Understanding Social Motivation for Encouraging Children's Development

Social Character Studies in Mexico

Sonia Gojman de Millán and Salvador Millán

Abstract: A group of psychoanalysts led the Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis to broaden their clinical perspective gained through working with patients in the setting of a private practice. In this paper we describe participatory action research initiated by a community. We started by interviewing impoverished and economically disadvantaged children, first from a miner's village and later on from a center for children living in the streets. A study on *Attachment and Social Character* of mothers and children as well as the systematic appraisal of the unconscious motivations in the individual's responses to the Social Interpretative Questionnaire are presented. We strive to bring the findings of our social character studies back to the communities themselves. Our purpose is to support or foster possibilities for initiating participatory community-based action projects, aimed at transforming the quality of life and to confront the difficulties and obstacles that emerge on the path to change; furthermore we hope that our research will help to stimulate the development of childcare health policies.

When the inhabitants of Mexico City were shaken by the 1985 earthquake, people throughout the city – from every socio-economic class – responded in a spirit of impressive solidarity. Even though the official political leadership was largely absent, on the grass root and local level people still helped each other. These spontaneous reactions revealed existing latent psychological resources of the population that came to light in the face of the crisis.

149

Sonia Gojman de Millán and Salvador Millán

Since then, the Seminario de Sociopsicoanalisis SEMSOAC has developed projects for working with people who live in difficult conditions, who usually don't have a chance to benefit from the deep understanding of human motivation that psychoanalysis can offer. We strive to bring the findings of our social character studies back to the communities themselves. Our aim is to support and foster possibilities for initiating participative action projects aimed at transforming the quality of life. Ultimately, our purpose is to help people confront the difficulties and overcome obstacles that emerge on the path to change.

We have been working on participatory community-based action projects for almost thirty years. Our efforts started by interviewing impoverished and economically disadvantaged children from a miner's village in order to study the development of their social character traits. The initial study was theoretical but led us to develop a nine-year participatory community-based action project.

A "Monthly Weekend Open School" in a Miner's Village

After we had applied the social interpretative questionnaire SIQ to the community, we started a monthly weekend project of an "open" community school, exploring the possibilities for change through the participatory action project.[1] We collaborated with the students, teachers and parents of the school, and gradually opened to the whole community. Community leaders, men and women, mining leaders, and members of the miners' union gradually became involved (See Gojman de Millán 1993).

The "open school" among many projects staged theater plays written and performed by the children and hosted handicrafts and painting classes for children and adults. A mothers' group formed to discuss everyday trepidations. This was later combined with a group that started separately, a handicrafts workshop group that would creatively recycle simple "waste" materials and used them to make things with practical applications. The

---

[1] Actively participating were Cristina Barros, Carlos Diaz, Tomás Granados, Verónica Espinosa, Carolina Politi, Rafael Ruiz, José Escurdia, Galia Eibenshutz, Sara Burguete, Filiberto Valdiviezo and Sergio Cházaro.

two workshops were combined at the women's request; they felt their husbands would be less likely to object to their Sunday attendance if they returned home with something visible, material, and useful that they had done during the day. The men developed a silver smithing workshop, and finally an Alcoholics Anonymous self-help group was started.

After we discovered some children had hearing and vision problems that impeded their school progress, a Semsoac' member who was a language and hearing therapist worked with children with hearing impairment. We also initiated consultations with mothers that taught them to measure and recognize visual acuity and vision related problems in children. The mothers then volunteered to evaluate the children from the surrounding schools. The miners' union contributed a bus to bring children who needed glasses to Mexico City. We found a hospital that diagnosed them for a very low cost, and we contacted private schools willing to collect eye-glass frames discarded by their students and then donate them to the children who needed glasses.

Our work consisted of visiting the community once a month on Sundays and staying there for about eight hours. We worked with community members who positively surprised us with the extent of their willingness to do voluntary work. Members of our Seminar held two-hour weekly discussions, in which we examined each member's monthly activities during the community visits. At the end of our visits we discussed the meaning behind the children's paintings and the plays they created and performed in. We also examined our own emotional reactions and their meaning in relation to the community's gender battles, poverty and hopelessness.

We compared the initial children's responses to the questionnaire to those administered three years later (Gojman de Millán 1991). The outcome was unexpected. The children were apparently describing less – or experiencing less – maltreatment by their mothers. In the next session of the mother's workshop we asked them if they thought there had been any changes in their homes. Their straight answer was, "We have lowered the volume of our shouting at the children quite a bit, but what has definitely stopped has been the hitting."

