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After the Conflict:
Training of Group Supervision in Guatemala.

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The political and social background

After having signed a peace treaty in 1996, marking the end of a devastating war that lasted more than 36 years, Guatemala was confronted with the challenge, to reconstruct a society that had only known violence, savage persecution, random killings and massacres for almost half a decade. More than 200 000 people had lost their lives during the so called "armed conflict", 45 000 disappeared without any trace, one million fled to Mexico to live in refugee camps and more than 400 indigenous communities were completely erased from the landscape as a result of the military strategy of scorched earth, leaving a toll of more than 600 massacres in rural and ethnic regions of the country (Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico, CEH 1999). Two Truth Commissions under the guidance of the UN and the Catholic Church, stated unanimously that the majority of the atrocities, i.e. more than 93%, had to be attributed to the army and 3% to the guerrilla (Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica - REMHI 1998, CEH 1999).

The war in Guatemala always had a global and a local dimension: it was drawn from the beginning on, into the cold war, threatening the hegemonic power of the USA in the Central American region, already weakened by the political

transformations that had taken place in Nicaragua and in El Salvador (Molkentin 2002, Kernjak 2006)¹.

But beyond these global factors, the war developed a strong and home-bred racial and even genocidal dynamic and turned out to be one of the longest, bloodiest and most violent wars of South America (Kurtenbach 2003). Both of the Truth Commissions left no doubt that large parts of the population were psychologically damaged and heavily traumatized (CEH 1999, Jonas 2000, p. 63). But the devastating effects of the war and of human rights violations especially affected the marginalized and impoverished, although majoritarian indigenous population, living in remote ethnic communities, many of them not even in touch with the larger world outside. Since the army perceived indigenous people, most of them of Mayan descent, as natural allies of the guerrilla, defenseless civilians were mercilessly and with particular cruelty slaughtered en masse (CEH 1999).² As a result the rural ethnic population made up 83% of the victims of the war (Bornschein 2009:61).³

The main reasons behind the armed conflict were the extremely unequal distribution of wealth and of land⁴ – in combination with the racial discrimination and social exclusion of the indigenous population (CEH 1999). To be Indian always meant to be poor. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Bank confirm this reality, when they point out that 56% of the 13.4 Millions of Guatemalans are poor, 16% even extremely poor, living off less than one US-Dollar per day (UNDP 2005:228). But within the indigenous rural population 90% have to be considered to be poor and 81%

¹ *Under Reagan US-military interventions, CIA-headed intelligence, weapons and counter-insurgency trainings increased to support the Guatemalan army in their efforts to fight the guerrilla, whereas Carter had minimized military support when human rights violation of the army provoked international protest and critique (Torre Rivas 1998).*

² "In the majority of the massacres there is evidence of multiple acts of savagery, which preceded, accompanied or occurred after the deaths of the victims" (<http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/report/english/conc2.html>)

³ Whereas in urban areas people did not even want to believe that there was an ongoing civil war, asking "where is the war?" or "it can't be that there were so many atrocities, we would have noticed them" (Molkentin 2002:278).

⁴ 20% of the population receive two-thirds of all income (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Guatemala). Last reading: 11.7.2010; 2% of the farmers own 56% of the land and 48% of small farmers own 3% of the land (KfW 2007:1).

to be extremely poor (World Bank 1995). Today Guatemala has the fourth highest rate of chronic malnutrition in the world and 70% of indigenous children under age 5 are malnourished.⁵ The cultural, social and economic polarization within Guatemalan society has always been and still is structured along racial lines.

