

REFLECTING ON RESEARCHING THE FAMILY BIOGRAM: THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF WORKING IN VIOLENT CONTEXTS

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This narrative is written as a reflection on the dilemmas, challenges and opportunities encountered when undertaking cross-cultural fieldwork in unstable and violent contexts. The fieldwork was carried out in order to design an instrument to capture the experience of internally displaced families in Colombia, and provided a context in which to think about the experience of fear and the meaning of resilience. As a family therapist and child psychologist working in the field of violence and abuse, the author is accustomed to using these words. However, during her time in Colombia, the author gained a deeper understanding of both, which she believes influenced how she was able to present the research.

Prelude

Four years ago, I was one of fourteen students selected to study in an international masters course in public health, focusing on safety promotion and community protection and sponsored by the World Health Organization. The course offered the unique opportunity of studying in four European countries—France, Sweden, Italy, and Portugal—and meeting professionals from all over the world working in areas related to violence and abuse. As someone with a diverse cultural heritage, and as a European professional who has worked in Latin America for the last seven years, I saw this as a rich context for learning.

Early in the course, I formed a special friendship with the only course member from a developing country, J. The relationship was strengthened by our common work context—I was then working in Bolivia—and my interest in Latin America. I admired J who was working in Colombia as a doctor and as a volunteer for the Red Cross in communities affected by the armed conflict. Many communities in the high conflict areas were moving, becoming “internally displaced.” The moves were generally triggered by traumatic events following a period of increased tension and fear. In 2001, internal displacement in

Colombia reached crisis proportions, with an estimated two million people displaced (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2001).

Apart from the cultural affinities, J and I shared a commitment to human rights and working with disempowered, marginalized communities. Internally displaced populations, as refugees within national borders, do not enjoy the same rights or international protection as cross-border refugees (Cohen & Deng, 1998). On a prior visit to Colombia I had witnessed the plight of internally displaced families as they held the Red Cross building under siege, demanding help and support.

To complete the international masters, all students had to undertake and publish research on a theme related to the course. J was looking to construct a measure of “threats” that would help communities analyze their strengths and weaknesses and understand their options when faced with the threat of armed attack. As a complement to his research, J wanted to use my expertise as a family therapist and researcher to analyze the verbatim interview case material that had been gathered on displaced families. This micro-systemic analysis would focus on identifying the factors that lead to some families moving, others not, some returning, and others

not. We were both interested in factors that helped families to become resilient and continue striving in the face of adversity.

J and I discussed modeling our instruments on "the biogram," developed at O Porto University (Agra & Matos, 1997). The biogram was constructed using the "reconstructive biographical" method derived from the work of the Chicago and Louvain (Belgium) sociological schools (Coulon, 1992; Debuyst, 1985; Sutherland, 1934;). The biogram is a temporal and dimensional grid framework that was initially devised to capture the life experiences of criminals and victims of violence and abuse in a structured way. The methodology bridges the gap between professional discourses and subjective experiences. The dimensions of the grid used to collect and structure information are constructed by "crossing" (combining two sources of information) "hetero-biographical" information (information, reports, documentation from sources other than the subject) and auto-biographical information (the biographies of the subjects themselves) for qualitative and quantitative analysis. Explanations in terms of subjective "meanings" are prioritized over causal explanations. Our instrument, the family biogram, was designed to map families' changing experiences over time, including the experience leading up to flight, the consequences of flight, the meaning that each family gives to its change in situation, as well as the family's resources for rebuilding their lives.

Drawing on post-modernist narrative family therapy and the idea of "dominant discourses" (White, 1989), I saw the structuring of biographical information using the family biogram as offering the possibility to develop empowering descriptions. These descriptions would 1) capture the "diversity" of experience including displaced families sources of strengths and their needs; and 2) offer an alternative to the dominant

professional discourse that emphasizes trauma, powerlessness, and dependency (Summerfield, 1998). Refugees and displaced families are often considered as "homogenous, undifferentiated masses" (Harrell-Bond, 1999). The dominant discourses used to describe their experiences are often overwhelming and self-defeating (Lucas, 2004) and do not capture the courage and resilience of family members or the family as a whole. Intervention programs based on these discourses often reinforce the powerlessness and dependency they describe. The family instrument was to capture "heterogeneity" in order to encourage more tailored programs that can take into account families' strengths, weaknesses, and hopes for the future. In the case of Colombian families, this was done to draw attention to the need to explore alternatives to following the government's policy of "encouraging" (sometimes coercing) return to the communities of origin.

Fieldwork: Issues and Dilemmas

J and I agreed that I would travel to Portugal to study the construction of biograms and start gathering hetero-biographical information (reports, documents, articles) on internal displacement. This would be prior to the month I would spend in Medellin, Colombia, working with a team at the University of the State of Antioquia analyzing family autobiographies from 120 verbatim transcripts. For security reasons, directly interviewing families was impossible for me as an outsider. J gave me some information on the unit where the transcripts were held and the research conducted there, as well as some of the resulting publications, one of which was on internal displacement.

