

Book Reviews

Pau Pérez- Sales & Susana Navarro García (2007) *Resistencias contra el olvido. Trabajo psicosocial en procesos de exhumaciones*. Barcelona, Gedisa, 362 pp. (Spanish language publication. Title in English: *Struggle Against Oblivion. Psychosocial work in exhumation processes*)

People that have been *forcibly disappeared* (i.e. presumed to have been killed), in Latin America, have been ignored by the relevant authorities for decades. The first exhumations began in Argentina in 1983 with the regime change. Currently, people and organizations in 14 different Latin American countries are involved in exhumation processes. *Resistencias Contra el Olvido* is a groundbreaking account of the recent history of exhumation processes in Latin America. One of the aims of the book is to contribute to a global process that is currently taking place, of establishing minimum standards regarding psychosocial work before, during and after an exhumation process.

The book is divided into four parts: Exhumations in the context of genocide and massacres; (El Salvador, Colombia, Guatemala, Peru); exhumations in the context of political violence, (Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay); exhumations and social violence (Venezuela, Mexico and Panama) and selected murders under democratic regimes (Ecuador and Honduras). The final chapter provides an overview and recommendations, prepared and agreed on by all 36 authors. Each

chapter gives voice to a special country and follows a general structure: the history and social context of the disappearances, the work of human rights organizations, psychosocial approaches, lessons learned and recommendations. Because of this clear structure *Resistencias Contra el Olvido* allows the reader to look at the same picture from different angles, highlighting different, or sometimes even, contradictory details.

Relatives of those that were forcibly disappeared were the first to establish organizations to coordinate their search for loved ones. In their search for the truth about what happened, why, when, where and by whom, they hope to find justice and rehabilitation on individual, community and societal levels.

All of the contributors describe the difficult, frustrating, discouraging, stressful process in order to realise an exhumation. It is a struggle against illegal and immoral acts by authorities such as: the destruction or tampering of evidence, the provision of false information, hindrance in the identification process, needless delays, statements and press releases that are humiliating for the person who has disappeared and his/her relatives. So far, very few exhumations have led to concrete identification of those that have disappeared. There is success rate of only 3% of individually murdered persons and 30% in the cases of people killed during genocide and/or massacres. More than 99% of the perpetrators have, until now, not been sentenced.

The book also asks the hard question: Is the difficult process, with often retraumatizing

experiences, worth the effort while there is so little chance of success?

It is pointed out that exhumations are part of a larger process. Disclosure of the truth is important, not only for relatives of the disappeared, but also for the society at large. However, the truth is only one part of the Right to a Remedy and Reparation as described in the UN basic principles and guidelines adopted by the General Assembly on 16 December 2005¹. The truth is required to obtain justice, but truth is unfortunately not automatically followed by the persecution of alleged perpetrators. The search for justice can be a difficult and painful process. Reparation, including: *'full and public disclosure of the truth, 'the search for the whereabouts of the disappeared', 'restoration of the dignity, the reputation and the rights of the victim', 'a public apology', 'judicial and administrative sanctions against persons liable for the violations', and 'commemorations and tributes to the victims'* are for some people, even more important than their personal interest.

This book contains a special focus on the psychosocial work involved in the process, which gives it a unique value. In many countries, families get no psychosocial help at all, although some receive support from the family groups themselves (i.e. in Venezuela, El Salvador, Honduras). In other countries, regular psychosocial assistance has been offered (i.e. in Guatemala and Chile).

In Venezuela, a number of families, in cooperation with human rights organizations, were able to form a strong, mutually supportive group. They struggled for recognition of the crimes, and after several years, succeeded in getting the graves exhumed. They even succeeded – with the help of national and international institutions and through mobilization of the public opinion – to get a verdict from the North

American Tribunal, holding the State of Venezuela responsible for the violations. For this group, in particular, the exhumation process was a healing experience.

Chilean and Guatemalan organizations cooperated with special psychosocial teams. From their contributions we learn about the difficulties in finding the right approach towards victims² (neutral vs. involvement), how to fight against the idea of psychosocial work as crisis management, how to establish cooperation with the forensic anthropological teams, how to prepare the relatives for next steps, and how to include cultural values and rites in the work. All of these issues combine to define how the exhumation process is experienced.

This book makes the plea to see the families as key players in the exhumation process and psychosocial assistance is considered to be essential to that end. Psychosocial assistance, in close collaboration with the team of forensic anthropologists, should be available from the very beginning in the exhumation process. To accomplish this includes working on an individual, family, community and social levels in the human, legal and juridical field.

This book is a valuable document for all those working in this field, anyone who is interested in it, and offers a lot to think about. This book also shows the long path required to uncover the truth and to be able to commemorate those who were forcibly disappeared. This book, in itself, is a milestone in the struggle against oblivion.

Ria Stiefelhagen

¹ Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/remedy.htm>.

