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From trauma to resilience: reparation through artistic mediation Stolen babies families from Spain, the “bus experience”

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Abstract

The cases of stolen babies in Spain began at the time of Francisco Franco’s regime (1940-1975) but continued to occur until relatively recently. To be precise, 300,000 babies were stolen during and after the Coup d’Etat. Many of the families now looking for their babies suffer from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). They began to make their cases public only recently in 2011, when they discovered that the institutions had lied to them, and that their babies had not died but had been sold/given up for adoption. After confirming the lack of studies based on the victims we decided advance in the framework of research/action.

The purpose of this paper is first to contextualize the theft of babies in Spain, to examine the process of artistic mediation and creativity that took place between 2016 and 2018 and to analyze how the workshops based in artistic mediation created an impact in the process of group transformation. The “Community resilience, Bus stop” and “Drive your resilient Bus” workshops in which various techniques gave rise to a safe space, not only allowed this population to increase its members but to take its cases beyond Spain’s borders, to travel to other countries and tell their stories from within a resilient and above all creative space.

Keywords: Mediation transformation – Resilience – Stolen Babies – Trauma – Resilient bus – Artistic mediation

1. Introduction

The theft of babies in Spain (1940-1999) was systematic (medical doctors, nurses, Catholic priests and nuns) and based on the concept of eugenics developed by Doctor Antonio Vallejo Nágera used, during the period under Franco, as an argument for the appropriation of descent. After the dictatorship, in 1975, these practices were motivated economically.

In other words, Francisco Franco made drastic changes to the way Spanish society could live, think and act from 1939 until 1975. Franco won the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and went on to establish a dictatorship. Since the end of the Spanish Civil War, its victims lived under repression; the Republicans (known as the Reds) lived in terror during Francoism. Extra-judicial executions took place after the Civil War was over, making the Republicans very wary of exposing themselves by denouncing human rights abuses (Valverde, 2012).

The morality imposed during the dictatorship had different approaches. For example, women were ordered to preserve their chastity and re-conquer the household. Women’s chastity was to be considered the most valuable of all feminine virtues, and those women violating in any way these public morals were to be considered a danger to the social order (Morcillo Gómez, 2015, p.193). Throughout Franco’s dictatorship, women were considered subordinate to men, to medical doctors, to church representatives. Women not in line with the dictatorship were persecuted, imprisoned and murdered - like many men - but they also had to face sexual violence, electric shocks and the theft of their children (Bueno Morales & González Besteiro, 2018). Also, until 1973 single women could not leave the paternal home and become independent before the age of twenty-five.

In that sense, the marginality of women in the labor market had a justification and more so in the case of positions in the administration of justice, where it was considered that women would jeopardize certain attributes that they should not relinquish such as tenderness, delicacy and sensitivity (Women's Political, Professional and Labor Rights Act, 1961; in Ortiz Heras, 2006: 9).

It is hence important to understand the power of manipulation exercised by the Catholic church at this time as it had become, as stated by various authors, the right hand of Francoism: women were obliged to stop working once they got married, and only after 1961 were they allowed to continue working, with their husband's permission. In addition, they also needed marital permission for certain business transactions (Barrenechea López; 2018, p.34). In that sense, Herman states : "They are the organized techniques of disempowerment and disconnection. Methods of psychological control designed to install terror and helplessness and to destroy the victim's sense of self in relation to others" (1992, p.77).

Franco, Vallejo Nágera and the Catholic Church worked together to define a lifestyle that was good and accepted. It was this that paved the way for psychological brainwashing; making people believe that Republicans and people that were not Catholic deserved to be cast aside and even experimented on, so that the "red gene" and other forms of opposition could be eradicated from the community and hence not infect the Spanish population.

Faced with that stated above, artistic mediation in workshops with the families of SOS Stolen Babies of Catalonia and SOS Stolen Babies of Pamplona, aimed to express community resilience at all meetings. To do so, we based our work on that defended by Landau, defining community resilience as: "the capacity to sustain the hope and faith of a community in order to resist trauma and the greater loss, to overcome adversity and prevail, generally with an increase in resources, skills and connectivity between people and systems." (2004, pp.2-3)

Hence Landau specifies that:

Frequently, after undergoing events of extreme stress, communities find it difficult to access resources that could give them the support and strength necessary for their recovery (Hobfoll, 1998; Chemtob, 2002). When this happens, initiatives of mutual support undertaken by trained professionals may mitigate the effects of community loss and trauma, allowing people to support themselves in their recovery process (Landau, 2004a, 2004b; Landau & Saul, 2004).

2. Methods

The concept of artistic mediation on which this paper is based refers to the socio-educational intervention through workshops for those in recovery, to concepts of pedagogy, social psychology and communication aiming for the person's integral development in order to recover and strengthen what is healthy, and promote the symbolic creation of safe spaces in which to overcome conflicts and initiate actions of resilience as part of the transformation process.