I felt well prepared and excited at the possibility of joining professionals helping those affected by organized armed violence in a country for which I have a great affection. The most difficult part of the preparatory phase

was the anxiety expressed by my family and my husband regarding safety issues. Living in Latin America ourselves, and having already visited Colombia, my husband knew that Medellin is the capital of one of the states where the conflict is at its most intense. We also knew from our experience of living in Bolivia, that universities, like the University of Antioquia where the transcripts were held, are often caught in the country's political conflicts. Whether it was because of my interest, my commitment, or the trust I had in J (he would not have invited me if it had not been safe), I was not concerned about this aspect of the fieldwork. Maybe I chose only to focus on the positive aspect to overcome any underlying anxiety, and I went on the condition that I would not take "unnecessary" risks.

My first week in Colombia was in the private university where J worked and where I would be based when not reviewing the transcripts. I went to meetings to understand more about the armed conflict and peace initiatives, and shared with my Colombian colleagues what I had learned about biogram construction. However, by the end of the first week, I was impatient to start analyzing the transcripts and a little anxious that nothing had been said about going to the unit. Maybe this was not going to be as simple as J had said it would be. I eventually asked J and it was agreed that I should meet his sister, who—unknown to me until this point—was coordinating the displaced families project. I met her first on Friday night at a social event at J's mother's house where she, reluctantly I thought, agreed that I could visit the unit on Monday.

In between time, I experienced firsthand the reality of the guerilla conflict. While driving out to Js' "finca," or farm, someone shot at the car behind us. Back in the city on Sunday night, a bomb exploded near the flat where I was staying, blowing out the windows of surrounding buildings. The risks involved in

the fieldwork, and the basis for my family's concern, were becoming apparent. However, since J's family was reassuring, on Monday morning as planned, I set off for the University of Antioquia. We started with a meeting where I explained my research proposal and what material I would need to review and why. Concerns were voiced about using information that would identify the families, and I felt that J's sister was still a little wary. However, she agreed to let me access the cases and permitted me to work there with the full cooperation of the research team.

The following events remain clear in my mind. Halfway through the morning, we heard what I thought, having witnessed the frequent demonstrations in State universities in Bolivia, were firecrackers. The noises grew louder and louder, and then one of the members of the team—a young male researcher—came back from the toilet, white as a sheet. He said that there was someone with a mask and a gun right by our door. Our immediate response was to shut and lock the door. The noises were getting louder and were obviously gunshots. The whole team turned pale, confessing that they did not know what was going on and that this had never happened before in the University. Then there was a loud knock on the door, and we all looked at each other. J's sister, as the senior member of staff present, said she was unsure what to do: open the door, or keep it shut and risk the anger of the gunman.

There was a three- to four-minute pause and I said, "I have my French identity card on me, and they kidnap foreigners here!" They told me not to open my mouth as I did not look "obviously foreign." I told the girl next to me that I did not think I could run as my legs felt like limp "spaghettis," and she confessed that hers did too. The sporadic gunfire lasted for 40 minutes. I managed to contact J on a cell phone and tell him what was going on. He said to stay calm and that it was unlikely we would get hurt. When the

shooting stopped, I left for the other University, frightened and confused, to debrief and recover. After speaking to J and his family, I decided to say nothing about the day's events when my husband phoned that night. I knew he would want me to return and, although shaken by an accumulation of events, I was not ready to take that step.

I spent the next day in reflection. I was becoming more aware of the safety risks associated with unpredictable violence, but this had paradoxically reinforced my commitment to the project and helping people who had repeatedly experienced such violence. I had complicated feelings about the risks, the promises made to my family, and how to balance these against my commitment and J's expectations of our research. I also reflected on J's sister's attitude and J's enthusiasm. What explained the difference? I had written an article on the complex dynamics of "outsiders" from dominant cultures working in Latin America and what they represented for local people and professionals. I thought about what I might represent for her, but not represent for J. How could I gain respect and trust for what I was doing?

That evening, J shared some information with me that perhaps would have remained hidden if the events of the previous day had not occurred. Two years prior to my visit, the head of the unit where I was working had been shot due to the information held on displaced families. J's sister had filled his position until a replacement was found. With this information, I hypothesized further about my relationship with the research team and what they thought of me. Could I really understand what they had risked? Was it right that I would fly in for a month, write a paper, and share the credit for the research on which it was based? Would I be respectful to them and the families that they had interviewed? J also told me that the shoot-out at the University was related to the death of a student

killed by the military on that date a few years earlier. There was usually some form of demonstration to mark the anniversary, but J explained that the escalation of the violence that had led to the armed interchange was due to the increased number of students whose studies were funded by the FARC attending the University of Antioquia. These students—trained in armed combat—were committed to escalating existing levels of discontent and using symbolic events to generate violent protests.