This racial dimension of the war was one of the reasons why the armed conflict in Guatemala, in contrast to the wars in Chile and Argentina, did not find too much of a media echo outside of the country and hardly any international protest. The impoverished, illiterate and politically barely organized indigenous population had no international political lobby to denounce their human rights violations. Even after the war, there was only the UN-Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA), a project to monitor the peace accord implementations, pressuring the Guatemalan government to critically reflect its past and to put all efforts in punishing those, who had violated human rights during and after the war. But within the political elite of the country an attitude dominated to forget and to cover with silence a past that left scars and wounds in the social fabric of society (Barahona de Brito and González-Enriquez 2001). According to this repressive strategy of silencing and threatening those, who wanted to uncover the dreadful acts of the past, none of the well known perpetrators, amongst them the dictator Rios Montt, who was responsible for the worst period of genocidal acts against indigenous communities, were ever taken to court and convicted of human rights violations (Bornschein 2009). Since the Guatemalan army was convinced to have won the war, they only signed the UN- enforced peace treaty reluctantly and as a result the government felt not too much of an urge to fulfill the criteria of a peace-building process, they never believed in. President Arzù even rejected in 1999 to officially receive the 12 Volumes of the Report of the Truth Commission, thus publicly rejecting the recognition of the suffering of the victims of the war (Oettler 2004).

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Guatemala, last reading 11.7.2010

This post-war political atmosphere of denial and repression had severe psychosocial consequences: There was no public space to mourn the dead and the enormous losses and even worse, it was not possible to demand justice in the wake of large scale human rights violations, committed during a dirty and irregular war. Because this would immediately raise suspect to be a sympathizer or even close supporter or worse, an ex-member of the guerrilla. The political repressive climate of the post-war, did not allow any critical reflection of the war. Those, who did not adhere to this unwritten law were simply annihilated, like the anthropologist Myrna Mack, who dared to investigate the tragic situation of the Guatemalan refugees. She was by far not the only one, who was brutally executed to reestablish the law of silence (Fundación Myrna Mack 2004, Bornschein 2009)). The message was clear: To mourn the dead, to denounce the atrocities of the past, to analyze the reasons behind the war, simply meant to risk one's life.

How then would it be possible to rebuild trust in a society, whose social fabric had been severely damaged, maybe even destroyed and where democracy, justice, peace and human rights formally existed, but in reality social and political life was organized according to different and quite repressive laws? Of course, Guatemala is not by any means an exception, as similar experiences of post-conflict societies prove around the globe. But certain is and experiences in Cambodia, Ruanda, Chile and South Africa f. e. have shown that a combination of economic, social, cultural and last but not least psychosocial measures have to be taken, to meet the complex challenges of post-conflict societies, to reestablish peace, democracy and human rights and to break the silence, mending the broken connections.

But considering the special working conditions in psychosocial contexts of work, the question has to be raised, how a training in group supervision, relying on trustful relationships in a group, working with theoretical and methodological concepts, based on the notion of the unconscious, will function, if life and work

in a society obliges its members to silence the past and to deny any historic memory? How then would participants dare to develop a desire to explore and to reflect critical incidents in professional life, if, at the same time, all other desire to explore experiences of the past has to be suppressed? What kind of difficulties, inhibitions, anxieties, defenses and strategies of resistance have to be expected in a training group under these conditions? The central question therefore is: How then can a group training in supervision work and function under repressive political conditions, in a post-conflict society and within a population that has been heavily traumatized and not allowed to mourn its losses?

The organizational background

In Guatemala a whole armada of international organizations entered the country after the war, offering to support Guatemalan efforts in helping to rebuild trust and peace in society. The international network of support was the only way not to leave a fragile peace building process up to a government that would happily allow it to simply fade away, if there would not be strong international pressure and presence to ensure the implementation of the peace treaty.

One of these organizations was the German Technical Cooperation, an official government agency, who had been working in the country for many years and therefore was quite familiar with political and social structures in Guatemala. Drawing mainly from experiences in other post-war societies, the German Technical Cooperation decided, to put more emphasis on psychosocial projects, thus strengthening already existing national efforts that were reaching out to the victims of the war.

Within a long lasting evaluation procedure and in cooperation with Guatemalan NGO's and government institutions, finally a whole array of projects was designed aiming f. e. at empowering indigenous populations and especially

indigenous women, suffering most under the aftermath of the war. Another project aimed at strengthening local and social reconciliation processes and legal reparation efforts, supporting indigenous communities to set up memorials, monuments and museums to commemorate the horror they had lived through. Some of the projects also aimed at capacity building, strengthening capacities of conflict resolution, or offering a university diploma course for indigenous social workers, being engaged in community mental health services.

