

Human rights, education and peacebuilding: Theories, models and experiences. A case study in Cohauila

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Summary: 1. Introduction; 2. To begin with: An image of the human being; 3. Reflective tools for social actors; 4. Building maps of social reality: reflecting on Mexico’s multiple lines of conflict; 5. Recognition and the transformation of relationships ; 6. Relevance and replicability of the educational experiences in other contexts inside and outside Mexico; 7. Conclusions

1. Introduction

Paraphrasing the Russian writer Tolstoj, we might say that “Every peaceful society is alike, but every society experiencing violent conflict is different”. In Mexico, pervasive violence and the everyday social life of an advanced, relatively prosperous country are inextricably linked.

The sheer numbers of violence in the past decade resemble those typical of high intensity warfare. The homicides went from 8867 in 2007 (9.04 per 1000.000 inhabitants, the historical minimum in the country) to 36685 in 2018 (29.27 per 100.000 inhabitants; source: INEGI); in 2019 there have been reported 35588 violent deaths (source: Seguridad Pública, in

Vanguardia.mx, 26 January 2020). A stunning number of persons have disappeared: according to the latest estimates by the Mexican government, there were over 60.000 desaparecidos in the period between 2006 and 2019 (El Pais, 07. January 2020).

On the other hand, Mexico has functioning State institutions with the task of protecting its citizens and upholding human rights: Besides the system of law enforcement – police, and judiciary – dedicated offices for the protection of human rights and attention towards victims of violence and crime exist. Despite the sophistication of existing laws, however, the level of impunity is extremely high.

The author of the present text has been invited to hold a 4 days workshop in January 2019 in the context of the course “Especialidad en Derechos y Garantías de las Víctimas de Desaparición”, at the Academia Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, at the Universidad Autónoma de Coahuila, in Saltillo (Mexico). The experience this author has made in Saltillo has been remarkable under several points of view. From the point of view of *content*, the seminar explored a number of key concepts of conflict analysis and management. From the point of view of *didactical approach*, the teaching method intended to encourage the articulation of the participants’ identities, objectives, needs, and resulting educational objectives. Finally, from the point of view of *reflexivity*, the workshop intended to show that theories and models used to make sense of violent conflicts could help actors involved in the renewal of Mexican institutions and society to understand better their own context and engage in meaningful shared reflections and conversations.

A special aspect was the degree of recognition most of the participants showed during the course of the workshop to each other. The seminar offered an important opportunity to re-think relationships among

participants and transform interpersonal relationships that had been burdened in some cases by a certain degree of distance and distrust.

The dynamics of the seminar is also related to the specific qualifications I brought in the work. My main field of expertise is in analysis and transformation of social conflicts at community level, as well as in mediation and training as means of micro-level transformation. I am not an expert in Mexican politics, history and society. While this may be seen as a distinct disadvantage, paradoxically it cleared the way for participants to explore their social reality collectively gaining more insights on the specific situation of Mexico and the State of Coahuila.

The present text will present the topics of the workshop, their objectives and rationale, explore their effectiveness in the Mexican context and the potential role of this type of educational experiences in the context of a comprehensive policy of Human Rights promotion, overcoming the present situation of pervasive violence. Before addressing these themes, it is useful to briefly spell out the specific view of human beings and their relationships with each other that lies at the foundation of this type of educational work.

2. To begin with: An image of the human being

Every kind of social intervention, such as teaching, social research, psychotherapy and peace work, presupposes a series of premises about human beings, their actions, their potential, the resources available, and finally – perhaps, most importantly – the relationship between those who act and those who are at the receiving end of an intervention. For our purposes, it is important to underline some general principles which taken together constitute a coherent image of human beings that has been validated by practice and that are of immediate relevance for the

training of peace and human rights:

- Individuals and groups can produce relevant knowledge about the social reality they inhabit. They can understand and design the best possible course of action for the community they belong to: *human beings possess cognitive capacity.*

- Allowing them time and opportunities to reflect, share and dream, individuals and groups are able to aspire to a better future for themselves and their communities, and to formulate new proposals about their future: *human beings have creative capacity.*

- By enabling them to communicate constructively and develop mutual recognition, individuals and groups are able to analyse, manage and positively transform the social conflicts in which they are involved: *human beings have the capacity for transformation.* (Bush / Folger 2006).

Cognitive, creative and transformative abilities do not necessarily manifest themselves in all individuals and in any social situation, but the recognition of their possibility of existence offers an important perspective for peace-building.

At the root of this perspective is the recognition of the centrality of the learning category. Human beings can change and improve their behaviors, perfect their cognitive and communication skills, and become emotionally mature. In a word, human beings can learn, individually and collectively. The transformative practices of peacebuilding are rooted in this understanding of being human.