² The word 'victim' is usually avoided in psychosocial work. The term 'survivor' is preferred to emphasize the resilience of people. However, in international human rights work the word 'victim' is often used to emphasize that rights have been violated and injustice is done to someone.

A world turned upside down. Social Ecological Approaches to Children in War Zones (2006). Edited by N. Boothby, A. Strang & M. Wessels. Bloomeld, Kumarian Press. (Available via www.kpbbooks.com)

This book is about the social world of children in areas of armed conflict. It offers an ecological framework that departs from the view, developed by the Psycho Social Working group, that psychosocial assistance to children in armed conflict areas should not occur through provision of therapy by outsiders, but through holistic support from insiders. Therefore, psychosocial interventions should be based in local communities, and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) should focus on stimulating and supporting local initiatives.

Some of the chapters are about the various important structures existing in the natural environment of children: family, peer groups, school and religious organizations. Each of them can either be a resource, or a risk, to the development of a child. These chapters describe the possible influences of these structures, and some of them give examples on how to support these structures. Other chapters discuss the difficulties of special categories of children, such as children separated from their families and former child soldiers. Or special issues, such as the development of Palestinian children affected by conflict, peer relationships in

conflict and thereafter; the need for post conflict training and livelihoods for excombatant children to reduce the risk of returning to war are considered.

The various authors – all of them pioneers who seem strongly committed to their work – demonstrate the role children may play in improving their own situation, even in cultures where children are usually not heard very well. For example, Kostelny describes how groups of volunteers, called 'child wellbeing committees', were able to reach out to marginalised and vulnerable children and to raise the awareness of the community with regard to the problems of children and opportunities for supporting them. Half of the participants in these child wellbeing committees were under 18 years of age.

I fully agree with the attitude, expressed in this study, that focussing on the resources in the environment of children is usually more fruitful than concentrating on the dysfunction of individual children. However, I also believe that it is very helpful to discuss these resources in relation to the more, or less, universal psychosocial tasks individual children have to face in the various stages of their development. It is also important to take into account the specific environmental factors in a war zone that may complicate dealing with these universal tasks. The book does not offer such a developmental approach: a systematic overview of the various psychosocial tasks connected with particular developmental stages, the psychosocial tasks that may be complicated as a result of armed conflict, and the extra psychosocial tasks some categories of children (such as refugee children) have to deal with. Consequently, the book lacks an overview of the possible contributions of family, peer group, school and religion to deal with these tasks. It therefore also does not bring much order to the already cluttered

field of psychosocial interventions aimed at supporting resource structures.

Although the topics discussed in this book are interesting enough, for field workers the book is not exactly a page-turner. It seems to be written for senior programme staff and for academics that still have to be convinced of the fact that one cannot just pick up Western knowledge and Western

approaches in helping children and parachute them into a war zone. The field worker is tempted to simply search for the examples from practice. Happily, there are many inspiring examples to be found.

Reviewed by Guus van der Veer, developmental psychologist, psychotherapist, former Editor-in-chief of Intervention

Intervention Journal training manuals: now available in several languages

For the past three years, *Intervention* has set itself the task of development and publication of training manuals in the field of psychosocial support in (post) conflict areas. Various respected trainers have drawn on their training methodologies. These texts have been translated into several languages, which can be used by local trainers and aid workers in different countries. To date, two types of training manuals have been developed and translated.

- Paediatrician and child psychiatrist Dr. Anica Mikuš Kos from Slovenia has developed the manual *‘Training of Teachers in Areas of Armed Conflict’*. This manual originally appeared in English and was thereafter translated into Russian, Albanian and Arabic. A further edition in Tamil is currently in publication.
- Psychotherapist Dr. Guus van der Veer from the Netherlands developed the manual *‘Training Counsellors in Areas of Armed Conflict Within a Community Approach’*. This manual appeared originally in English and was thereafter translated into French and Spanish.

These manuals have been disseminated to schools and trainers, and are also being used in North Ossetia, Ingushetia, the Russian Federation, Georgia, the Palestinian Territories, Iraq, Algeria, Kosovo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Sri Lanka, Argentina, Colombia, Peru and various other countries.

Currently, two other training manuals are being developed by trainers and *Intervention*, which will be translated and published.

- Clinical psychologist Dr. Josi Salem-Pickartz from Germany, who is living and working in Jordan, is developing the manual *‘Training Refugees as Peer Counsellors’*. This manual will be bilingual, in both English and Arabic languages.
- Psychologist Prof. Dr. Yvonne Sliiep from South Africa is developing the manual *‘Training in Narrative Theatre’*. This manual will also appear in a variety languages.

The manuals can either be downloaded via www.interventionjournal.com or ordered via the War Trauma Foundation; e-mail: info@wartrauma.nl **Based on the World Bank country classification those from low and lower middle income countries may order the manuals for free. For those from other countries, the War Trauma Foundation will charge postage to send the manuals.**