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Ana María Barroso, Silvia Rosas, Angélica Rodarte, Estela Palma

Artists for the Street

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Copyright © 2001 and 2011 by Dra. Ana Maria Barroso, Prolong. López Cotilla 1847-602, Col. Del Valle, México D.F. CIP-03100, E-mail: barrosoana[at-symbol]hotmail.com

This paper describes the vicissitudes of a two-year project in which the Seminar of Sociopsychanalysis has accompanied a group of artists working with homeless or street children.

We know that children and young people reflect the historic experiences of the societies in which they live. In our country and in other Latin-American countries likewise, especially in big cities, the phenomenon of children who live in the street is becoming more frequent. We learned from the last census carried out in our city that there are over 30.000 children living in such conditions.¹

Little by little, street children have assumed the characteristics of a specific social group, created out of the breakdown of communities and families. They have learned to function in networks that have their own dynamics, and their means of survival has been to reinvent themselves, opening spaces of their own. The Mexican National Council for Culture and the Arts accepted and supported the project of a group of artists who, working in coordination with the Seminar, came up with a model for approaching these children. The model is based on the sociopsychanalytical approach proposed by Erich Fromm, who posited that the individual psyche is shaped according to the demands of society, and thus becomes a reflection of it.

The basic purpose of this “participatory investigation” was to favor the artists’ awareness of those aspects of their personality that they

have had to sacrifice as the price for being a part of society (something Fromm, called “the social unconscious”²), and which, if recovered, could help them in their work.

Another basic component of the work was the belief in the importance of relationships, since building a truly satisfying connection with another person is the only thing that can help us to obtain a stimulus to transcend the narrow confines of our existence. The project was also based on the recognition that a basic ingredient in every psychotherapeutically oriented effort is to facilitate and encourage the healthy aspects of the personality, using, in this case, the possibility for expression through creativity and art.

Another feature of the project is that the artists have interacted with a group of children in the areas in which they live: the Alameda Park in downtown Mexico City and in the adjoining drainage tunnels, in addition to two shelters. This showed a respect for the community they themselves had created, whose fundamental difference with the families that most of them had decided to abandon, was that there was room for all the children.

The Seminar applied a social questionnaire to the artists, originally conceived by Fromm³, with two objectives. First, to know the character traits predominant in the group, and second, to

¹ INEGI, 1998: *Censo de Población*. Departamento del Distrito Federal.

² E Fromm, 1962: *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, New York 1962, pp. 88-134.

³ in: E. Fromm and M. Maccoby, *Social Character in a Mexican Village. A Sociopsychanalytic Study*, Englewood Cliffs (Prentice Hall) 1970; New Brunswick and London (Transaction Publisher) 1996.)



stimulate self-reflection and raise awareness of each artists' motives for undertaking this adventure.

In addition to this work, three therapists who are members of the Seminar met regularly with the group of artists. The purpose was not to provide psychotherapy for the group, but rather to create a space, a kind of armor bounded by transparent walls, which could play a dual role. In one sense, to create a space where the artists could freely express their feelings and conflicts generated in interacting with the children, and in another to encourage the artists to become observers not only of themselves but of the tensions and resources of the group as such.

The Group of Artists and the Language of the Birds.

In their social questionnaire, one of the artists described the following dream: "I'm in a very green valley, there's a gorgeous lake and a cabin. The birds and I are whistling, and my wife and my son know that I'm talking with the birds."

At the start of the project, the group included 14 artists: painters, musicians, artisans and actors. Two of them had been street children during their youth. Two months after the work began, and during the course of remodeling a museum across from Alameda Park, the authorities decided to "get rid of the problem." To do so, they welded shut the drainage tunnels where the children lived, with them inside. Some of them asked the artists for help, and these in turn brought pressure to bear through the media. In cases, they succeeded in getting the drains re-opened. Their names began to be known and to be part of the children's language.

After these events, the institution that had contracted the group of artists began to doubt the "usefulness" of the project, threatening to shut it down and dismiss the members.

