

Preface

On Violent Conflicts and the Fragile Strength of Peace: Doing Peace Psychology in Colombia

As promoter of this book, edited by Stella Sacipa, professor at Pontifical Javeriana University in Bogotá, Colombia, I congratulate her not only for her capacity to gather the impressive and touching chapters contained in this book, written by first line researchers, but also for the brave defense of peace they all have. For me, working along with Stella has been an opportunity to participate in the organization of this work of science and also of ethics, about a main psycho-political problem concerning peace.

The task assumed by the group named *Social Bonds and Cultures of Peace* (Lazos Sociales y Culturas de Paz, in Spanish) is not a distant experimental research program; it is close to the refugees and victims of violence, near their feelings, their fears, narratives, losses, and hopes; lived with them by way through their accompaniment. This research has been carried out in a country that has been at war and conflict for more than 60 years; a country living in a daily internal strife that has taken too many lives, suffering from a war seeded by political polarization and social conditions, a war that goes far back to the beginnings of the twentieth century. With the exception of the paper by López, Sabucedo Cameselle, Serrano and Borja, who analyzed data provided by a survey, finding a frame made by a main Colombian newspaper, the 13 authors in this book have been doing, at different moments, but with the same objective, action-research works on the current effects of the armed conflict existing in Colombia since the 1950s.

The Colombian Armed Conflict: Its Origins

The historical roots of the political situation that opened the way to the armed conflict in Colombia, go back to 1930, according to Guzman et al. (1962), when the Liberal Party won the presidential election, and to many people's surprise, began

a persecution of leaders and members of the Conservative party. Why such retaliation? Urdaneta Arbeláez (1960, in Guzman et al. 1962, p. 25) said:

The government and Olaya Herrera [Liberal president elected at that time] did all the imaginable efforts to stop the blood shedding and the Liberal directive cooperated with the Executive [power] with the same objective; but in fact [the aggressions] went on and an abyss began to open between the two parties, as well as the vengeance will to sprout, thus bringing in the near future, sad days for the Nation.

Fals Borda (1967) points out a previous antecedent in a first subversion by the Liberal movement, carried out between 1848 and 1854. Perhaps, after the Independence from Spain, in the frustrated hope for a society envisioned by that group but opposed by the conservatism of another group, could be the seed for the excesses of 1930. Perhaps, there also could be found a deep gap between conservatism and liberalism, creating a polarizing social division, whose bases reside in economic interests.

It is important to know that according to historians, in 1930, president Olaya Herrera (from the conservative party), tried to stop the violence against the militants of his party, when a liberal president was elected. Jorge Eliézer Gaitan, Liberal leader killed in 1948, in 1946 presented in a meeting, a “Prayer for Peace”, trying to stop the persecution against the liberals, this time carried out by the conservative militants, then in government. The wounds caused by political hate must have been very deep in both cases, and were still open. About what happened from the late 40s on, Stella Sacipa presents a concise historical and political guide (**Historical Data About the Colombian Violence Strife**), at the beginning of this book, allowing readers to follow what has happened in Colombia since the fourth decade of the twentieth century.

Are those wounds still bleeding? Currently it is not the confrontation between two political parties due to different conceptions about the world, about their country or, about the way to govern it. Other interests have entered in the arena. Now there are three factions and the Colombian army in dispute. The main victims of their violence are the civil population both peasants and urban people suffer the actions of the four armed groups operating in the country. Those aspects are reflected in the victim narratives. The worst part is their confusion, assuming guilt, self blaming for a conflict they have not created, although they have to live with the scars and losses caused by it.

It is very brave to have assumed the task to develop cultures of peace, where the force, the arms, asymmetrical power and destruction, brought upon the population are concentrated in the ranks of the violent ones. There have been efforts to stop the internal strife that is bleeding the country. The first one between 1953 and 1954 shortly lived and followed by a new wave of violence. In 1958, again there was the intent to stop the violence, but it did not last. In the past decade, during the government of President Pastrana, once more, another agreement was proposed, failing once again. The Colombian people want and deserve to have peace. Violence should already be a finished moment in their development as a democratic nation, because so far, violence has been the impediment to build that society with equity and equality, with freedom stopping being a word, and starting to be a way of living.