Two of the mothers attended a congress on community action projects, where they shared their experiences. They said, "Through the doctors' visits we discovered that our problems were not only ours, that other women

were facing the same kinds of problems and that we were not alone." Later on it was established a local "House of Culture," a government institution created to give space to the community for cultural related activities. An abandoned house, that was redecorated and rebuilt, was used for that purpose. In the end our participation came to a close, when political authorities took over the running of the building.

The Project "Artists for the Streets" in Mexico City

We started this project by administering the SIQ to the children and young adults who attended a "center for street children" (Gojman de Millán and Millán 2004; 2008). We also administered it to workshop instructors and board members of that center, in order to orient our participation in supporting the nonprofit organization called "Artists for the Streets," that was working with children at risk of becoming homeless or already being street children (Artistas por la Calle 2005).

Many children and young people survive on the streets of Mexico City by cleaning car windshields at traffic lights. The project made a permanent space, in an extremely poor suburb, for creative artistic activities for children and youth. It was open and available for them during the day for any time they wanted to attend. At this center the young people and children could do their laundry and get some food. They could also get involved in a variety of workshops in plastic arts, music, working with leather, and performing. When the staff members realized some of the attending girls were pregnant and others were adolescent mothers who carried their babies tied to their backs, they started a special room for babies and some of the mothers participated together in a singing lullabies workshop. Some of the children took part in a workshop fostering a circus spectacle that marched through and performed on the streets. A digital animation project using figurines made of plasticine clay entered into an international competition.

Every two weeks in two periods – in 2005 and in 2012 – SEMSOAC members participated in supervision and psychological counseling of the staff, and creating a safe space for therapeutic listening, which often took the form of crisis intervention. We held weekly meetings with the youth and separate with children. Since attendance was voluntarily, it was sporadic.

Some children came once and never returned. At every session we dealt with emotionally very difficult topics, which sometimes caused bizarre, aggressive and frantic behavior on the part of the attendees. The therapists dealt with the emotionally intense experiences in a once a month supervision sessions.

Social Character and Attachment in Mexico City and in an Indigenous Village[2]

In 1997 we started a research project based on two psychoanalytic theories that share an emphasis on relational processes that forge the psyche: the social character theory of Erich Fromm and the attachment theory of John Bowlby. The project (Gojman and Millán 2000, 2003) studied dyads (of mothers and their infants) from a middle class, urban, mestizo population in Mexico City, and from a rural, peasant Nahua population, from the Mountains of northern Puebla (Sanchez and Almeida 2005). The latter one was in collaboration with a forty-year-old community development project known as PRADE.

We shared our results with two institutions in Mexico City: the breast-feeding league and a natural delivery-training center that collaborated with us. In Puebla with PRADE in it's efforts to enhance the quality of life in the community and to support the local human rights commissions in the area, by providing them with the knowledge on the common manifestations of the psychological effects of mental fragmentation, resulting from adults and children's traumatic experiences.

Care giving quality and social character

We identified the prevailing social character orientations of mothers in the urban and rural groups and sorted them into five socio economic groups:

---

middle-upper/upper, middle-middle, middle-lower, impoverished and very impoverished. Mothers' responses to the interview were written down and typed up by the interviewers. The typed interviews were then scored on the six scales specifically developed by SEMSOAC (Gojman de Millán et al. 2008) for detecting mothers' unconscious attitudes towards their lives and towards their children: (a) sensitivity to emotional needs, (b) lovingness, (c) joy of life, (d) attention to everyday survival needs of their children, (e) passive hopelessness and (f) active-violent hopelessness. We observed whether the individual responses showed a mother to be productive or unproductive and compared the two groups. Within each group, we juxtaposed the responses of the five socio-economic levels (Gojman de Millán et al. 2013).

As we read through the entire interview transcript, we identified and marked the elements that pointed to particular traits as defined in each scale, sometimes in subtle, yet meaningful ways. We then listed them together and we arrived at a point score ranging from 1 to 5, taking into account all the responses and representing them with one number.

Results

(1) The receptive orientation was predominant in both groups. In the urban group the receptive-productive orientation prevailed, and in the rural group the receptive-unproductive orientation was the most common.