3. Reflective tools for social actors

The main objective of the seminar I had in mind was to enhance the ability of participants to act and think as *reflective practitioners*.

The concept of reflective practitioner was introduced by Donald Schön almost 3 decades ago (Schön 1998) and has been very influential in the helping professions and in fields as diverse as urban planning, education and psychotherapy. In short, a reflective practitioner continuously faces new challenges who do not have a pre-defined set of answers - on the contrary, these ever changing professional problems need elasticity, the development of “reflection in action”, and applying forms of analogical thinking to learn from past experiences and adapt them to the new problem currently at hand.

In applying the concept of reflective practitioners to the field of social change and peacebuilding, some additional specification with respect to the traditional concept proposed by Schön are due. My elaboration builds on the “reflective peacebuilding” approach proposed by Lederach, Neufeldt et al. (2006). I suggest to identify four distinct areas that define the essence of a reflective practitioner of peace:

1. *Uncertainty and creativity*. A reflective practitioner faces open problems, without predefined answers, and develops reflection in action: s/he builds the knowledge needed alongside the work s/he performs; it is not possible to have a pre-defined set of knowledge, becoming familiar with all the future challenges while preparing ourselves for our profession;

2. *awareness*. A reflective practitioner is aware of the societal context in which his/her action takes place – the same action can have different meaning, impact and consequences in different context. An awareness of the implicit messages we send with our actions and decisions: who and what is important, what comes first, what are our values and orientation

points (Anderson 1999)? We also have to be aware of our own values, needs, emotions, that can often steer our choices and need to be made conscious.

3. *Theory of change.* We have to become aware of our own theories of change. The concept of theory of change has been first proposed in international development and community work (Connell and Kubisch 1999; Stein and Valters 2012), and has been used in Peacebuilding as well (CARE 2012) In short, a theory of change is a comprehensive description of how and why a desired social change is expected to happen in a specific context, and what can be the contribution to this objective by intervening actors. It is focused in particular on identifying the “missing middle” between our actions (project activities or interventions) and how these are supposed to lead to the desired goals. We do this by first identifying the desired long-term goals. then defining all the conditions (outcomes) that must be in place for the goals to occur, and finally how our own actions will be conducive to these.

Organizations also have their own theories of change that are often implicit. In the field of human rights protection, an academic program will try to enhance the culture of Human Rights, the judiciary may decide to strengthen control over security forces, while civil society groups may denounce institutional shortcomings, or decide to sensitize public opinion on the issue, etc.

For individual peace and Human Rights workers, it is important to gain a clear picture of the – explicit and implicit – theories of change of their own institutions. Divergence in the way we perceive needed actions to achieve required change may result in professional frustration, a sense of ineffectiveness and isolation.

4. *Conflict and relationships* : reflective practitioners should be able to explore with attentiveness, respect and empathy the life-world of others,

particularly those with different values, interest needs and those who are our adversaries in conflict. In nurturing positive relationships and resolving conflict, listening becomes a decisive skill. As Italian anthropologist Marianella Sclavi says: “A good listener is an explorer of possible worlds” (Sclavi 2003): listening opens up the possibility of finding new solutions to social problems, creating new types of relationships and creatively address common challenges. In general, reflective practitioners should be able to handle conflicts negotiating “win-win” solutions with their adversaries, opting for mediation in case of particularly complex controversies, or resorting to nonviolent struggle against a very powerful opponent who is unwilling to negotiate.

Clearly, it would be impossible to cover all these aspects during my workshop at UADC. The path I chose to undertake in the training work at the Academy for Human Rights was to start an educational journey by offering simple maps to encourage meaningful reflection and discussion among participants.

We should think of all knowledge about the social world as maps of reality we build: while they describe a territory, maps always simplify the almost infinite amount of information we can derive from reality. It is only this simplification that makes maps useful for orienting ourselves in the territory they describe.

4. Building maps of social reality

The maps / territory metaphor is central in systemic thinking, and particularly in the work of Gregory Bateson (Bateson 1998). The relationship between social reality and our knowledge of it is analogous to the relationship of a map to the territory it describes.

In his reflection on maps, Bateson builds on a key insight by the Polish philosopher Korzibsky: “a map is not the territory it represents”, but has a similar structure to it. The two belongs to different orders, the map being the product of an abstraction. A set of operations (measurement, description, translation in symbols, recording etc.) *and* an operational objective are needed for the meaningful selection of information which is an integral aspect of map-making.

Building a map necessarily means a simplification, selecting information and discarding data which is not deemed as relevant. This process of selection and simplification is related to the function of a given map: a tourist map of a city may only collect specific sites of interests, while the public transport grid of the same city only captures the essential information of bus and metro lines, station and interchanges. In a conflict situation, military strategists and peace workers will necessarily build very different maps of the same reality of armed conflict. The sentence attributed to Joseph Stalin “How many armored division does the Pope have?” brings this insight to its paradoxical extreme.