One of the elements of the peace and reconciliation program was a training in Group Supervision, offered to Guatemalan social workers and psychologists, all engaged in psychosocial fields of work. The previous evaluation process had shown that a large number of social workers and psychologists were working in very difficult areas of work: Some of them organized exhumation processes of mass graves in indigenous communities, talking to families, who expected to find dead family members in the fosse, trying to bear their grief and offering counseling to alleviate their pain after the dead body was identified and the cause of the death was clarified. Some worked with lawyers defending criminals in penitentiary institutions, who turned out to be criminals and victims of torture at the same time. Others worked in ethnic communities trying to offer support to groups of widows, who had experienced mass violations and loss of their husbands and children during the war.

All of these social workers and psychologists were highly engaged and motivated young people, sometimes carried away with their desire to help, trying to heal the wounds and soothe the pain of indigenous families and groups they worked with, offering consolation and hope to restore trust in others and supporting their desire to uncover the atrocities of the past. They all worked in an environment that Becker (2006) defined as a "traumatizing situation". They saw and felt the suffering of the victims of the war and knew at the same time that impunity was the law of the day and that the majority of society denied the

misery, the despair, the suffering and the extreme poverty of the victims of the war.

Throughout various workshops organized by the German Technical Cooperation, slowly hidden issues emerged: All of these social workers and psychologists felt left alone with their sorrow and grief, bearing and sharing so much suffering and pain, they daily experienced. There seemed to be nobody, who wanted to listen to them, who wanted to share their sadness and helplessness. Within their institutions counseling the counselors or group supervision was completely unknown. Therefore any sign of weakness had to be suppressed, it would have been understood as a sign of professional deficiency. They always had to be strong, never failing, never showing any signs of exhaustion. They simply were supposed to function. There could not be any doubt: An enormous, even desperate need for supervision existed: If the health care experts would not find a possibility to digest their painful experiences, the risk of burn-out and the risk of being traumatized themselves would increase. Because without continuous and professional support they might get contaminated by the surrounding trauma themselves and it would not be possible for them to stay healthy and sane, fulfilling their professional tasks. Instead they would be drawn into what is called "secondary traumatization" (Figley 1995), the trauma of the experts dealing, watching or trying to heal traumatized patients.

Therefore the German Technical Cooperation decided to offer a group supervision training, promoting supervisory skills and support, capacity building and instruments to prevent burnout and secondary traumatizations, thus qualifying professionals working in the field of "traumatizing situations".

The concept of the training

It took altogether five years and a number of workshops before the first group analytic training course of supervision could start in September 2005. I was entrusted with the task to work out a design for a group training in supervision and in cooperation with Dr. Vilma Duque, a dedicated Guatemalan psychologist, who turned out to be the heart of the project, we finally had all the necessary approvals of the German Technical Cooperation to start with the project. Since I spoke Spanish, it was not necessary to work with translators, however the theoretical readings and the learning exercises had to be translated into Spanish before the courses began. We could not rely on any major Spanish books or articles about supervision, because nothing seemed to be published in Central America about this issue. But we did find a few books in Spain dealing with supervision, which I acquired and took to Guatemala to be copied for all participants.

The training courses took place in six five-day sessions, spread out over a period of two and a half years. They ran from Monday to Friday in a beautiful colonial style villa in Guatemala City, starting at nine in the morning and ending at five in the afternoon, with lots of coffee and snacks during the breaks, and a delicious lunch at noon on the terrace under a huge avocado tree.

The morning sessions were all dedicated to theory and methodological questions, as well as to learning exercises, the aim being to present difficult theories in a more digestible form. The afternoon sessions were life-supervisions centered around casework, brought in and offered for discussion from one of the participants.

The first training week was organized around certain central questions.

- What is supervision? A method to analyze, reflect on, and understand the dynamics of working relationships.
- How does it work? By establishing a secure space, and a setting with well defined boundaries, by applying group analytic techniques for

interpretation of the dynamics, and by relying on a conductor who is capable of containing the process and promoting confidence in the group's own resources.

