

Crucial Conversations: Exploring Intergenerational Trauma in Post-Conflict Guatemala

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Guatemala is a country fractured by years of sociopolitical conflict and instability. In the summer of 2011, I secured grant funding to implement supportive counseling and educational services, in conjunction with a local nonprofit organization, to help local children better understand and process the profound effects of the country's civil war, which ended in 1996. Upon beginning this project, however, it became apparent that many of the children with whom I interacted had limited or no knowledge of the conflict. This article explores the pervasive and systematic avoidance of discussing widespread psychosocial trauma and the potential effects of this avoidance on parents, children, and the greater community. I compare these observations with existing social work and psychology research literature, drawing from the concept of intergenerational trauma, or the transference of trauma symptoms from parent to child. I then discuss whether the avoidance of trauma discussion with children can protect their psychological well-being and prevent the transference of trauma, or if such avoidance leads to increased risk of individual psychological impairment and cyclical community problems. Based upon this analysis, the article finally discusses implications for social workers confronting psychosocial trauma in post-conflict settings.

Guatemala is a country fractured by years of sociopolitical conflict and economic instability. In Huehuetenango, one of the country's many small rural towns composed mostly of indigenous people, hundreds of bodies remain in mass graves as a haunting shadow of the massacres perpetrated during Guatemala's civil war that ended in 1996. In the summer of 2011, I secured funding from the Davis Projects for Peace to implement an initiative to help Guatemalan children better understand and process the profound effects of the country's internal conflict. Two colleagues and I facilitated a peace-centered curriculum for children ages 10

to 16 about the conflict; the local nonprofit organization Committees of Victims concurrently supported children's parents who had lost loved ones.

It quickly became apparent that a significant barrier hampered effective implementation of our program: many of the children had limited or no knowledge of the conflict. Almost all of the parents, it seemed, had not disclosed the full details of their tumultuous histories. Observing interactions within the community, we noticed an absence of discussions about the conflict and its lingering effects. Although based on anecdotal evidence as a foreigner, my observations led me to believe that many children did not seem to receive any information about the civil war from either families or school.

This article reflects on my observations during the project and their potential implications. After providing a historical context and background of the initiative, the article then explores how the systematic absence of discussions of trauma can affect children, parents, and the greater community. The theme of intergenerational trauma, the transference of trauma symptoms from parent to child (Kellerman, 2001), will also be addressed. This article strives to explore whether the avoidance of discussing trauma with children protects their psychological well-being, or if failing to address trauma leads to an increased risk of individual psychological impairment and cyclical community problems. I will argue that social workers in post-conflict settings can assist families and communities in addressing traumatic experiences to facilitate the healing of a repressed or violent past.

Background

A History of Inequality

Guatemala's instability reflects a complex history of violent conquest and inequality. During the Spanish conquest, many indigenous groups—mainly Maya populations—were forced off their ancestors' land as the colonizers forcefully seized huge portions of the country's arable land. The Spanish "exploited the indigenous labor force" for trade, setting into motion dimensions of

ethnicity and oppression that still exist today (Viscidi, 2004). The indigenous population still accounts for the majority of Guatemala's poorest citizens (Freedom House, 2012).

Democratically elected leaders in the 1940s and 1950s attempted to implement land, labor, and economic reforms to help the nation's poor (Calderón, 2011). In 1952, the administration of Jacobo Arbenz enacted agrarian reform to expropriate idle land and distribute it to approximately 100,000 peasant families (WRITENET, 1995). Under intense lobbying pressure from United Fruit—a U.S.-based company and Guatemala's largest landowner (WRITENET, 1995)—and in an era of fear of communism, the U.S. government approved a coup d'état in June 1954 to overthrow Arbenz, who was replaced by a military general (WRITENET, 1995; Calderón, 2011). The subsequent reversal of agrarian reform left Guatemala with greater inequality and the most skewed distribution of land in Latin America (WRITENET, 1995), setting the stage for the Guatemalan Civil War.