General models or frameworks can help subjects build and structure maps that include meaningful information. The models I shared with the participants in the seminar can be understood as generative frameworks of analysis to help map-making. The main activity of the first part of the seminar was thus to provide the participants with these frameworks of analysis to help them produce maps in order to make sense of the current situation in Mexico and in the State of Coahuila with respect to Peacebuilding and Human Rights protection and promotion.

Conflict network mapping (stakeholder mapping (Charbonnier and Oliva 2016)

This is a classical first exercise of conflict analysis, and it is used both by conflict parties to better understand their conflict and by third parties involved as mediators in conflict to better plan their intervention. This type of map consists in identifying all relevant actors, the main issues at stake, and their respective relationships: alliances, affinities, adversarial relations, neutrality. Influential external actors can also be added to the picture, as hidden conflict parties and / or possible mediators.

Mapping this conflict “networks” allows actors to position themselves in the context of conflict: understanding better who they are fighting against, and who can offer support or mediation. (Mancila and Habegger 2006)

Leadership pyramid (Juan Pablo Lederach 2007)

With the help of the conflict leadership pyramid, different levels of leadership can be identified in societies divided by violent conflict. Contemporary violence affects societies as a whole, and most victims of violence are usually civilians. Society as a whole can offer a constructive response to violence as well: besides the top level leaders, those who sign peace treaties and declare wars, Lederach highlights the importance of two other levels: middle-range leadership has both access to the top leaders and the freedom to engage adversaries in dialogue; grassroots level leadership is close to the everyday suffering of people affected by violence, has an immediate understanding of the practical aspects of conflict and can help articulate the voice of ordinary citizens. Different leaders can unite across different levels of society to support and shape peace processes. In particular, middle-range leaders have the potential to build effective networks of “peace constituencies”, networks for the

promotion of peace, at the same time reaching out across the division produced by conflict and violence (figure 1).