To construct a new base for peace in Colombia is necessary, and that is what the chapters of this book, show. Reconstructing bits of peace is not what is needed. Not when there has been more than half a century of violence. Two generations have been living among violence and fear, they and those now being born are entitled to a different kind of life. They need to be liberated of violence and its origins.

Psychology can provide a different perspective of the direct and indirect ways sorrow and trauma take from the lives of people, and their effects upon them, both for the victims of direct violence, and for their care-givers. Whoever hears, sees, or works with the accounts and narratives given by the victims of violence, cannot remain unmoved to the violence revealed in them. The results obtained by working to re-establish peace should be a path for what institutions, schools, and governmental policies could begin to do in order to achieve that peace. As I write this, there are, once again, peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the guerrilla (both FARC and ELN), and we hope they will reach peace accords. The other two groups (para-military Self-Defenses and Drug traffickers) will need to be dismantled and give back what they have taken from their victims. Justice is necessary; and the time will be to go on with the practice these researchers have initiated, and other social sciences that are also producing.

Sorrow, Trauma, and Their Effects on the Victims

The chapters in this book show a process of de-personalization of the Other. Others become displaced people, kidnapped people submitted to violence in many of its expressions. They are objects that should obey without asking, without the possibility to have ideas of their own. Women become sexual objects, children too. Prisoners become things, merchandise that can be traded, since as objects, they have a price.

This book presents certain aspects regarding the ways followed by sorrow, trauma, and their direct and indirect effects on the victims. Those aspects are:

The mixture of political persecution and deaths of innocent victims without any political participation other than being citizens produces what could be considered a sort of death by contiguity. Just being at a certain place, nearby that place, or looking like someone, is, according to the perception of the murderers enough to be killed. This also is a trivialization of death: It does not matter who is the victim; the error of the perpetrators does not matter. It is just another person or group being in the wrong place, at the wrong moment; a nobody without a name. The killer's action is just part of his/her job.

Another aspect is that behind those deaths there are no innocent people. The killing has happened because the victim was an Other, meaning not one of Us. The cruelty accounts seem to be a sort of announcement of what will happen to those who do not belong to the killer's group; whose motto seems to be "whoever is not with us, is not like us". In that sense, death, according to that perspective, has no exceptions, it is for all those not belonging in the violent group. Everyone could be killed. That is the knowledge present in the victims' narratives. Death is in those

narratives, as it is part of living in the places taken by violence, from where the victims have to flee. Also, it can be felt in the victims narratives, there is a sort of obsessive persecuting of the Others, wherever they are, resulting in indiscriminating attacks to rural hamlets and villages.

From the perspective of someone that is not living the violent conflict in Colombia, war seems to have become a life situation creating another need for people: to learn how to live in war, how to avoid the conflict, what not to say, how to take care of themselves and of those that depend of others. That means developing defense mechanisms, “just in case of,” because something could happen. The hardworking condition of the Colombian people helps them to prepare the actions necessary to palliate the harm, learning how to overcome fear, while living in fear.

What to Do with Peace Psychology

The chapters in this book contribute to Peace Psychology by describing, analyzing, and critically discussing, the psychological effects of a cruel armed conflict with a long history, within a split society. The authors present ways to fight the effects of a war on its victims, obtained by their close work with them, avoiding themselves possible dangers. The use of participatory action-research has been the best way to carry out their task, accompanying, being with the victims, patiently hearing, answering, doing together, as can be seen in their chapters. Participation as the base for their task is present in nine of the ten chapters. Thus, the behavioral analysis made by Ballesteros, points out that “metacontingency is the relation between interlocking behavioral contingencies” (Chap. 2), expressing in behaviorist terms, the importance of participation, reminding that contingent relations are a “technical term that resumes behavior as an event in function of a set of historical and contextual factor” (Chap. 2). The readers will also find what these researchers—actors have found in the psychosocial effects of that conflict, on those people whose lives have been damaged, whose bodies and souls keep scars that will stay with them, constant reminders of the suffering. The other chapters give account both of the cruelty exerted upon the victims; and, more important, they show the ways to cure their psychological wounds, and they teach the possibility for the victims of developing the strength in order to construct new lives.

