



Sociopschoanalytic Experiences in Participative-Action Community Projects: On Facing Social Character

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As a professional, living in a large city means a way of life more or less circumscribed by the clock, the university and the academy. Capitalism exalts individuation and independence (to some extent the paternal) and pathologizes fusion, dependence and communality (to some extent the maternal). Knowledge is produced out of theory, which comes from above, with a strong influence from the great masters of knowledge, the "Maitre," as Turkle pointed out in her research on psychoanalytic politics, and as psychoanalysts well know. The intention is to link theory with practice, clinical work with research to return to the theories, without the opportunity of taking into account the collective, community and popular knowledge (an interdisciplinary point of view). Research can be conducted along the lines of participatory research-action, in an attempt to involve oneself not only in self-reflection but in social reflection.

The bridge

Erich Fromm's central hypothesis - the concept and the role of social character - has been understood and put into practice by the Seminar of Sociopscho-análisis A. C.¹ in Mexico, as giving

¹ The Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis members are: Salvador Millán, Sonia Gojman, Guadalupe Rosete, Patricia Gonzalez, Ana María Barroso, Carlos Sierra, Cristina Duarte, Clotilde Juárez, Ana Carolina Fon-

the psychoanalysts a chance to contribute to understanding society, i.e. to social analysis. In consequence this also contributes to an understanding of the social context and its influence on the formation of the unconscious.

Faced with the de-humanizing living conditions of modern society which ignore the central value of the human being it is necessary to express concern for other human beings beyond the frame of psychoanalysis in classical therapy.

For Fromm himself, social character and the social unconscious are precisely the missing link between the economic base and Marx's ideological superstructure. Community and social experience, put in the framework of social character theory and connected with clinical psychoanalysis is so to speak a bridge between individual analysis and analysis of society. This is how J. Boltvinik², a political economist at the University of México puts it in his analysis of Fromm (*El Psicoanálisis Social de E. Fromm*, 1987). For this author, the concept of social character lays an appropriate bridge between microanalysis and macro analysis:

tes, Angélica Oviedo, Angélica Cortés, Silvia Rosas, Estela Palma, Esmeralda Arriaga, Juan Jose Bustamante, Mauricio Cortina, Angélica Rodarte, Guadalupe Sánchez.

² Boltvinik, J., *El Psicoanálisis Social de E. Fromm*, in: *Anuario 1987-1988*, Instituto Mexicano de Psicoanálisis A.C., México, 1988, pp. 159-170.



**Microanalysis → Social Character
 → Macro analysis**

Particularly if we are not happy with the advance of modern society or if the experience of society is painful our appreciation of modern society that surrounds us has diminished. In the Seminar of Sociopsicoanálisis, we believe that we as psychoanalysts can, due to a genuine concern for others alleviate the experience “of normal people” of what Fromm called the “pathology of normality.”

To work in close-up meetings with people that are coming from different social and economic backgrounds enriches researchers, who understand themselves also as subjects of research, because of unconscious levels of mutual influence between social groups and inter-subjectivity.

Since there is a growing spirit of communication across schools and generations, I would like to speak on behalf of my Seminar colleagues and share the history of our social experiences. These experiences have developed in various parallel processes:

- Social Character Studies or Participatory-research.
- Community Projects or Investigative participation.
- Training psychotherapists with a socio-psychoanalytic orientation.
- Group journeys and meetings with other study groups

**Social Character Studies
 (Participatory Research)**

The social history of the Seminar begins with the participation of one of its founding members³ in an international study of peasant village women, their life changes and fertility.⁴ At the end of the 1970s in Mexico, women with 12 or more pregnancies still found. The study contin-

³ Sonia Gojman and Salvador Millán founding members, in 1984.

⁴ Tinker et al., 1977: *Village Women - Their Changing Lives and Fertility*. Studies in Kenya, Mexico and the Philippines, American Association for the Advancement of Science.

ued with research on the formation of character traits and by comparing dreams of children of various and contrasting social backgrounds: urban upper classes, working class in a suburban zone, and a rural community. The most profound socio-psychoanalytical research experience began in 1985 in a mining community.