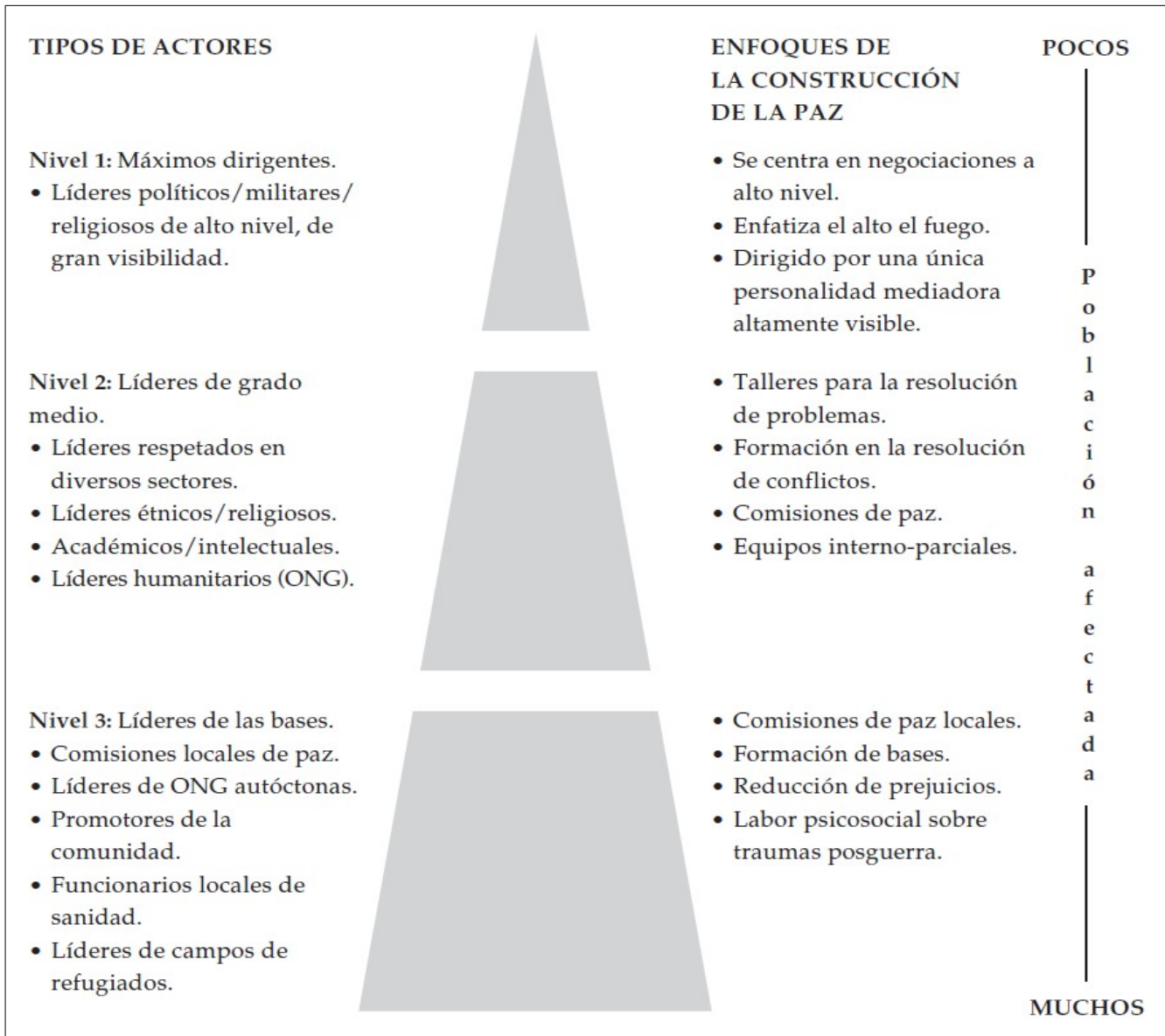


Figure 1. Actors and domains of peacebuilding (Lederach, 1997).

In our case, participants could use this framework to map different relevant articulation of State power, non-state actors, economic powers and violent criminal networks at different level of society – in the city of Saltillo, Coahuila state, and Mexico as a whole.

The map-making work was carried out in mixed civil society / civil servants groups. Participants applied the frameworks described above in order to generate shared maps of knowledge of their social reality. This helped them see the Mexican social reality with the eyes of other participants, and encouraged to share insights into the respective life-worlds, the set of coordinates of social life that shape our everyday experience and that we mostly take for granted.

Brainstorming – problem mapping

In this exercise, each participant was encouraged to identify one specific problem related to the high degree of violence, organized crime and human rights abuses in the country. Some of the topics chosen were very broad: general impunity of perpetrators, inefficiencies of the judiciary and security sector. Others were more context-specific, such as the issue of corruption in the market of oil and gasoline, which deprives the State from important sources of revenue, while at the same time strengthening informal economies and criminal networks, foraging widespread corruption among state officials.

The brainstorming method allowed the emergence of relevant topics and enabled a temporary suspension of judgement among participants. Subsequently, working groups of 4-5 participants with mixed backgrounds – civil servants, academics, civil society activists - were asked to analyze a single topic of shared concern by means of an additional framework of analysis: the upside-down triangle.

The upside-down triangle (Jean Goss and Hildegarde Goss-Mayr)

In a brief introductory presentation, I gave an overview about different aspects and forms of violence. In peace studies, I presented Galtung's influential theory of the three forms of violence, adding the dimensions of structural and cultural violence to the direct violence perpetrated with weapons. Structural violence refers to harm done to human beings by the way societies, laws and institutions work. Cultural violence, in Galtung's view refers to those specific aspects of culture which conceal, belittle or justify the emergence and persistence of direct and structural violence. (Galtung 2003)

The concept of symbolic violence, proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, refers to specific aspects of culture directly aimed at causing suffering and oppression against specific groups, for example in a patriarchal, male-dominated society (Bourdieu 1996), or in a state where some groups are marginalized because of language and cultural domination by a majority, as is the case with many indigenous populations in the Americas.

Direct violence can easily be described and detected, because it belongs to the domain of human action. It is more difficult to understand the structural and cultural dimensions of violence: both of them are usually in plain sight, but they belong to "things as they are" - structural realities that have always been like this, such as the existence of borders between the states, and cultural concepts that shape our life-world, determining the very way we think, feel and perceive reality.

Structural and cultural violence not only require an effort to be identified. Even when people are aware of negative social mechanisms affecting human well-being, they usually perceive them as intractable problems, due to their persistence over time or to the sheer magnitude of the required transformation. Indeed, tackling patriarchal cultures or

attempting to change a widespread institutional culture of impunity in a whole state may seem impossible tasks.¹

A specific suggestion on how to draw maps of mechanisms of social injustice and structural violence, while at the same time identifying options for transformation, was developed by nonviolent activists Jean Goss and Hildegard Goss-Mayr. They worked for decades supporting opposition groups in countries ruled by military dictatorships, mainly in South America and the Philippines. An important tool for analysis was the so-called upside-down pyramid.