For this research we base our work in the methodological concepts put forward by Lewin on the intervention (planification, action and data collection) as well as the work of Fischer (1982) and Wandersman (2003) and their theories on the existing tension between scientific knowledge and the resolution of social problems, and its applications seen from a psychosocial perspective.

Based on the above, this research/action arose from the analysis of historical facts and the observation that currently, none of the families whose babies were stolen had been given special treatment or had taken part in group dynamics looking to help with or make amends for their experiences following the theft/forced disappearance of their babies. In this sense, the work carried out in Argentina through the Grandmothers and Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo organization was taken into consideration, in terms of reparation and work with the victims, as presented by Beristain:

"We must avoid thinking of reparation as a fallacy. We know that nothing can replace the relatives or repair the pain of the victims, or recover lost years of life; in essence the repair speaks of a problem without solution. We are talking more about how we mitigate the damage and what commitment there is for there to be a restitution of the rights of the victims (...) and how we help victims, who have been marginalized from a history, to be reintegrated from an active position and have a social recognition by the State that has violated their rights and by society," (2007).

Faced with this, meetings for members of SOS Stolen Babies Catalonia and Pamplona were held in a neutral space. The actions planned for these meetings were open to changes, last minute modifications or group recommendations. Since 2016 data has been collected from these workshops, and continues to be collected, although for this paper we will take into consideration experiences between 2016 and 2018, during which time seven meetings were held.

To carry out this type of research, Maya-Jariego argues that there are two key points: that of the efficacy of intervention, which stresses the results obtained, and secondly, "the systematization of the practice, that contemplates the comparative analysis of the conditions and effects of various forms of social action" (2007, p.17). In order to systemize such a practice, dates and times were agreed upon, and the group members were asked to make a list of situations they were experiencing and for which they wanted to find tools to help them surpass or experience them from a different perspective. These preliminary actions correspond to that stated by García-Ramírez, Albar-Marín, Morano-Báez & Castro: using this approach (research-intervention) in the study of psychosocial phenomena and problems implies, at least two limitations: social conflict and a need for consensus. Social consensus is essential for the definition of the problems, causes and possible solutions (Price, 1989; 2007, p.52). In this sense, we will take as our reference that defended by Maya-Jariego: the most widespread image of the process of intervention is that of a self-regulating social action (Lewin, 1946), in which operational, evaluating and logistical aspects are involved (Rueda, 1993; 2007, p. 19).

2.1 Workshop planification/production

The content/production of said workshops was based on artistic mediation with its starting point that put forward by Langer in terms of symbolic activity. Langer considers that human beings have a basic need to symbolize, to invent meanings and to fill their world with sense. Which is why she considers the symbolic to be the fruit of an objectifying, revealing and communicative conscience, and art represents the objectification of a purely experiential pattern. Art is a space of symbolization (p.29). Hence, we refer to that put forward by Goodman, art as a dialectical relationship between what we know and what we perceive:

Images can, thus, make and present facts and can take part in the construction of worlds in a very similar way to words, and, in fact, what we call our daily image of the world is the result of the conjunction of verbal descriptions and representations of images (1990, p.141).

We must specify that this is a transformative artistic mediation because through the workshops the aim is to empower, and to create empathy and resilience in the target group. It is a mediation that aims through the meetings to bring positions closer and embrace differences. In this sense, as defended by Moreno González, emotions are considered "an integral part of the process and those taken part are allowed, even encouraged, to experience ambiguity, confusion and uncertainty" (2016, p.45).

Going back to the importance of the symbolic and images in order to construct and reconstruct new spaces and resilient positions, one of the workshop activities was the "Bus" – the outline of a school bus drawn on a sheet of paper was given to the participants, who were asked to invite on to the bus all those people who had done them good during their lives, people who believed in them, who saw very good qualities in them. In each window of the bus, some drew a face or wrote a name or initial that referred to that person. During the workshop, the bus took on new roles, each one becoming the driver who had to welcome all the people who were symbolically ready to accompany them in their new challenge. The bus externalizes the arduous journey of each individual's life, through hostile terrain and silenced paths. The bus is full of allegories and metaphors fostering a possibility for renewal in their lives and also a choice, from a different and resilient perspective, of the people to accompany them in this new path.

The buses often encountered problems along the way, accidents that stopped them from moving, and this demonstrated that many processes advance, stop or simply don't progress at the speed we would like. In their narrative, each person connects with their feelings and shares them with the group. In this sense, the reparation is natural and dynamic, as defended by Herman:

The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates; the group recreates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity" (1992, p.223).

Faced with these experiences in close relation to the story, some of those present transcribe their own accounts of the bus, who got on, how the road was and how they managed to surpass the difficulties encountered. This also allows for the creation of mechanisms/stories related to the bus such as the Bus in Boxes (which should be taking to the road very shortly). In this sense, as defended by Moreno González:

The transcription of oral tales by the artistic mediator, the writing of stories, scripts or any form of the stories constructed by the people we work with, are one more form of artistic creation that allow for the reworking of memory and experience (2016, p.106).