In their initial contacts with the children, the group was seized with a desire to protect them and solve their most immediate problems, which was a clear reflection of the children's

demands toward them and the ways that children under these circumstances have learned to approach strangers. And, in countertransference, the therapists felt overwhelmed by demands that seem to require magical solutions.

Up until that time, the group had been focusing on its interest in getting to know the world of these children and recognizing the emotional reactions that it provoked in them. One anonymous knowledge could be clearly expressed. This was the awareness that they as artists were also disadvantaged and abandoned within a social structure aimed at the market economy. This was accompanied by an ability to reflect on the feeling of powerlessness and resentment that this abandonment created.

Around this time, the group could be described in terms of its functioning as one of "Dependence" (W. R. Bion⁴). Here, the fundamental belief is that power does not come from knowledge but from magic, and demands that the leader be a magician, or at least act as if he or she were one.

One of the essential characteristics described by Bion for this type of group, is that it seems to resist the knowledge that the members have come together to work on their emotional states. And that it trusts very little in its capacity to learn not from but through experience, since: "What history teaches us is that history teaches us nothing." This state can be summed up as hatred for the evolutionary process, but which nevertheless has the basic characteristic of providing security, an essential element to deal with these first contacts with street children.

Nevertheless if the individual were driven only by a desire for security, this form of organization would be sufficient to satisfy him, but the individual needs something more than personal security, and thus other kinds of groups are necessary.

When a possible break with the institution seemed imminent, the group took on another way of functioning, following Bion's proposal, which was "attack and flight" (ibid.). In fact, four of the artists chose to withdraw from the project. The tensions within it focused on how

⁴ W. R. Bion, 1994: *Experiences in Groups and other Papers*, London: Tavistock.



to fight and survive, the working materials that were in short supply at the start became even scarcer, and even the artists themselves began to explicitly voice their doubts about the usefulness and objectives of their work.

During the time this was going on, one of the artists had brought some children from the group to his home and was robbed by them; another was attacked on the street by another group of children. Their complaints involved two basic points: one was that they believed the children behaved in one way when they were with them and another when they were gone. And the other regarding the mistreatment and obstacles the institution submitted them to—delaying their paychecks, requesting countless records and reports of their activity, etc. They began to question the therapists with regard to the usefulness of the meetings, because they involved extra effort with no financial compensation. Endowing them with the characteristics of an authority, they directed their anger and frustration toward the therapists and the Seminar. In the meetings, they expressed their feeling that the only solution they could accept would be punishment: of the children, of the parents of the children, of the artists who had abandoned the project, of the government institution and of the Seminar. One important reflection that arose at this time was that they felt orphaned and helpless, feelings that seem to re-create the experience of the children. The group made a discovery: they would not attempt to solve any problem until it had been clearly delineated.

Counter-transferentially, the therapists felt tired and unmotivated, ignored and disoriented. Faced with the apparent “disorganization” of the group, late arrivals or outright absence of participants from their meetings, in addition to the clear sensation that they were cast adrift in the group: they neither belonged to the group of artists nor did they feel that they belonged to the Seminar. Through these responses, we recognize the feelings of the artists toward the group of children, and a fundamental aspect: their fear of forming a bond among themselves and with the children.

The members of the Seminar decided to deal with the crisis by offering the group of artists the results of the analysis of their social char-

acter questionnaires. One crucial conclusion of that analysis was that this was a group with many creative traits and resources, but that as individuals they shared a profound contempt for themselves and their work.

They were aware of their talent, but this would make ambivalent feelings arise. On the one hand they know that their creative capacity has been their most powerful tool but on the other hand the possession of this tool made them feel guilty and therefore it was held in contempt. They are frightened of knowing that they own a different language. However, they display some kind of pride for being “not common” and somehow unsettled. They are familiar with the creative process and they know that this is a lonely path. The need for recognition and affection thus, makes them feel inadequate.

It was clearly evident that the main obstacles to constitute a group came not from what they did know about themselves, but from what they did not know. After having the experience of discussing their social character traits, the group began to see the meetings as worthy of attention and reflection, while the “battle” against a common enemy began to lend coherence and continuity to the group’s internal experience.