Participatory research into social character is based on the application of a socio-psychoanalytic methodology proposed by Erich Fromm and the accompanying use of an Interpretative Questionnaire. Results are obtained through qualitative and quantitative analysis of the interview responses. The Seminar developed its own method to bring back the results to the people demonstrating that the research process is not unilateral and asymmetrical, but rather one of reciprocal sharing of knowledge - i. e. in the context of a symmetrical inter-relationship, as outlined by M. E. Sánchez, E. Almeida⁵ and S. Moscovici in their proposed genetic model.⁶ This practice generates the participation and action of both the team and the studied group, in activities aimed at developing the group's productive traits through workshops.⁷ In these workshops the idea has been to encourage socio-psychoanalytic understanding of the social context, in order to enhance the degree of development and artistic and cultural activities for the possibility of emotional development. This was the case with the mining community, which we visited once a month on Sundays for nine consecutive years to work with them approximately for six hours.

During those years, we studied the formation of social character traits children whose fathers were miners who spent most of their time

⁵ Sánchez, M. E. y Almeida E., La Relación Humana Simétrica: Fuente de Acción y de Conocimiento, in: *Cuadernos II*, Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis 1991, Instituto Mexicano de Psicoanálisis A. C., México, 1991, pp. 30-43.

⁶ Moscovici, S. 1981: *Psicología de las minorías activas*, Madrid: Morata, 1996. Original title: *Social Influence and Social Change*, London: Academic Press.

⁷ For more information about the workshops see “El Carácter Social, su Estudio, un Intercambio de Experiencias,” in: *Cuadernos IV*, Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis 1993, Instituto Mexicano de Psicoanálisis A. C. México, 1993.



underground to earn a living. These children not only studied and helped with the housework and family chores, but also took care of animals and younger siblings and worked outside the home to contribute to the family's income.⁸ We also studied teachers, women and community leaders.

More recently, the Seminar has begun a unique research project that combines two frames of reference whose basic postulates will shortly be subject to comparative analysis: mother-baby dyads in Mexican peasant communities, where patterns of attachment are being studied using the Mary Ainsworth Strange Situation, adult attachment using AAI with the mothers, and social character features.

In the city, we have studied the social character of small groups of pediatricians, nurses, young adolescents literacy campaign workers and artists working with street children.

Community Projects: Investigative participation

We arrive on the ground of social experience by the path of psychoanalysis, extending our interest in the knowledge of oneself to encompass the knowledge of concrete societies, at a time when Mexico's modern economic and social crisis were beginning. When the 1985 earthquake destroyed much of downtown Mexico City, giving birth to a grass-roots movement with the aim to rebuild and assist earthquake victims, there was virtually no social class that did not participate. Some members of the Seminar also contributed in collecting and distributing food and medicine, and so in our country we had a deep experience of concern for other human beings in critical conditions.

The Seminar of Sociopsicoanálisis, with the members that had already begun to study the mining community, trained some mothers to measure the eyesight and hearing of children with low scholastic performance, and a campaign was organized to obtain glasses for those

⁸ Sánchez, G.: "Rasgos de Carácter de Niños Trabajadores, in: *Cuadernos II, Seminario de sociopsicoanálisis*, 1991, Instituto Mexicano de Psicoanálisis A. C. México, 1991, pp. 138-152.

that needed them. This is how, what we call, "social practice" began.

The economic crises intensified in several periods, such as in 1988-89 with the first major stock-market crash that affected a country that did not even fully understand what a stock exchange was. In 1994-95, the change of presidential administration was accompanied by a dizzying devaluation of the peso and an alarming rise in unemployment. The Seminar then facilitated a network for the unemployed, created and participated in a support group where members could express their anxiety over unemployment and their lack of economic resources. It furthermore gave the group of unemployed and employed members an awareness of an unforeseen advantage in their situation: the free time to develop creative talents and do what they had always wanted to do but had not had the opportunity.

The Seminar has also made several video presentations on the importance of attachment, directed at health care professionals, parents, and schoolteachers, which are shown in discussion groups. For three years, we participated in a Children's Book Fair, giving talks on: the importance of emotional development for children, reading of fairy tales in childhood, the role of pets and a psychoanalytic approach to the analysis of children's stories by Mexican writers. This allowed us to have an interesting exchange with the general public.

A variation on this type of participation is what I will call field visits. It is in the cities where the class society is most present; there is not much to lose in crossing the city borders, and there is much to gain. Attending religious festivals and community events, witnessing and hearing, and being shown from inside allows us to expand our vision and to become acquainted with the different images of a single reality.