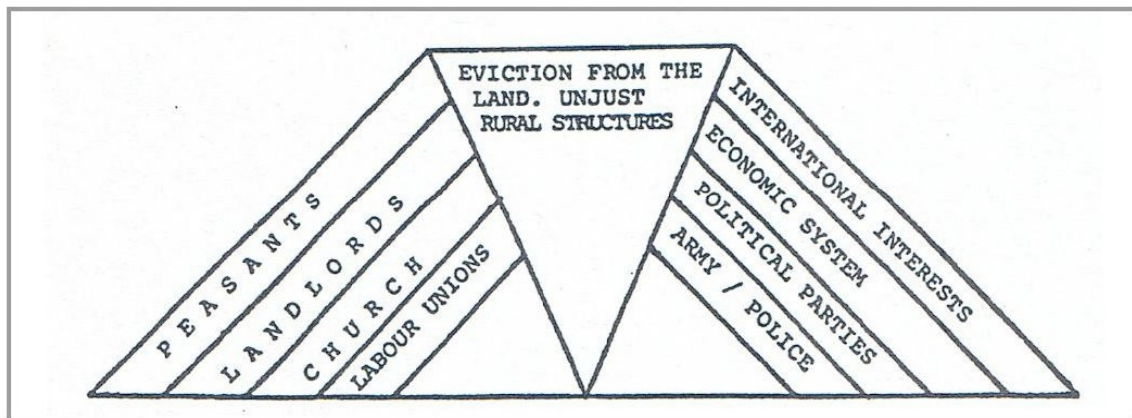


Figure 2. The upside-down pyramid and pillars of structural violence

In this diagram, the case of structural violence we intend to analyze is represented as a pyramid touching the ground on just one point. The stability of the whole construction is only apparent, because it relies on a number of “pillars” representing different actors or social forces. Groups

¹ This is even more so in the latest example of large-scale destruction which is unfolding under our eyes – what we could term *violence against the planet*. The global phenomena of climate change and loss of biodiversity – the sixth mass extinction of life on Earth – are at such a gigantic scale that human actions and decisions to halt them seem futile: nevertheless, it is the very actions of human societies that are causing the problem.

and organizations engaged in social transformation can therefore identify one or more pillars as their targets and develop appropriate strategies for action (Mischnick 2007) .

Using the upside-down pyramid makes it possible to deconstruct existing patterns of injustice, structural and cultural violence. By identifying specific pillars that support the system, possibilities for action may emerge and it becomes possible to initiate a process of transformation.

The frameworks of meaning illustrated above (conflict map, leadership pyramid, upside-down triangle) mainly as educational tools for self-reflection and to encourage a critical look at the role different social structures, institutions and organizations have in the current situation in Coahuila and Mexico.

In particular, my aim was to invite participants to critically locate themselves and their organizations or institutions in the process of *reproduction* of different forms of violence in Mexico and the *transformation* towards a new, more peaceful society.

This type of educational work can be understood as path of *empowerment*. During the four sessions of the workshop, the activities produced a number of consequences – some of them were intended, some were completely unexpected.

The main consequence was the generation of maps summing up the hitherto implicit information about the current human rights situation in Coahuila and Mexico. The group constructed maps on the basis of the “frameworks of meaning” I had offered.

It has to be noted that these frameworks had been developed having in mind political and societal situation which were markedly different from contemporary Mexico. Lederach had developed his concept of leadership pyramid in order to capture the complexity of civil wars in deeply divided societies, particularly ethnopolitical, identity-based conflicts. Goss and

Goss-Mayr had devised the upside-down triangle as a means to overcome powerlessness and lack of direction among opposition movements in South America and the Philippines in the 1960s and 1970s, in times when the general political context was marked by military dictatorships. The path of change was clear: putting an end to authoritarian regimes and achieving political democratization.

Obviously, contemporary Mexico is neither a country divided by civil war nor an authoritarian regime. Its unique situation of being an advanced democratic country with very high levels of criminal violence, high degree of societal control by organized crime and inefficiency of state institutions, however, resemble some characteristics of both situations.

In choosing the frameworks for the analysis exercises illustrated above, I hoped that the analogies between the different contexts was relevant enough to allow the adaptation of the analysis tools to the different circumstances and therefore the construction of meaningful maps.

On the other hand, differences between the originally intended purpose of the tools and the real situation – the “life-world” of the participants – could possibly encourage the emergence of new points of view and ideas regarding the situation in Coahuila and Mexico.

The development of the seminar in February 2019 validated this initial working hypothesis. During the third and fourth day of the seminar, instead of presenting additional theories and models or tools for analysis, the need arose for extended conversations among the participants. Thus, in the final part of our work I acted as a facilitator rather than an instructor or trainer.

We went through the materials the groups had produced and identified a number of key themes. These can be regarded as *palabras generadoras* along the lines of Paulo Freire (Freire 1970): enabling a collective

exploration by the group on the topics, giving participants the opportunity of making knowledge explicit which was previously hidden or “silent”, exploration of paths to gain new, contextually relevant and transformative knowledge.