At this time, the girlfriend of the leader of the group of children became pregnant, and wrote a story entitled “A Story of Love from the Womb,” which she shared with the artists. Another child asked one of the artists to take him “somewhere where they can help me to get off drugs.” Others began to spend hours at a time learning to make one or two chords on the guitar. Another announced that he wanted to return to his town, and would only come back to the city with his children, seeking out the artist and telling them, “look, this is the one that taught me another life.” A common language between the children and the artists began to emerge.

In a later session, the artists asked the therapists: would you continue to work on the project even if the government withdraws its funding? The therapists said yes. After this, the artists began to talk with each other about themselves, their life stories, and what art meant to them. For the first time, the group began to



value each member, both individually and for his or her contribution to the group.

The long-threatened budget cut from the government finally came. Officials in charge of the project said that it was “a ghost project”. One of the artists responded: “of course it’s a ghost, just like the children, nobody sees them, they’ve become part of the urban landscape.”

A number of them were laid off, and the others found their already modest salaries cut by two-thirds. This created a new rift within the group. Some members had the idea of creating a non-profit organization, independent of any government institution; others thought the children themselves should be encouraged to come up with the resources to continue participating in the workshops.

Consciously confronting the prospect of independence seemed to terrify them, and once again discussions returned to the subject of their mistreatment at the hands of the institution, a response that served partly to stifle once again the emergence of independent thought. On an individual basis, it was clear that they were beginning to reflect on the search for solutions, but not as members of the group. In Bion’s words, “this is how it ought to be: the group does not have consciousness; and it is not articulated; it is the individual that possesses both attributes.” (Ibid.)

The group’s dilemma became whether to continue its opposition not of the institution but of its own development, or to make itself into a self-run institution. - Around this time, one of the artists organized a group of children to take them for a visit to a museum, the same one the authorities had tried to “protect” from them by welding shut the drains. The children arrived clean and with their hair combed; and very much in spite of themselves, the museum officials had to allow them access. They walked through the museum, taking some ideas to build an altar for the Day of the Dead festivities.

Another of the artists decided together with the children to make wooden flutes to perform a concert. Another organized the creation and staging of a play.

Some of the children had learned to make handicrafts-multi-colored bracelets, clay masks, wire sculptures, etc. Some painted or wrote,

creating drawings, stories and poems to decorate the altar for the Day of the Dead. One important observation was that while they were involved in these various activities, none of the children consumed drugs.

Reflecting on all this, one artist remarked, “they’re braver than we are when it comes to doing what interests them and taking the risks.”

From this point on, the group of artists has begun to re-evaluate their creative work, gaining awareness as individuals of the fact that certain capacities only exist as potential, as long as they remain in relative isolation. In other words, the group is more than the sum of its parts, because an individual in a group is more than an isolated individual, and through the activation of these potential capacities, the group can become coherent and act on the basis of organization and cooperation.

The possibility of founding a non-profit organization has become the hope that unites the group-which seems important to keep it as hope given that the destructive aspects, the despair and resentment have not been radically influenced.

One of the artists summed up the work carried out with the children until now with the following words: “We came in as artists, and we’re going out as human beings. We have learned a lot from and with them.”

Within the group, members have begun to realize and value the fact that they have a different language, which through the symbol of the birds, seems to represent the freedom of the psyche to rise above what ties it to mere earthly existence. And that only the development of internal resources can allow emotions, imagination and intellect to support and enrich each other mutually.

As psychoanalytic researchers with a social orientation, we are increasingly convinced that mere “adaptation” and “adjustment” to society has become the false gods of the frightened citizens, inhabitants of a disturbed world. In this experience, both street children and artists have shown us a world in which society and its institutions have failed to protect its members.

Finally, we have been able to corroborate that the relationship between individuals, the basic tool for work with human beings, is “the



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black hole” in all programs aimed at addressing social problems but which have been created

from behind a desk.