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CENTRO DE SALUD MENTAL  
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**PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION IN FAMILIES  
WITH A MISSING MEMBER IN A RURAL COMMUNITY  
APPLYING THE ABSENT THIRD MODEL**

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper describes CINTRAS' experience of this year with families who have a missing member in Parral, a town in south-central Chile.

We believe it is important to assess this issue, because it is an expression on one hand of the deep psychosocial damage caused by political repression, and on the other, of new therapeutical challenges generated by the contradictions pertaining to the governments on the way to democracy.

In this particular case, the damage is basically expressed in a frozen, not concluded mourning that has perpetuated considerable psychological damage, causing a wide range of problems at a psychological, medical, family and social level.

We were forced to use several therapeutic alternatives, combining individual, family and group psychotherapy with occupational therapy and other techniques, due to the complexity of the damage our patients presented.

In the therapeutic process we can distinguish two major stages. The purpose of the first stage was to establish the therapeutic link, facilitate the socialization of the traumatic experiences, unfreeze the mourning and assume the loss of the missing family member. In the second stage, described in this paper, we pursued to achieve deeper modifications of the process of family mourning using a systemic focus. We based ourselves particularly in the absent third model developed by the Belgian psychologist Edith Goldbetter, and modified by our team in order to fit it to the needs of the concrete problems we had to face.

The absent third model was proposed by Goldbetter in order to understand better specific aspects of the organization of a family going through a situation of mourning or loss. The author means by loss not only the death or physical disappearance of a member of the family system, but also other situations such as divorce, prolonged absence, imprisonment, etc.

It is interesting to describe this experience based on the absent third as a model, because we share the idea that in the case of a mourning process where the family system has not successfully come to terms with, the presence of a third important party (grandparent, child, sickness, etc.) emerges to occupy the place left

empty due to the loss. This third party would act as the regulator of the affective distances within the different family subsystems affected by the traumatic experience, but at the same time it becomes an obstacle to the ongoing process of evolution and family change.

It is important to mention that our work has the additional particularity of developing the absent third strategy in a group therapy approach.

## **2. Parral, a rural town**

Parral, a small town 350 km south of Santiago, has a population of 39.000 people whose main activity is agriculture. Most of the people are agricultural workers, with high levels of poverty and social alienation.

Traditionally, in this area the land belonged just to a few families. The decade of 1960 marked the beginning of a process of agrarian reform, with the expropriation of the big estates and the passing of the land to the workers organized in cooperatives. These profound socio-economic changes were actively opposed from their beginning by the big local land owners. This opposition became more intense during Salvador Allendes' government (1970-1973) originating a serious social conflict that included also the murder of government officials.

The military coup (1973) unleashed feelings of hatred and revenge against the people involved in the agrarian reform, mainly governmental officials and leaders of the land workers. A few days after the coup the Superintendent of the region was shot to death and the Governor of the zone was detained and has been missing since then. These actions were the beginning of a state terrorism escalate whose main consequence was the forced disappearance of 29 land workers.

The popular organizations in the region were destroyed by political repression. Military and police forces acted jointly in the detention, torture, murder and disappearance of people related to these organizations, producing a climate of social terror among the people.

Near Parral is located the ill famous Colonia Dignidad, a retreat of German settlers. Colonia Dignidad was bestowed with privileges during the military government, and held close connections with the landlords who collaborated actively with the dictatorship in their task of repression and death. There are testimonies that in this place people were tortured, murdered and kidnapped. There is also strong suspicion that the remains of some of the missing people can be found here. In spite of this, no investigation has been carried out.

The police officers who carried out the detention of people that later disappeared are still in service and

the landlords have regained all their power.

### **3. Psychosocial damage**

The psychosocial damage in a rural community such as Parral achieves a special dimension due to the sociocultural context previously referred to.

When CINTRAS arrived in this area (1990) we were able to verify the magnitude of the damage among the families of the disappeared. At a psychosocial level, fear, isolation and helplessness predominated. These reactions evolved toward social resignation and indifference. The lack of supporting networks prevented the elaboration of the situation of repression, which was assumed by the families as an individual fact, without a historical context, leading to the privatization of the damage. In the presence of pain, fatality, skepticism and resignation predominated.