Recognition and the transformation of relationships

At this point it is important to briefly describe the nature of the group I worked with. As stated in the beginning, the participants were partly civil servants of Coahuila State institutions, mainly working in different institutions of the judiciary (Fiscalía, Atención a Víctimas, Derechos Humanos), in part they were leaders of local and regional civil society organizations, most of them relatives of persons who had disappeared in the past. The third group comprised a few Ph.D. and Master’s students at the Autonomous University of Coahuila.

The composition of the group caused a very specific group dynamics: activists on the one side, civil servants of the other. While they were very courteous to each other, the two groups appeared to experience a deep sense of division. Activists traditionally accuse state institutions of being incompetent at least, looking away or being undermined and corrupted by violent organized crime groups at the worst. In turn, civil servants thought that activists were not loyally cooperating with the state, spreading a negative image of institutions; some thought they were undeservedly object of prejudices, despite their efforts to carry on with professional work in the face enormous financial, political and security challenges.

The map-making work was carried out in mixed civil society / civil servants groups. Participants applied the frameworks described above in order to generate shared maps of knowledge of their social reality. This helped them see the situation with the eyes of other participants, and

encouraged to share insights into the respective life-worlds, the set of coordinates of social life that shape our everyday experience and that we mostly take for granted.

Therefore, there were additional consequences of the work beside the reciprocal validation of the pedagogical working hypothesis and the production of new and promising maps of social reality. These effects belong to the development of relationships among the group of learners.

When I had been invited to offer the workshop, I had not anticipated that the group attending the seminar would be substantially divided between civil servants and relatives of victims of violence or disappeared persons.

The Grupo Autónomo de Trabajo in Coahuila

Addressing this division in the classroom mirrored work done by of the most interesting institutional innovations in contemporary Mexican human rights policies, the Grupo de Autónomo de Trabajo en Coahuila (Spigno, Ríos Vega, and Zamora Valadez 2018) . “While Human Rights are non negotiable, their implementation and protection can be negotiated”. This quote by Luis Efrén Ríos Vega, Director of the Academia Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, the institution promoting GAT, captures the essence of the philosophy at the basis of its work.

The main goal of the GAT is to identify areas of cooperation between families of victims of human rights violations, civil society and State institutions. The GAT was created with a legislative act of the Coahuila State government in 2012. Its core group would be one representative each of the following actors 1. FUUNDEC - the first collective created by family members of the disappeared in 2010; 2. Centro de Derechos Humanos Juan Gerardi A.C; 3. Centro Diocesano para los Derechos Humanos “Fray Juan de Larios”, A.C.; 4. Oficina en México del Alto Comisionado de las

Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos; y 5. Gobierno del Estado de Coahuila de Zaragoza. (Spigno, Ríos Vega, and Zamora Valadez 2018). The composition of the GAT was then gradually extended to other relevant stakeholders, such as Federal institutions, representatives of judiciaries, other collectives and victims associations, lawyers following the cases, scholars, and other interested parties. The GAT is organized around different Mesas de Trabajo, who are responsible for the daily implementation of the general agenda of the group: Búsqueda e Investigación y Acceso a la Justicia; Armonización Legislativa; y Atención Humanitaria.

Better cooperation means a gain for each of the counterparts: on the one hand, civil society organizations find a permanent channel for voicing their concerns, grievances and policy suggestions to the public institutions; family members of the disappeared find recognition and an appreciation of the importance of determining the fate of their loved ones. In turn, public institutions can strengthen transparency - a specific goal of civil society organization and a necessity for public actors who have entered a process of reform and renovation. Closely related to this, a heightened degree of accountability of public institution is achieved. These elements may foster a sense of positive allegiance to the state and strengthen the momentum and political will for positive reform.

To achieve this, the Grupo Autónomo de Trabajo had to find a *modus operandi* and to establish a new type of relationship among its members. As Irene Spigno recalls, “the very first meetings were extremely difficult and quite frustrating, different participants could not stop blaming each other and no effective communication took place” (Personal communication, January 2019). With time and appropriate facilitation

from the GAT chair, effective collaboration became possible, and a relationship of mutual respect arose.

In a different format and context, the process within my seminar group underwent a similar, although less dramatic, evolution. The initial communicative exchange I witnessed as an outside instructor was characterized by courtesy and a “matter of fact” style of communication: in retrospect, I understand this attitude and behaviour as a sign of emotional distance.

The cognitive work of shared map building helped the participants to identify commonalities in interpreting the current situation in Cohauila and Mexico, as well as identifying critical issues and ways of moving forward in order to contain criminal violence and promoting a higher degree of respect of human rights.

