeting organized by highland Maya villagers whose region had been devastated by war. When they returned, grieving for the suffering of which they had been unaware, these two women began to see their local role as mediators as part of a wider movement for peace. As Cornwall (2002) observes, ‘invited spaces’ created with one purpose in mind may be used by those who engage in them for something quite different. Not radically different, but certainly unforeseen.

CONCLUSION

From the perspective of a liberation psychology, treatment of children is conditioned by the wider context. For a change in the parent–child relationship to take place, parents need to understand the way in which external conditions affect their ability to care for children. They also need to reflect on what is, and what is not, of value within their ideological and cultural framework. **Educando con Amor** did, indeed, evoke profound reflection (in many cases for the first time) on phenomena that had been taken for granted. Through experiential learning, participants experienced what it felt like to be silenced and linked this to the norms and values of a culture that silences subalterns, women and children. They tested alternatives in the workshops later, and in real life. Participants who had little confidence were able to gain a sense of individual and collective agency. This is finding its expression in an ‘existential life project’ (Lira and Weinstein, 1990). Thus, EcA enabled people to move beyond a focus on their own lives to a wider social engagement.

This was, of course, enabled by the fact that Los Cedros had already developed neighbourhood committees and (through Asunpro) an informal network of women. Heaney (1995, p. 4) has observed (with reference to Freire’s literacy campaigns in Northern Brazil): ‘opportunities for collective action were antecedent to learning’. The ultimate realization and impact of such a conscientization process cannot yet be fully evaluated: a number of other factors intervene to help or hinder such transformative social change, over time. As Ray (1993) notes, such processes of social engagement do, however, add to the store of ‘social learning’ or as Martín-Baró (1986) puts it, the ‘historical memory’ that remains in the collective consciousness or lifeworld of the population.
available as a resource for utilization in the future. Conscientization and collective action cannot be forced or imposed by outsiders.

In spite of its broad base and conflation of external factors, intra-individual attributes and behaviour, Newman and Blackburn’s (2002) study of children’s resilience to risk factors as diverse as sexual abuse and natural disaster draws attention to consistent findings. These are the presence of at least one unconditionally supportive primary carer, and/or a committed mentor; that is the possibility of establishing (or re-establishing) secure attachment. The second cluster of factors revolves around opportunities to develop a sense of competence and agency. ‘Educando con Amor’ offered the opportunity for both.

As was seen, some families continued to struggle with serious problems 2 years after the first cycle of Educando con Amor—in spite of the social resources available to them. Care must be taken to demarcate the limits of group-based parent education grounded in critical pedagogy. Although there is a strong argument to invest the bulk of resources available in primary prevention, some families caught in patterns of transgenerational violence need access to long-term support, perhaps through forms of therapy that incorporate an ecological perspective and always aims to help integrate people into community organizations. This presents an interesting methodological challenge; Lira and Weinstein’s (1990) work shows that it is possible.

Organizations already involved in child sponsorship could offer such families (who will be among the poorest and most vulnerable) access to therapeutic support, whether this is provided by their own staff or contracted out. Since, as Garavito (2003) argues, the emotional dimension of life needs to be given political priority, a step for practitioners is the proposal of concrete policies to address the mental health of people in precarious urban settlements.

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