(2) We found a statistically significant relationship between mothers' attitudes toward life and toward their children and their basic character orientation – whether productive or unproductive, looking at the urban and rural groups combined[3]

(3) We found significant relationships between basic productive-unproductive tendencies in mothers and the blindly coded attachment assessments[4]. Our results confirm that mothers with productive ori-

---

3 N = 70. Chi-squares varied between 45.316 and 4.015 df = 1, with a probability between .000 and .048.

4 We used three attachment instruments: The Adult Attachment Interview AAI (George et al. 1985; Gojman de Millán 2004; Gojman et al. 2014), videotaped Quality of Care Mother-infant interacting dyads (Ainsworth et al. 1974), and the Strange Situation laboratory procedure SSP (Ainsworth et al. 1978).

154

entations have babies with a "secure attachment pattern" more often than mothers with unproductive orientations [5]. Productive mothers tend to be more sensitive/cooperating in the treatment of their babies[6] and more frequently present Autonomous-secure transcripts as scored blindly on the Adult Attachment Interview.[7]

(4)   Our results suggest that the daily material conditions of existence are closely related to the shared character orientations, especially the tendencies toward productive or unproductive orientations in the very impoverished mothers. Mothers fitting into "a very impoverished category", in the rural group, were almost exclusively unproductive even compared to mothers from the "impoverished" category, the vast majority of whom were productive. The contrast was even greater when we compared the very impoverished to the other socio-economic levels studied in this rural group.

On the other hand upper-middle and upper class mothers in the urban group were more likely to be rated unproductive than middle-lower and middle-middle income groups, although the results did not reach statistical significance. This finding points to our consideration that being able to count on economic resources beyond those required to fulfill basic, everyday life needs does *not* necessarily lead to a better quality of life or care giving. This is seldom consciously acknowledged.

We conducted a follow-up assessment of the children who were assessed on attachment when they were infants and are now eight or nine years old (Gojman, Millán, Gonzalez and Sanchez, in press). This follow-up involved a clinically systematized appraisal of their responses to the SIQ adapted for children from six to fourteen years and their responses to pairs of stories resembling those of Piaget's designed to explore cognitive moral reasoning, such as asking children to draw their family, and comment on their family history.

We are in the process of developing scales equivalent to the six, five-point scales used to score the mother's attitudes towards their lives and their chil-

---

5 Chi square = 7.349 df = 1p < .006
6 Chi square = 16.144 df = 1 p < .000
7 Chi square = 10.353 df = 1 p < .001

dren. We code the children's responses to the SIQ on: joy of living, sensitivity to their own and others feelings and emotional needs, harmonious relations with parents and other authorities, sibling rivalry, passive hopelessness and active-violent hopelessness.

Conclusion

Our work as members of the Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis[8] was aimed to widen our clinical perspective by applying socio psychoanalytic insights to understand the difficulties of everyday life of people in their community including, in particular, the raising of children in economically difficult conditions. We strove to participate in shared initiatives with these groups to develop practical, health enhancing, and developmental strategies for their children. The people have found these efforts stimulating. In the course of our study we realized that people are able to overcome hopelessness and resistance to change as they examine the common civil voluntary and creative alternatives available for them. We consider these findings a parallel benefit to the one offered to the individual in clinical practice when becoming aware of their unconscious motivations.

The SEMSOAC has made progress developing a methodology for conducting empirical studies of social character of women and children in México. The design of our research allowed us address and work with very diverse socioeconomic populations. We have developed special scales to detect character traits of mothers, and we are in the process of developing similar scales for their children. Individual responses to the SIQ have proven to be useful for discovering the effects of unconscious motivation accompanying people in their everyday life concerning behaviors that affect their children's development. Systematically assessing social character can become an excellent tool for stimulating the development of socially re-

---

8 The members who initiated the projects were: Sonia Gojman de Millán, Salvador Millán, Patricia González, Guadalupe Rosete and Guadalupe Sánchez. The members who joined over time were: Ana María Barroso, Carlos Sierra, Angélica Rodarte, Esmeralda Arriaga, María Eugenia Guzmán, Luz Angélica Quintero, Lucina Montes Juan José Bustamante, Mauricio Cortina, José Breton, Belinda Cruz, Isabel Cruz, Patricia Hurtado and Gerardo Hernández.

sponsible health policies, taking psychoanalytic insights out of therapeutic individual context into the social world as Fromm himself did so effectively.