The Guatemalan Civil War

The Guatemalan Civil War began in 1960 and erupted over economic and social discord as some unrepresented indigenous Guatemalans joined guerilla groups to rebel against conservative and strict military governments. The Inter-American Human Rights Commission cited the era between 1970 and 1983 as “the worst for human rights violations in Guatemala...at least 50,000 people died in the violence and hundreds of thousands more were internally displaced because of systematic repression by the military” (Calderón, 2011).

In 1982, guerrilla resistance groups, consisting of mainly poor and indigenous Guatemalans, gained strength and support. The Guatemalan government retaliated, launching a counterinsurgency campaign against the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). The result was devastating: more than 200,000 people were killed during the conflict, with state forces responsible for 93% of those deaths, and 83% of the killed were indigenous (Guatemala Commission for Historical Clarification [CEH], 1999). As a result of this widespread violence, the United Nations

and other international actors brokered peace agreements between the Guatemalan government and guerilla groups, signed in December 1996.

The Guatemalan government has since passed legislation criminalizing ethnic discrimination and established institutions to protect the rights of indigenous peoples (Freedom House, 2012). However, due to economic circumstances and “lack of resources and political will,” marginalization continues and legacies of the conflict remain (Cultural Survival, 2008, p. 1).

Huehuetenango, Guatemala

During the government’s counterinsurgency campaign, the bodies of hundreds slaughtered indigenous people of Huehuetenango were hastily buried in mass graves, where many remain today. The horrific memories of the civil war and its human rights violations are still fresh in the minds of many survivors. According to indigenous Mayan belief, a person must receive a proper and dignified burial in a community cemetery to allow his or her spirit to find peace (Palazuelos, 2010).

Motivated to help rebuild their country, some refugees returned home and founded the nonprofit organization Equipo Técnico de Educación en Salud Comunitaria (ETESC, Technical Team for Education in Community Health). ETESC works to help victims of the conflict in Huehuetenango bring closure to the traumatic events through locating mass graves, uncovering and identifying bodies, and helping families obtain death certificates and conduct dignified burials (Palazuelos, 2010). Although significant steps still remain in the effort to achieve closure for many, these processes provides oppressed communities with an opportunity to heal from the past.

Davis Projects for Peace Grant Implementation

Funding from Davis Projects for Peace enabled my involvement with ETESC. ETESC planned to exhume 50 bodies in mass graves during the war and assist families with dignified burial processes and memorial ceremonies. Concurrently, my part-

ners and I worked within five schools in three rural villages, conducting educational and psychologically supportive workshops, to help the children critically understand and process their country's recent past. Groups of children ages 10 to 16 were led through historical storytelling, role plays, theatrical activities, and group discussions.

I learned that many children had limited knowledge of the conflict. They appeared to only partially comprehend that the burial ceremonies were in honor of their relatives; the children did not seem aware of the grim historical context associated with the deaths. In perhaps an effort to protect their children from their horrific memories of the conflict, many parents had chosen not to discuss the past. I also observed that this silence permeated the community. Within families, between adults, and among elder generations, it appeared to be mutually understood that the harrowing past should not be discussed.

Although parental avoidance seemed like a well-intentioned effort to shelter children from facing the traumatic past they had experienced, I feared this could cause unintended negative consequences for the children. Such silence has been shown to potentially affect children's mental health, identity formation, and ability to form trusting relationships with their parents if the truth is uncovered in piecemeal form or far into the future (Coles, 2011). Furthermore, some parents still seemed to struggle through their own healing processes. It appeared improbable that families could fully heal from their own trauma while keeping the past hidden.

Avoiding Intergenerational Trauma

The Effects of Trauma

Trauma can be defined as sustained emotional distress following a disturbing experience (Coles, 2011). A traumatic event may be sudden or unexpected, shocking, a threat to life or bodily integrity, and/or invoke the feeling of intense terror or helplessness (4th ed., text revision, American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The result is behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and/or

physical difficulties directly related to the traumatic experience (Cohen et al., 2006). When a person experiences a traumatic event, he or she may develop Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a set of behavioral and emotional reactions to an extreme stressor (Appleyard & Osofsky, 2003). PTSD can entail persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event, avoidance of stimuli associated with trauma, and physiological hyperarousal, all causing significant impairment to social, emotional, and occupational functioning (APA, 2000).