Putting music in the bus and finding solutions, putting into action new possibilities to make the journey more agreeable have all been part of these meetings.

As for conflict, firstly it is understood as a challenge, an opportunity for development that helps to comprehend the idea of a process that at times advances, and at other times does not. Faced with this, the construction of the bus has helped to understand the various phases that a conflict/challenge can represent and to discover new ways to approach it. For this, it is essential that the group feel that it is accompanied in this process. Mañón & Llorente (2003) state that the educator "walks alongside someone" towards the aim of improving the autonomy of those with whom they work (in Moreno González, 2016, p. 85). In this work, during, outside and as part of the workshops, the figure of the mediator and researcher is that of an accompaniment during the process.

The workshops carried out with this target group were divided into three phases: the first, the process of joining the meeting, of joining the space as a safe space of trust; the second refers to the production (here the creative work); and the third refers to the reflection and sharing (here the various individual expressions and experiences arise) and corresponds to what is known in Gestalt psychology as the "realization", following which in many cases comes the question as to what can be done once we have realized.

For the second stage, the creative phase, we base our work on that put forward by Arnheim, that art helps people to find a place in the complexity of the world. We base our work on that defended in "Thoughts on artistic education" in which is suggested the importance that intellect and intuition interact: "A practical knowledge of the principles of artistic form and the ways of communicating meanings using these principles directly helps to learn how to think productively in any field" (1993, p. 69).

3. Results

The first objective reached through these workshops was the creation of a safe space in which people expressed themselves without the fear of reproach or judgement. Hence the group maintained the confidentiality of the workshops. This confidentiality allowed the group to see the workshops as a safe place. Through artistic mediation, trust was ensured while allowing for and fostering artistic/symbolic creation. Reflection on what occurred in the workshops was also undertaken, such as the group's motivation for carrying out actions for social impact such as posters and social media campaigns.

Resilience is part of the group and associated with individual and collective actions. The strategy of the safe bus was used by 95% of the people taking part in the workshops when having to talk about their traumatic event, but it was also used in other challenging circumstances.

There are no prior studies with which to carry out a meta-analysis as these workshops represent a landmark in community work and a first approach of this subject at a national level.

4. Discussions

The workshops analyzed in this study demonstrate that the families of the SOS Stolen Babies of Catalonia and SOS Stolen Babies of Pamplona organizations represent a portion of families whose babies were stolen in Spain. Nevertheless, we also know that those families in Germany, Ireland and England who also went through similar traumatic events have not received any psychosocial accompaniment or reparation either. It is necessary to achieve more concrete progress with this group in various regions of Spain and we must also urgently establish a “Manual of Best Practices” for the press, researchers and documentary makers interested in the subject of stolen babies, to better understand how to address this issue and how to interview the victims.

It is clear that through the artistic mediation carried out in the workshops, the families of stolen babies taking part were able to express what was often never formally expressed. Considering that wounds need to be expressed in order to heal, when these people have expressed themselves in a literal manner they have often encountered silencing responses, such as: “What a horrible thing to have happened to you”, “How did you manage to go through all this?”, “This person is a monster!”, “I can’t believe it, after all this time maybe you’ve changed this story in some way?”, “Please don’t go on, be quiet, it makes me sick to the stomach to hear it”, “What bad luck you’ve had!”. Hence shame, stigmatization, humiliation and guilt are added to the pain of what they already went through.

The sort of questions put to this group of people, and the way in which journalists or documentary makers invade their daily lives with badly thought-out questions or expressions only increases the pain and revives the trauma which, as pointed out previously, has not received the necessary attention/support. This is why, through processes of artistic mediation, they find different means of expressing their experiences, in accordance with Arnheim: “Art is therefore one of the most powerful tools we have in order to have fulfilling lives” (1993, p.48).

5. Conclusions

The workshops carried out in Barcelona and Pamplona for members of the SOS Stolen Babies Catalonia and SOS Stolen Babies Pamplona organizations have achieved a short, medium and long-term impact, with resilience and empowerment concrete factors as seen in the “We are Looking for You” (Te Estamos Buscando or TEB) campaigns (Escudero, 2017, 2018), in which the resilient searching from a place of empowerment is brought to light. These campaigns not only demonstrate the strength of the group but also how the voice and image of the group has reached beyond Barcelona and Pamplona to connect with the whole of Spain and the rest of the world (Mexico, Argentina, Russia, Chile, Venezuela).

These impacts represent a direct connection with one of the premises defended by Herman for recuperation from trauma:

"Sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world (...) The response of the community has a powerful influence on the ultimate resolution of the trauma. Restoration of the breach between the traumatized person and the community depends, first, upon public acknowledgment of the traumatic event and, second, upon some form of community action" (1992 p.70).

The TEB campaigns and the “Te Estamos Buscando” posters created during the workshops have also inspired the organizations to set up the International Platform Te Estamos Buscando, managed by the families of stolen babies and joined by families from England and Germany and the Bus is still a way to connect with new processes/challenges.

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