At a family level there was a deep break, as a consequence of the progressive dissolution of the emotional ties among its members. The families were fragmented and showed significant structural changes. Some mothers established close links with a son of the missing member, originating strongly dependent relationships, that caused the damage to increase due to new fantasies of abandon and loss in both components of the pair when the young person became an adolescent.

Fear and pain are activated differently among the different members of each family, expressing themselves in diverse forms of malfunction in the couple and in emotional isolation. Individually, we can observe psychosomatic symptoms such as precocious aging, cardiovascular problems, osteo-articular disease and psycho-organic disorders. The most frequent psychic symptoms are: depression, anguish, sleeping disorders, headaches and symptoms of stress, all recurring and persisting in time, and resistant to common medical treatment.

In this biopsychosocial reality, mourning appeared as a severe unresolved psychic conflict, where the traumatic situation was expressed by the negation of death.

The purpose of the first part of our work was to develop and consolidate a therapeutic link, to stimulate interpersonal emotional relationships and the expression of fears and conflicts, accepting pain.

The work of mourning begins with the elaboration of a real and human contact with the dead person. Seeking to establish contact with the disappeared, we worked in groups leaving empty chairs thus, stimulating an imaginary dialogue with the absent person. In this way, thoughts and emotions could be expressed, empathy and solidarity could be developed, and the mechanisms of negation, isolation,

rationalization and avoidance could be unclosed. The neutralization of the defense mechanisms led to admitting the possibility of death of the missing person.

The publication of the report of the "Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación", that assigned the character of official truth to the cases of human rights violations ending in death during the military dictatorship, added toward the disposition of accepting the death of the loved missing. In this way, family guilt diminished and social responsibility emerged. This led to concrete actions in the struggle for truth and justice, assuming a public social role that made legitimate the demands of reparation.

The first step was to help relatives of the missing people to organize themselves, creating the so called "Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos de Parral", which became part of the community participating in activities such as citizens' groups, sport clubs, etc. After struggling for years the "Agrupación" received an important social recognition when it was given space of its own in the building of the Municipality.

Nevertheless, the long and complex therapeutic process was always facing difficulties and hindrances, due to the way problems related to crimes against humanity during Pinochet's dictatorship have evolved in the regimes of transition to democracy. There has been no real investigation of what happened and, much less, sanctions to those guilty - with the exception of a couple of cases - just a slow but persisting consolidation of impunity.

The violators of human rights in Parral are still free and the demands for truth and justice are continuously obstructed, causing the reappearance of the symptoms in their different levels after some time. This fact pushed us to work out the strategies to maintain the therapeutic process with flexibility and creativity, as described below.

#### **4. Psychosocial intervention using the absent third model**

The second democratic transition government came to office in March 1994. This government characterizes itself by its scarce interest in solving the pending problems related to the lack of truth and justice in the many cases of victims of repression during the military dictatorship. The new government assumed a detached attitude, considering that the pending problems were the concern of the courts of justice, that have the responsibility of giving an answer.

Driven by the will to avoid any conflict with the armed forces, the government is advancing solutions that imply oblivion, amnesty and, consequently, impunity for those responsible. The efforts made by the associations of relatives of the victims, jointly with human rights organizations in order to achieve truth and

justice, are disqualified for leading to confrontation and obstructing the reconciliation of Chile.

In this context, the psychosocial process of the victims, closely linked to sociopolitical phenomena, suffer a new setback. The previously described sequels reappear with intensity. The association of relatives of Parral experiences new frustrations and hopelessness. Pain, depression and psychological impairment are expressed through discouragement and irritability. Once again the psychosomatic disorders appear with intensity: dermatitis, headache syndroms, gastrointestinal disorders, etc., to which anxiety and depression can be added.

Frustration is viewed as a consequence of lack of success in the actions undertaken by Parral's "Agrupación", and there is a tendency to relate the absence of truth and justice to personal incapacity. By substracting their own experiences from the social context, the family members assimilate the situation at a personal level, generating intense relationship conflicts, with mutual recriminations and an important share of guilty feelings.