Note

We are grateful to Bob Duckles who helped us editing this manuscript.

References

Ainsworth, M.D., Bell S.M. and Stayton D.J. (1974). Infant-Mother Attachment and Social Development. "Socialization" as a Product of Reciprocal Responsiveness to Signals. In: M.P.M Richards (Ed.). The Integration of a Child into a Social World. London (Cambridge University Press), pp. 99–135.

Ainsworth, M.D., Blehar M.C., Waters E, and Wall S. (1978). Patterns of Attachment. Hillsdale (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates).

Artistas por la Calle (2005). Nadie se dio cuenta nunca. Testimonios. Otras voces. México (CONACULTA).

George, C., Kaplan, N. and Main, M (1985). Adult Attachment Interview. Unpublished manuscript (3rd Edition 1995), Berkeley (Department of Psychology, University of California).

Gojman de Millán, S. (1991). Revaloración del cuestionario interpretativo en una comunidad minera después de tres años de trabajo comunitario (diseño experimental pre y post aplicación a la experiencia de trabajo de grupo). The Final Report to the National Council of Sciences and Technology (CONACYT) México.

Gojman de Millán, S. (1993). A Sociopsychoanalytic Intervention Project in a Mexican Mining Village. In: Wissenschaft vom Menschen – Science of Man. Yearbook of the International Erich Fromm Society, Muenster (Lit Verlag).

Gojman de Millán, S. (2004). Sistemas de calificación y clasificación de la entrevista de apego adulto (versión 7.2, agosto 2010). Unpublished manuscript, Semsoac México. [= Translation to Spanish of M. Main et al. (2002). The Adult Attachment Scoring and Classification System (Version 7.2, July 2003). Unpublished manuscript. Berkeley (Department of Psychology, University of California).

Gojman de Millán, S., and Millán, S. (2001). Attachment Patterns and Social Character in a Nahuatl Village. Socialization Processes through Social Character Interviews and Videotaped Attachment Current Methodology. In: Fromm Forum (English Edition). 5. (Self-published), pp. 38–42.

Gojman de Millán, S., and Millán, S. (2003). Integrating Attachment and Social Character Approaches to Clinical Training. Case Studies from a Mexican Nahuatl Village. In: M. Cortina and M. Marrone (Ed.). Attachment Theory and the Psychoanalytic Process. London (Whurr Publishers), pp. 179–203.

Gojman de Millán, S., and Millán, S. (2004). Identity in the Asphalt Jungle. International Forum of Psychoanalysis, 13 (4), pp. 254–263.

Gojman de Millán, S., and Millán, S. (2008). The AAI and its Contribution to a Therapeutic Intervention Project for Violent Traumatized and Suicidal Cases. In: H. Steele and M. Steele M. (Ed.). Clinical Applications of the Adult Attachment Interview. New York and London (The Guilford Press), pp. 297–319.

Gojman S., Millán S, Sanchez G and González P. (2008). Escalas para calificar a madres o cuidadores principales en las respuestas al cuestionario de carácter social. Manuscrito no publicado. Registro Público México, SEP_INDAUTOR # 032008-120511185300-01.

Gojman S., Millán S., Sanchez G., and González P. (2013) Caregiving and Social Character. Towards a systematization of the Clinical Assessment of Social Character Traits and Their Relation to Mothers' Care Giving Quality in Urban/Rural Mexican Samples. In: Fromm Forum. (English Edition) 17. pp. 35–46.

Gojman de Millán, S. Millán S., Carlson, E., González, P., Guzmán, M.E., Hernández, G., Rodarte, L.A., Sánchez, F., and Sánchez, G. (2014). La entrevista de apego adulto en Español. In: B. Torrez et al. (Ed.). La Teoría del Apego, investigación y aplicaciones clínicas. Psimática Editores. Capítulo 7.

Gojman de Millán, S., Millán as., Sanchez, G., González, P. et al. (in press). Attachment Research in Urban and Rural Mexico. Clinical and Social Implications. In: Ch. Herreman and S. Gojman de Millán (Ed.). Attachment across Clinical and Cultural Contexts. Accepted for publication by Routledge, the UK.

Sanchez, M.E. and Almeida, E. (2005). Las veredas de la incertidumbre. Relaciones interculturales y supervivencia digna. Puebla (Universidad Iberoamericana Puebla, Lupus Magíster).