Moreover, studies of children exposed to orchestrated violence and war exhibit moderate to high rates of PTSD. Children have been shown to experience frequent headaches, disrupted sleep, altered memory performance, difficulties concentrating, trouble socializing, and loss of trust (Kinzie et al., 1989; Saigh, 1991; Schauer et al., 2004).

Vicarious, or secondary, trauma is the transmission of the effects of trauma from the primary victim to a secondary person (Coles, 2011). Although the secondary person does not directly experience the traumatic event, subsequent interactions between the trauma victim and secondary person lead to the development of similar trauma symptoms in both persons. Intergenerational trauma, also referred to as transgenerational or cross-generational trauma, refers to vicarious trauma from parent to child (Coles, 2011). Following circumstances of political violence, the psychosocial trauma experienced by one generation can often “pass” to the next generation (Weingarten, 2004).

Children of Holocaust survivors tend to absorb the psychological burden of their parents, thus causing the offspring to experience a form of trauma themselves (Kellermann, 2001). Trauma symptoms were transferred either through repeated narrative storytelling from parent to child, or through heightened stress levels and abusive tendencies of the parent as a result of trauma (Kellerman, 2001). Survivors of other conflicts, such as the Vietnam War and the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s, have also shown this kind of transference (Lin et al., 2009). Repeated narratives of traumatic events can perpetuate intergenerational trauma.

When trauma affects an entire community, a culture of silence can arise when community members avoid discussing the

trauma (Lin et al., 2009). Survivors of mass trauma often resist talking about their experiences, particularly with their children. Parents frequently avoid discussing their own traumatic histories to prevent re-experiencing the trauma and protect their children from psychological harm (Appleyard & Osofsky, 2003).

Breaking the Culture of Silence

In Huehuetenango, war-related conversations between adults in the community appeared to be short-lived and tense. Although negative effects of intergenerational trauma are well-documented (Gorden, 2011; Yehuda et al., 2001), research also demonstrates that discussing trauma can be therapeutic. Lin et al. (2009) studied Cambodian-American refugee families and concluded that educating children about socio-cultural trauma had a positive effect on fostering intergenerational communication and healing through narrative sharing. Similar results are cited in Somalia, Rwanda, Uganda, and other sites of forced migration and war (Schauer et al., 2004). Although comparing examples requires an understanding of cultural and societal circumstances, examining one context can provide applicable lessons to others.

Discussion of trauma may better enable children to understand their family's past. Such dialogue helps youth integrate their family history into their overall identities and context in which they live, bringing meaning and healing into their lives (Hammack, 2010). Structured and developmentally appropriate discussion mitigates the risk of transmitting intergenerational trauma (Axelrod, Schnipper, & Rau, 1980). Sorsher and Cohen (1997) identified parent communication style as a crucial determinant in a family's ability to adapt in light of a catastrophic or traumatic event. Measham and Rousseau (2010) found a positive relationship between family disclosures of war trauma to children's play, a sign of psychological well-being. A strengths-based approach enables parents to serve an integral role in mitigating intergenerational trauma. Many of the parents in Huehuetenango survived years of conflict and violence, creating tremendous potential for them to engender resilience and coping skills in their children. Parents, as potential mediators between traumatic events

and children's adjustment, deserve significant consideration in the healing process (Gewirtz et al., 2008).

The Long-Term and Societal Effects of Silence

Along with interpersonal and psychological effects of avoiding these conversations, long-term and societal implications must be considered. Younger generations can seize this opportunity to learn from the past, for lack of knowledge may perpetuate a cycle of conflict. Even though educating children about conflicts may endanger their immediate well-being, the true risk may be *not* to educate future generations about the past.