Personal withdrawal is added to the social isolation of the "Agrupación", as the cohesive sense of the collective is lost due to the paralyzation originated by hoplessness and lack of expectations. Self-absorption and concealment of the damage emerge once again causing strong interpersonal conflicts.

The feelings of guilt and disloyalty toward the absent family member deepen, as the relatives feel incapable of representing them symbolically in front of society and of satisfying the need for truth and justice. The hope of finding their remains for burial disappears, implying the impossibility of performing the funerary rites of our culture.

In order to face this period of retrogression we developed a new line of therapeutic intervention based on the systemic model, applying a modification of the technique of the absent third. This line was complemented with other techniques such as creative expression and relaxation.

According to Goldbetter, in the case of a situation of mourning that the family system has not successfully come to terms with, the figure of the absent third rises to occupy the place left empty due to loss.

In our patients, where the traumatic situation becomes more intense and chronic because of the social dynamics, this is expressed by the appearance of feelings of guilt, of disloyalty

and in conflictive relationships, symbolically expressing the unresolved mourning of the missing family member.

The therapeutic answer we developed, based on the absent third model, integrates those who are

absent or third persons into the therapy with the goal of freeing up family function and at the same time permitting a new understanding of the loss.

The novelty, as we see it, is that we applied this model in a group setting, beyond the family circle. In order to do this we considered the fact that the disappeared of Parral knew each other. The families had shared their lives and additionally, several of the people that today are missing were detained together. The idea was to base ourselves in all the families as a group, in order to collectively experience the loss, and to share the experiences leading to an understanding of this process as a coherent whole and not as isolated and individual facts.

We developed the group therapy work in a fixed therapeutical setting: we used always the same room and treated only one case per session. The chairs were organized in a circle, leaving an empty one to symbolize the absent third. Each session was begun with collective activities of creative expression, aimed at linking the family member more with himself and to unclose the defense mechanisms that precluded a more fluent contact with the missing person. This was reinforced with relaxation techniques.

At the beginning, the expression of the psychoemotional contents was hindered by pain, and also by the tendency to privatize the traumatic experience once again and to avoid mourning. For this reason, we decided to write letters to the missing family member.

After reading the letter we would focus on the emotional contents. The experience would be discussed with the rest of the group, who also participated in the dialogue with the absent person. In this way, frustrations, expectations and feelings of hopelessness were expressed.

In an other moment, the relatives who acted as a supporting network in each session would answer for the absent third to the direct family member. The most important aspect of this dialogue was that the feeling of guilt diminished, because it was stressed that every effort to find the disappeared was being made, and the impact of the socio-political reality on the experience undergone was pointed out. The conclusion was that the missing person was well, that he was not suffering and was peacefully waiting for the moment when he would meet his family once again. In this way, room was made again for the expression of pain, emotional contradictions emerged and redefinitions were set forth favouring a more healthy experience of the mourning process, including it in a coherent socio-historical interpretation that explained the underlying processes.

Thus, it was possible to take one more step toward the elaboration of the mourning process and accepting the loss. Both psychosomatic disorders and relationships conflicts diminished in this way, allowing Parral's "Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos" to assume once again the active attitude of

denouncing the human rights problems that are still unresolved.

## **5. Conclusions**

- a) The approach we have described was developed for groups that did not respond to traditional psychotherapy. As we could not work with the nuclear families in a family approach, the model was modified in order to work with several incomplete families at the same time.
- b) The use of techniques such as the empty chair (from the gestalt therapy), writing letters to the absent third and receiving the support of the group, displaces effectively the defense mechanisms allowing to advance in the psychotherapeutic process, and, therefore, in the elaboration of the loss.
- d) The elaboration of the mourning is favoured by the permanent symbolic dialogue with the absent third, as a form of neutralizing the setbacks of the therapeutic process caused by the socio-political reality of the macrosystem.
- e) The application of the absent third model in group psychotherapy appears to be a good and efficient therapeutic alternative for groups of peoples who have lost a family member because of political repression. We believe this approach could help to relieve the situation in several Third World countries, characterized by a great shortage of professional resources and a high demand for specialized psychotherapy.