The Effects of the Armed Conflict

Regarding the armed conflict, its damages for society and for its victims, the nine chapters address the following aspects:

- The institutionalization of indirect sources of violence, trying to erase memories, eradicating knowledge about the past and about the crimes committed by

the four armed groups (guerrilla, self-defenses, drug traffickers and national armed forces). The use of “institutional lies” based on the selective manipulation of the information. Official polarizing of the conflict with the social legitimacy of powerful social groups, and the justification of their crimes and lies; plus the stigmatization of victims and other groups (Vidales, Alzate et al., Wilson et al.).

- The forced displacement of groups and individuals that save lives while at the same time, leaves in them the scars of mistreatment, abuse, and losses. The absence of social support, the destruction of communities and, of the invisible social networks that build society, due to that displacement and the killing of people (Novoa-Gómez, Sacipa, Tovar).
- Use of strategies to impose impunity and to uproot memories of the physical and psychological suffering lived by the people along so many years of armed conflict (Alzate et al.; Vidales).
- Responsibility for a new cause of poverty, and for feelings of helplessness, guilt, and hopelessness (Ballesteros de Valderrama, Lopez et al., Muñoz, Novoa-Gómez et al., Sacipa, Tovar).
- Need to fight social and government inefficacy; to have a well informed public opinion; to know the resources investment in the armed forces compared to what is given to programs such as that of the displaced people (Ballesteros de Valderrama).
- The ways in which discourse in the media, as well as in politicians discourse, construct the other.

Constructing a Culture of Peace and Doing Clinical Psychosocial Support

Suffering can be so intense that all horizons leading to peace may disappear for the victims of a war, due to the constant harassment and abuse of the civil population. What the authors have been doing during the last 10 years has an evident psychosocial dimension, but at the same time it also is clinical, as well as political. The following lines are a tight description of their answers to the effects of war, previously resumed, and the construction of peace.

- Developing and strengthening resources in the victims. Also, empowering them on the bases of their own capacities, by way of social accompaniment and the use of clinical and social techniques, and developing coping strategies (Novoa et al., Sacipa, Tovar).
- Memory, and specially the recovery of collective memory, as a main resource and democratizing process (Vidales), and, a dignifying way for recovering their self-esteem (Novoa et al.).
- Developing solidarity, trust, hope, and respect for the Other. All ethic aspects with positive effects in social life and in the individuals (Sacipa, Tovar).

- Revealing the truth and denouncing the perpetrators. Obtaining public acknowledgment and legal recognition of damages caused. That is justice (Novoa et al.).
- Working on warlike masculinities and femininities developing by people (most of them children or teenagers) kidnapped, captured or attracted by armed groups. By rethinking reintegration, and transformation when some of those people leave the groups and return to society, is necessary for their new life (Muñoz).
- Work on the negative feelings of the victims (fear, sadness, shame, uncertainty, and mistrust), using the victims narratives analyzed and discussed both individually and collectively. Re-signifying, that is re-elaborating those feelings by sharing traumatic experiences with other people that have suffered in the same way, those developing the sense of being useful, as well as developing hope in the future. Re-elaboration of the sense of suffering (Sacipa).
- Government problems, such as: inadequate management of poverty in the country. Need to fight social inefficacy. Lack of security for the people. Denying the existence of a conflict and considering dissidents as terrorists. Talking about violence as the problem, instead of working on violent actions. (Ballesteros de Valderrama).
- Understanding the problem from the perspective of cultural practice, therefore, considering the necessity of developing functional/contingent relations reinforcing social conditions based in the aspects considered in the previous paragraphs, based in the construction of a Peace culture in Colombia (Ballesteros de Valderrama).
- And finally, using that most powerful weapon: discourse as producer of realities covering realities, displaying the fog of a language pronounced with a forked tongue (Lopez, Sabucedo, Barreto, Serrano and Borja).

References

- Fals Borda, O. (1967) *Subversión y Cambio Social* [Subversion and Social Change]. Bogotá, Colombia: Tercer Mundo
- Guzman, H., Fals Borda, O. & Umaña Luna, E. (1962) *La Violencia en Colombia. Estudio de un Proceso Social* [Violence in Colombia. Study of a Social Process]. Bogotá, Colombia: Tercer Mundo.

Psychosocial Approaches to Peace-Building in Colombia

Sacipa-Rodriguez, S.; Montero, M. (Eds.)

2014, XXI, 155 p. 2 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-04548-1