Even now that the war has ended, discrimination and violence toward indigenous Guatemalans persists (Amnesty International, 2011). Children and subsequent generations may unknowingly carry on this discrimination; opening up a dialogue about the conflict and its implications is vital in the movement towards reconciliation and sustained peace. A culture of openness could decrease the prevalence of discrimination as people learn to see the indigenous and elderly as strong and courageous survivors. The next generation could create measures to ensure prevention of future conflicts. Discussing historical events enables survivors and families to therapeutically acknowledge the intergenerational effects that continue to be felt. Societies "...can learn to change for the better in the future [as] the pain and shame of genocide becomes clearer for all to grasp" (Lin et al. 2009, p. 197). By avoiding crucial conversations, a society may not be able to integrate trauma in a meaningful way and wounds may not be healed. The next generation—and the future leaders within its ranks—cannot learn from the past if these discussions do not take place.

Implications for Social Workers in Post-Conflict Settings

Avoiding conversations about past trauma may also impede positive family and identity development. The key, then, to helping parents and children process the past, is understanding *when and how* to discuss the past constructively—in a way that mitigates potentially harmful effects both of the trauma itself and

the discomfort surrounding disclosure. Measham and Rousseau (2010) argue that the timing and manner in which the trauma is disclosed are also linked to children's well-being. There are ways to conduct crucial conversations in a manner that strengthens the parent-child relationship and the mental health of both parties; narrative building and psycho-education are among the proven methods (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Weingarten, 2004). Parents who struggle with mass trauma can grow in awareness of these healing methods and feel empowered to have sensitive discussions in a beneficial, nonharmful way.

As social workers, we can aid families in fostering crucial conversations. First, the social work community must cultivate the skills to understand the intergenerational effects of mass trauma, where the transference of trauma can be mitigated, and specific interventions. Social workers must also appreciate the mechanisms through which parents and children are exposed to the effects of political violence. We can play an integral role in helping clients understand the importance of mourning the pain and losses suffered by previous generations. Individual, familial, and societal acknowledgement and integration of the past are steps towards a peaceful future (Weingarten, 2004).

The helpfulness of trauma disclosure as part of the healing process depends on culture and context (Measham & Rousseau, 2010), so social workers in cross-cultural contexts must first strive to listen to locals and appreciate their social location within the broader context. Gray and Allegritti (2003) argue that for cross-cultural social work to take place, the first step must be extensive *dialogue* between cultural groups on appropriate practices, recognizing that approaches to social work and to grieving differ across cultures. Cross-cultural social work is predicated on two interrelated ideas: first, the interests of local practitioners and communities are integrated into all interventions and treatment plans, and second, local practitioners and clients should take the lead. In the case of the Guatemalan civil war, cross-cultural social work would begin by a discussion on people's experiences today and during the civil war.

Furthermore, increasing the capacity of local communities to be their own agents of change and healing can allow families to

rebuild in their own manner. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) cites a culturally sensitive approach as one “based on respect for and inclusion of their [indigenous peoples’] world-views, perspectives and experiences” (Secretariat of the UNPFII, 2008, p. 41). The UNPFII recently called for full inclusion of indigenous populations in the designing, implementing, and monitoring of all programs that affect them (UNPFII, 2005 via Secretariat of the UNPFII, 2008). Some of their examples can serve as learning opportunities for others. Niños, Familias, y Educación Primero (NFEP, Children, Families, and Education First) in Guatemala and Peru has demonstrated success in creating workshops that enable local *educadores* to lead therapeutic sessions in their own communities (Roberts, 2010).

During my time in Guatemala, I could not help but think of the irony of my presence as a U.S. citizen attempting to educate and rebuild a community that has been affected by the actions of my government. This realization was humbling. Cross-cultural social work practice goes beyond understanding the relevant literature—it is a personal and political endeavor. Crucial conversations in post-conflict Guatemala are just one example in which locally driven cross-cultural social work can be a supportive part of the healing process.

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