This convergence enabled a genuine conversation on the already mentioned generative words, part of which could represent contested topics among participants. As I have said, in the final part of the seminar I took up the role of a facilitator. What I specifically did was:

- starting with the shared knowledge the group had already produced in the first part of our work, symbolized by the different maps that participants had drawn together;
- guiding the group through the key themes that had emerged, managing the ensuing conversation; making sure that every person would have enough time to articulate themselves if they wished so, summarizing the key points that emerged, areas of agreement, diverging perspectives, etc.;
- systematically practicing *active listening* – a mode of communication that encourages to pay attention to emotions, needs, perceptions, and requests that are silently conveyed in human interaction, to clarify them if needed, and to make sure to really understand what other human beings want to

tell us. Since this aspect of work was crucial in the further development of the seminar, it is useful to clarify what active listening is about.

On active listening

The idea of active listening was first elaborated in the 1950s by US psychologist Carl Rogers (Rogers and Farson 1987) , later incorporated in the concepts of many scholars and activists, an important example being *Nonviolent Communication* by Marshall Rosenberg (Rosenberg 2016).

Cultivating an attitude of respect and attention towards the other, the listener can help clarify underlying emotions and needs. Addressing unmet needs can activate a deep process of recognition and transformation in difficult relationships. Active listening is an approach to allow better interpersonal communication with a long tradition.

An important technique used in active listening is to summarize what we have heard, either in our own words or simply repeating and summarizing what the speaker has said. This type of feedback has several advantages: listeners make sure they have really understood the authentic content of a message; at the same time the speaker may rephrase the message more clearly if this was not the case. Moreover, summarizing and rephrasing gives a powerful implicit message of appreciation of the speaker's contribution and, more in general, recognition of their value: we are making a genuine effort to understand the other at the fullest and deepest level, without any interest in manipulating or pressuring to make them say what we want.

In our context, practicing active listening was especially important when different views and controversial statements emerged in the discussion. In group work, training or facilitation, using active listening helps trainers to maintain a non-directive approach in the way content is discussed and

elaborated, highlighting important statements by the participants, and fostering a general atmosphere of respect and deep mutual attention.

Transformative aspects of the workshop

As we have seen, during the first two days of the workshop the group had learned and used a number of tool for analysis of social context and actual problems. During the third day, deeper conversations followed and a new type of transformation started within the group. Even to an external observer like myself, it was clear that the interaction among participants had reached a new quality, their level of engagement had risen and the communication had become more authentic and fruitful,

A further shift happened uring the fourth and last day of training, when the topic of recognition came up. Participants debated at length the necessity of recognizing each other's personal dignity as human being despite different social roles, opinions and views on responsibilities about human rights violations that had occurred.

Besides a basic attitude of mutual respect, a civil servant employed at the Coahuila State Fiscalía also demanded to receive the recognition she felt she deserved in her capacity as a professional of the judiciary, doing her work at the best of her capacity despite formidable challenges and obstacles, both outsied and inside the institution.

During the last session, therefore, I decided to leave ample space for a fresh exploration of the new quality of relationship within the group of participants. I asked them to form two concentric circles of equal numbers, and to face each other: each person in the pair who faced each other was invited to say something positive about the other. After a couple of minutes, the outer circle moved a few steps sideways, so that new pairs would form, repeating the exchange of positive remarks to each other.

Once the outer group had moved around, and all possible pairs in this constellation had been formed, the two circles would break and a few minutes of informal chat among people who had not had the opportunity to exchange positive comments. This exercise helped cultivate the sense of mutual recognition which had arisen and was, in my view, an adequate closing that had proved to be transformative beyond expectation.

It has to be added that not every member of the group participated in this final exercise. In fact, only one participant, the leader of a human rights collective and relative of a disappeared person, decided not to join. There always is an inherent dilemma in this type of situations: the choice of the person not to participate in activities has to be absolutely respected, but is it advisable to skip the activity altogether or bear with the situation of exclusion? In this case, I opted for the second alternative, and while the persons of the rest of the group were giving each other positive feedback I had a quiet, casual conversation with the participant who had remained seated: I enquired about her choice not to join in the activity and gave her myself a feedback on her positive role and contribution to the seminar, expressing my admiration for her courage and dedication in the cause of human rights protection and the fight for establishing the truth over past abuses.

This type of small episodes needs specific attention, particularly in light of long-term processes of building effective groups and networks. The voice of those who choose to stay at the margin of the training experience should be heeded and may carry crucial information on the dynamics in the group, current and future training needs, possible sources of conflicts and tensions, etc. at the same time, the trainer has to take responsibility for the appropriate choices to make for the benefit of the whole group.

A final comment on the validity of the above observations and reflections is appropriate. In the process of constructing meaningful social knowledge

on the basis of observations and qualitative data, the issue of validation arises, i.e. the necessity of further sources to confirm and reinforce observations and conclusions of a qualitative study.