Apprehensive after the week's events, I returned to the unit on Wednesday. I went every day until I finished the narrative analysis of the transcripts. My relationship with J's sister slowly changed. Going back to the questions generated from my hypothesizing, I can only speculate that "actions speak louder than words." Maybe my return and persistence communicated, as I hoped it would, not only that I was acting as a self-interested foreign researcher, but that I was committed to the project and resilient enough to carry it out with integrity.

Final Reflections

Persisting with the research required thinking realistically of the risks involved in the project and overcoming fear. It also involved thinking of the promises I had made concerning my safety. After the attack at the University, I began to think more carefully about the fieldwork danger. Speaking to people, analyzing events, and "getting to know" my context better, I knew there would always be a risk. I had promised not to take "unnecessary" risks, but sporadic and unpredictable violence made it difficult to disentangle "unnecessary" from "necessary" risks.

In the end, after a lot of reflection, I decided to continue with the research because I "felt" I could and that it was worthwhile. The opportunity of giving a voice to internally displaced families was, in my mind, valuable

and unique, especially after all I had witnessed. In Colombia, I experienced fear and “resilience” and understood them better. I knew what it felt like—at an emotional and participative level—to be caught in an armed attack. I overcame my fear and developed some “resilience” through mutually supportive relationships with the team members and the hope we shared of creating a better future for displaced families. Conducting the research with personal insights into what it is really like to be under attack and how relationships are important in developing resilience helped me design an instrument, the family biogram, that has the potential to capture the complexity of the families’ responses to fear and trauma. Understanding these responses helps identify not only families’ needs, but also their resources in the aftermath of displacement. Like the biogram on which it was modeled, the family biogram that was developed prioritizes the meanings attributed to human experience. It replaces the “categories” as found in psychiatric and criminal classification systems with a temporal dimensional grid like structure which can be used to collect narrative information in a structured way (Agras & Matos, 1997). The process of “crossing” the autobiographical data of the families and heterobiographical material from other sources makes the dimensions relevant to what professionals working with displaced populations think about the effects as well as to the people “living” the process, and can be used to establish a dialogue between them (Agras & Matos, 1997; see Lidchi et al, 2004;). Using the dimensions, information on all aspects of experience can be collected, including feelings of fear and insecurity, loss and distress, changes in circumstances (family, economic, community relationships), sources of support/help, meanings attributed to the consequences of displacement, and reactions to the experience.

The final biogram grid structure, and the codes developed to fill it in, mapped the

experience of the families over time and captured the complex changes in circumstances, perspectives, and emotions that resulted from forced internal displacement. Mapping families’ experiences - their emotional responses, social relationships, loss and resources (social, economic and psychological) - using a temporal dimensional instrument revealed needs and strengths over time that are not captured in diagnostic categories such as PTSD that emphasize stress and vulnerability. Community support and personal relationships were important sources of strength to help families, often influencing the interpretations of the consequences of displacement. I had understood the complexity of reactions to traumatic events, as well as the importance of personal interpretations/meanings of the events and supportive relationships through my own reactions to the shoot out. Despite being frightened, I continued with the research because of my perception of its importance and the support I received from J and his family to carry it out.

The family biogram and the methodology underlying its construction and use has been published and reviewed positively by professionals involved with refugees and displaced populations (Lucas, 2004). Professionals in Australia working with refugees appreciated the family biogram as a tool that emphasizes the “interpretation” of experience and meaning which goes beyond the classification of trauma. Developing an instrument that collects autobiographical narrative data along a number of dimensions, as well as the meanings attributed to displacement, encourages the design of interventions that take into account family strengths and needs, rather than applying a standard “package” resulting from a specific professional perspective – for example, one stressing the trauma/victim component of the response to forced internal displacement. The family biogram helps:

...to engage in a dialogue ... so that we [professionals] may begin to understand the significances which they [the refugees] attributed to their experience, alongside the significances which we as counselors may tend to perceive. In this way we have come to see our clients as survivors rather than victims, and have begun to learn something about resiliency in the face of adversity. We have also learned something about the value of relationship in providing a professional service and of the importance of curiosity as a tool (Lucas 2004, p. 222).

Taking an interest in families' narratives and involving them in the decision making process is a way of empowering and encouraging them to participate in the reconstruction of a future, as opposed to being passive recipients of aid and reinforcing their roles as victims.

From my position now—safe in Brazil—I judge that the risks were worth taking in terms of the outcome of research that reinforced the need for sensitive interventions that do justice to the complexity and richness of the experience of Colombian families, specifically, and displaced people more generally. The decisions I made regarding personal safety were made on a rational basis but also because they felt “right.” Maybe in different personal circumstances, I would have evaluated the risks differently, but I feel lucky to have had the opportunity to experience all this firsthand.

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