Some of the visits we have conducted together with students in psychoanalysis with a social orientation, have included: religious festivals on the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe (December 12) in a Nahuatl Indian community in San Miguel, the festival of the village's patron saint, and a traditional Nahuatl wedding. Throughout the numerous occasions we visited this commu-



nity, we have also had the opportunity to participate in an Oral Tradition Recovery workshop, where we heard Nahuatl legends translated into Spanish, and poetry by village residents. We were invited to understand the functions of its health clinic, its rural high school. In return for their hospitality we presented them some of the videos on attachment and the importance of the mother-child relationship. Subsequently we were able to establish a dialogue on their impressions.

Seminar members are interested in an in-depth understanding of the meaning of some important Mexican traditions, like the Day of the Dead festivities. For three years in a row, we have conducted visits to rural communities with particularly original Day of the Dead celebrations, which have remained essentially unchanged over 500 years or more. Anthropologists (E. Corona, personal communication) have traced the origins of these traditions, to as far back as 2000 A.D., long before contact with the Spaniards. Around these visits, we organized reading and discussions sessions on subjects like death, myth, prehispanic culture and symbols.

We also visited a rural community in the state of Puebla where young adolescents literacy workers from a Mexico City private high school worked during the summer teaching inhabitants to write and read (using Freire's method), in an intensive program where they lived and worked in the daily reality of illiterate adult men and women.

The creation of a Clinical Attention Network, which in addition to serving the community provides a space for psychotherapists in training to engage in clinical practice, extends the range of psychoanalysis to people with economic disadvantage who would otherwise not have access to this kind of treatment.⁹

Even though it involves tremendous economic and energy resources to hold meetings and share theoretic and practical experience with other groups interested in clinical and so-

cial research, to travel to distant cities and countries in many respects has been enriching. The combination of work and enjoyment trips has helped us to learn about other cultures and their history from within. (See M. Maccoby et al., R. Duckles, and B. Lenkerd in the United States; R. Funk, P. Tauscher, E. Ubilla et al. in Germany (May, 1994; cf. their work: *A Comparative Study of the Social Character of Teachers in Eastern and Western Germany*¹⁰; Centro Psicoanalítico de Madrid (October, 1991) and a group from Sweden and Finland during the Mexico-Finnish Seminar in Cuernavaca (1999)). Our last encounter brought two groups together from the most dramatically different geographies, climates, and lifestyles, revealing both the fundamental differences and commonalities in our cultural experience.

The experience in San Miguel

Another non-sociopsychanalytical participatory research team with whom we have kept up a constant exchange of ideas and visits is the PRADE group. It was founded by M. E. Sanchez and E. Almeida, made up of Mexico City social scientists, where they since 1973 have been living and working within a specific community and where they began, what they call, a "life-research" project.

Their work is being conducted in a small Nahuatl community located in the mountain range known as the Sierra Norte in Puebla. Its Nahuatl peasant residents survive by producing corn for their own consumption and by working for coffee growers. Their belief system is based on a syncretic blend of prehispanic Indian and Christian influences. They still wear Indian costumes and their native language is Nahuatl, although some bilingual residents also speak Spanish. Throughout our contact with PRADE and the community of San Miguel, we have been able to witness a process of participatory re-

⁹ Millan, S. and Gojman, S., "Sociopsicoanálisis y Desarrollo Autogestivo en una Población Minera. Reporte de Trabajo Desarrollado por el Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis del IMPAC, in: *Anuario*, 1989, Instituto Mexicano de Psicoanálisis A. C., México, 1989, p. 305.

¹⁰ Tauscher, P.: "A Comparative Study of the Social Character of Teachers in Eastern and Western Germany, in: *El Carácter Social, su Estudio, un Intercambio de Experiencias, Cuadernos IV*, Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis 1993, Instituto Mexicano de Psicoanálisis A. C. México, 1993, pp. 125-134.



search in form of a common community project between two groups to fight poverty: the team (mestizos) on the one hand and the village (Indians) on the other came from very different parts of the country (the city and the mountains), which reflected the pronounced contrasts that have existed throughout history.

The San Miguel group formulated its observations epistemologically as they, in their own words¹¹ “learned by transforming”, and thereby established a symmetrical human relationship that has resulted in a “dynamic action that set in motion a people that lived on the defensive.”