In this case three sources of validation confirm the positive assessment of the learning experience: the positive immediate feedback of participants during and at the end of the seminar; participants' evaluations and the assessment of the course coordinator (Irene Spigno, personal comment, May 2019); the personal subjective resonance between goals, motives and values of the trainer, and the learning process and immediate outcome of the workshop.

Lessons learned and possible applications in different contexts

To the extent that the experience has been meaningful for those involved, showing a transformative quality, the issue of its replicability arises. It is therefore useful to extrapolate some general guidelines for further educational work to strengthen cooperation in the field of Human Rights promotion between State agencies, civil society actors and academia – a set of general principles for orientation, outlining a general model in this specific educational work.

We can identify **five possible dimensions** of progressively deeper transformation induced by learning in this field:

1. **Acquired knowledge** of information, theories and models which are considered relevant for the problem at hand. We can refer to this as *first-order learning*: it can happen by simply studying a book or collecting relevant information in the Internet, and integrating it into our general knowledge.
2. **Map-making**, production and exchange of relevant, context-specific information. Here, participants acquire specific tools to further their own

ability to produce new knowledge and making implicit knowledge explicit. This is a case of *second-order learning* as it represents a process of “learning about how to learn”, as it has been defined by systemic thinker Gregory Bateson (Bateson 1998).

3. The learning experience may produce a **shift in the perception of the situation**, enhancing awareness and reflective ability about the immediate context or life-world of the participants: they become able to look at their own reality with new eyes. This type of small revelation is sometimes called in English “a-ha effect”: as when somebody suddenly recognizes something which was all the time plain to see. Particularly dynamics of oppression, marginalization, structural and cultural violence can emerge and are not taken anymore as something natural. This is an essential aspect of the conscientization concept developed by Paulo Freire (Freire 1970). Conscientization happens when individuals are able collectively to identify problems, reflect and agree on their solutions. A shift in the perception of the situation we live in allows better problem-posing and problem-solving.

4. Furthermore, the learning experience can produce a **shift in the perception of human relationships**: this is a particularly important effect when participants belong to the same community or organization, and the success of their actions relies on long-term cooperation and mutual understanding. It is also a central characteristic of every type of intervention aimed at the resolution and long-term positive transformation of social conflicts. In fact, a crucial aspect of a renewed perception of relationship is the discovery of new possible areas of cooperation and mutual advantage.

5. Finally, at an even deeper level, a transformative learning experience can effect a profound **change in the way we view ourselves** and our relationship with the world, finding meaning in our presence in the world.

This may have different dimensions: a new sense of commitment, political identity and solidarity with others; a stronger responsibility towards communities and future generations. It is also a characteristic of spiritual and religious processes, and also a possible outcome of successful psychotherapy. We find a new meaning in our being in the world.

An educational program for human rights with the objective to strengthen social networks to support protection of Human Rights and peace will orient itself towards the objectives 1 to 4. Relevant information on practices and challenges of Human Rights protection constitutes the starting point. Building on this knowledge, an exploration of implicit knowledge on the concrete situations, problems and strategies for their solution can begin – what we have termed “map making” exercises. This work has both an individual and a collective dimension: when the learning group brings together participants from different, sometimes conflicting perspectives, the process will allow each member to gain a wider perspective on the concrete Human Rights situation, the wider political and structural context, and possibilities for transformation.

In turn, this exchange based on different perspectives can open up possibilities for a deeper recognition between participants and, at a wider scale, across different groups in society: in our case civil servants, politicians, academics, activists and family members of victims.

A newly structured relationship across these groups can have, in the medium term, a crucial effect, building a strong support network for new policies of Human Rights protection and promotion.

Conclusion

The starting point of the present reflection has been a learning experience limited in space and time at the Autonomous University of Coahuila, involving about 20 individuals in the time frame of four day long sessions in the time of less than 2 weeks. As I hope to have illustrated, educational work of the type of the Peacebuilding seminar I led at the Autonomous University in Coahuila may play an important role for strengthening such policy innovations as represented by the Grupo Autónomo de Trabajo in Coahuila.

In this perspective, academic training can help the emergence of a new type of relationship among the different stakeholder groups in society searching for new responses to challenges in Peace and Human Rights. A positive relationship among these groups can have in the medium term a crucial effect: the emergence of a support group for Human Rights protection and promotion, beyond the actual work of institutions like the Grupo Autónomo de Trabajo.

The task of promoting respect for Human Rights and building a more peaceful society cannot be solely delegated to professionals in security, the legal system, political institutions, and academia. It is a deep cultural task which necessarily involves profound transformations. Projects of transformative education like the one illustrated in the previous pages can play an important role in encouraging society as a whole to develop a culture of better Human Rights protection and Peace.

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