- What are the historical roots? They are found in casework as known in social work, and clinical applications in psychotherapy.
- In which fields of work is it applied to? Supervision can be found in profit and non-profit organizations.

Within the second training course, we focused upon group theories, starting with Freud, Lewin, Bion, Balint, Schindler, Cohn and Foulkes, trying to understand differences, as well as similarities. In all of our training courses, it was important to draw attention to transcultural elements of group analytic theory (Brown 1992, Dalal 2002), thus contributing to the acceptance of a group analytic orientated supervision training in a non-European country like Guatemala. Participants connected easily to the idea that all of the group therapists mentioned were refugees, and that in Argentina a group of psychotherapists (Grinberg, Rodriguez and Langer 1957) had applied group analysis very successfully, even with workers in factories. It was also easy to show how Foulkes systematically included family and social structures, as well as legends in trying to understand unconscious levels of group processes. In the course of our training, I would always encourage them to look at supervisory cases with Guatemalan eyes, introducing figures from songs, legends, and poems, which might help them to understand the undisclosed meanings of conflicts.

Throughout the third training course, we concentrated on the essentials of psychoanalytic and group analytic theory and method, explaining basic elements like the unconscious, projection, splitting, identification, mirroring, multiple transference, matrix, etc.

In the fourth training course, we emphasized methods of conflict resolution, such as mediation, and explored how the very structured techniques of

mediation could be applied within the context of supervision. In the fifth training course, team diagnosis and organizational dynamics were the main subjects. Finally, in the sixth course, we focused on the role of the supervisor, and the specific skills needed, reinforcing the idea of abstinence, stressing the importance of empathy, psycho-hygiene, and own supervisory support.

The design of the training was basically group analytically orientated, open for the cultural context in which the training took place, and taking into account the conflict-burdened history of the country. The training combined an integrated course in supervision and conflict-resolution methods. However it did not include experiential elements. They would have been helpful, of course, but since I was the only person available and the German Technical Cooperation most certainly would not finance a second person, it was not possible to mix the role of a teacher and a group therapist. But a number of participants did have previous experiences of psychotherapy.

The participants

Throughout the various workshops we offered to find out, if supervision would be accepted as a specific form of counseling in Guatemala, there were always about 20-25 people from all parts of the country to participate, even if this meant a 5-hour bus ride to get into town. So we spread the news to different institutions, offering a group training in supervision, explaining the contents and hoping, there would be enough participants to arrive and to begin the course.

There were no previous specific assessment talks, we hoped that some of the people, who had already participated in one of the workshops would now decide to enter the group training course to receive a training in supervision.

Exactly 22 young people showed up the first morning, amongst them four indigenous women and one man of Mayan descent, three Germans and one Austrian working already for many years in the country. Even though the

majority of the participants were social workers and psychologists, there were also two psychiatrists, one law student and one teacher from a university, all of them involved with jobs connected to peace and reconciliation processes. Almost without exception they strongly identified with the victims of the war and also in their daily jobs went far beyond any regular labor boundaries to support the claims of reparation and to denounce the horrors of the war and the human rights violations. They understood their job as one possibility to repair the damage the war had inflicted upon the majority of the Mayan population. But of course, not all of the participants shared these views and it turned out in time that at least two of the participants still supported the army's and for that reason, the government's interpretation of the armed conflict and the reasons behind the conflict. Undoubtedly, we had the conflict, splitting the country for ages, right in the middle of our training group. This showed and proved to be a challenge from the beginning on: Two of the Mayan women only participated throughout the first course and never showed up again, not leaving any notice or message, leaving us to our fantasies. Within the two and a half year course five more people left, because they left the country, changed jobs or were not allowed anymore to participate, since heads of the institutions had not realized the duration of the training.

All in all, a group of about 15 people participated more or less regularly throughout the 2 and a half years period, in their majority women and four men.

The theoretical background

critical incidents and challenges

(we had people, who wanted desperately to establish peace, trust ... and)

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