The most important contributions of the experience of these two groups for us as clinicians have been the capacity to self-generate solutions, with bottom-up knowledge. In clinical work, we say that this is knowledge from one to the other, and not from the therapist, from “true self,” which remains out of communication. PRADE has provided us with some of the interesting concepts we have been in touch with: Learning from experience by transforming reality to produce knowledge, the interaction between the local, the regional, the national and, as we will see later on, the international, life-research through self-reflection and group-reflections.

The work in San Miguel in the 70s began to take shape through a concept of “team-village synergy,” (ibid.) which Yvon Le Bot¹², a French sociologist, has recently called the new social actors. These social actors do not belong to a single social class, nor are they articulated solely as community movements; they are movements that represent different sectors of the population in civil social networks, or non-governmental organizations.

Movements within the network, with migratory flows and trilingual communication, function as modern “horizontal” communications media, through letters in newspapers, ra-

dio programs, videos and the Internet (ibid.). Le Bot says, “today’s social movement of Latin American Indian people is one of the most innovative, creative, and modern of recent decades” (ibid.). He explains that this is a new cultural expression, different from the classic social transformation movements of the 20th century, and which, paradoxically, is more in accordance with the new post-industrial context of globalization, because it is indifferent to borders and inclusive of various ethnic groups, communities and sectors of the non-Indian population, as Mexican Oaxacan Miztecas, Tzotziles and Tojolabales from Chiapas, Europeans, South Americans and North Americans.

These are not community movements in the strictest sense, because rarely is the entire community involved (as we discovered through our experiences in the mining community). There are rather some sectors that show interesting character traits, such as a refusal to be walled in by the community, they are less custom-bound or traditional, and seek out new orientations for social relations and culture from the standpoint of civil society, rather than the State. Le Bot explains: “the new social actors mobilized to participate in the pursuit of change are modern, integrationists, not separatists. What they want is to be different but equal. In other words, we are in the process of building modernity, in the nation, and in globalization: something that articulates modernity and identity” (ibid.). This seems to be the new shape of democracy, with the social character traits required for change amid globalization. It coincides with the idea of the new minorities: active, heterogeneous, and innovative promoters of social change, as studied by S. Moscovici.¹³

The material, social, economic and multicultural¹⁴ reality has been an important component of our understanding. Being sensible to its influences in constructing the intra-psychic reality, the unconscious, the emotional, the development of character orientation, the mode of relating and the life experiences of those involved is crucial.

¹¹ Cf. Sánchez, M. E. y Almeida E., *La Relación Humana Simétrica: Fuente de Acción y de Conocimiento*, in: *Cuadernos II*, Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis 1991, Instituto Mexicano de Psicoanálisis A. C., México, 1991, pp. 30-43.

¹² Le Bot, Y.: “Moderno y Creativo, el movimiento indígena en América Latina,” in: *La Jornada*, March 26, 2000, p. 3.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Kymlicka, W., 1995: *Ciudadanía Multicultural. Una Teoría liberal de los derechos de las minorías*, Barcelona: Paidós, 1996.



Researchers, students and members of the Seminar who participate in socio-psychoanalytical experiences start out by answering the interpretative questionnaire interview themselves before using it as a methodological instrument for research. It is decisive to begin the experience as subject of understanding, placed in a context of self-reflection and in the position of those who will later be one's subject of study, because this confronts us with our own level of social consciousness, our social unconscious, our personal mode of relating to the social world, our attitude towards work and our character orientation. This makes it easier for researchers to gain a sensitivity to the instrument in question as one gains awareness of what she or he could see and not see in herself or himself, and of what the other might be feeling. The interviewer glimpses all this reality through a so-

cial window.

If psychoanalysis is the science of self-reflection - as Anzieu states - then the author would say, "theories embody the personalities of their theorists; elements of character etc. themselves in the theory, leaving traces both of strengths and limitations"¹⁵. Then, "the construction of theory is through a social process, theorists with different social character structures must collaborate in the edifice of knowledge" (ibid.). For my part, I do not have a passion for facts and figures in and of themselves. I see them rather in terms of their importance for establishing a shared knowledge that promotes creativity in groups.

¹⁵ Anzieu, D., quoted in S. Turkle, 1978: *Psychoanalytic Politics*, New York-.The Guilford Press, 1992, p. 300.

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