

PSYCHO-SOCIAL EFFECTS OF ARMED CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE ON FAMILIES

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According to Patterson and Eisenberg (1983), effective counselors are contemporary and have a world view of human events. This means that the counselors are aware of important present-day events in all the systems affecting their lives. They are aware of the significance and possible future implications of these events. And to be contemporary means the counselor has in-depth understanding of contemporary social concerns and an awareness of how these events affect the views of clients—especially their views about the future. It is for these reasons that I am prompted to share with you about some events that affect the lives of some fifty thousand Filipino families.

The demise of the Marcos dictatorship, the assumption of liberal democracy under Aquino in 1986, and the steering of Ramos-styles Philippines 2000 in the 1990s have not altered the socio-economic and political architecture of the Philippines. Increasing militarization begun under the Aquino administration, continues to batter the lives of people reduced to pawns in the seemingly endless conflict. In the span of four years (1986-1989), the number of children victims had already reached about 2 million.

War always exacts a heavy price on a nation's economy, on family security and stability, and on human lives. I would like to share with you about the war which is going on right now in our country. I will not touch on the political or legal

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aspects of it, but rather on the human side of it. I will specifically focus on the millions of Filipino families caught in the crossfire of this war.

In 1988 our government declared their total war policy against the New People's Army (NPA). Thus, military operations were intensified and vigilante groups, like the Citizens Armed Forced Geographical Unit (CAFGU) and the *Alsa Masa* were formed.

From January to December 1993, the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP) documented mass evacuation incidents involving 49,125 families. Evacuation or displacement refers to the voluntary or involuntary relocation or transfer of families from their permanent residence to another area because of militarization. Families are forced to transfer due to counter-insurgency drives, to unexplained killings or to a mere harassment by armed groups.

What effects does this displacement have on families? I will deal with these effects by citing some examples from my own experiences with families who have been displaced or relocated.

Jun's family was a victim of false accusation. They were forced to leave their place because the husband was accused of being a member of the NPA like his brother. He was picked up and tortured and sustained a deep gash on his neck and chin; he had been hogtied by the military for almost twenty-four hours to force a confession that he was also a rebel like his brother whom the military was trying to track down and arrest to no avail.

Due to a constant changing of residence, uncertainty for the family's future prevails. This has been heightened by their fear and anxiety because they are still sought after. The lack of security in their livelihood has enhanced their uncertainty about life. The wife, after a few weeks of the husband's ordeal, was still visibly shaken and fearful of the people around them although they were 37 kilometers away from their place. But the most pitiful looking lot of them all were the children: timid, fearful of the approach of anyone, non-conversational, heads constantly bowed down, eyes glued to the floor or staring blankly into space. The children couldn't go to school since they constantly moved from one place to the other to avoid harassment from the military. The children were confused. They were unable to comprehend the events happening to them.

In another incident, this time in La Paz, Leyte (Balanon, 1992), Ramil was living a simple life with his wife, Elsie, who was pregnant, and his two children, Richard, three, and Maricel, two. Ramil tended their little farm and went fishing as a means to support his family.

They were peaceful until, one day, their barrio was bombed as a result of the military's efforts to counteract insurgency. Residents were dragged off to jail, beaten and forced to admit guilt. Some were arrested and detained on suspicion of being supporters of the NPA's. The noise of guns and screams were all around.

Ramil then decided to flee with his family to the mountains when he saw his wife and children frightened. Even when they were in the mountains, bombs were dropped on them and so they were forced to move deeper into the forest. They had to roam about the forest to be safe from the military

operations. For a month they depended much on what nature could offer them. But the woods were cold and it constantly rained. Without shelter and protection from the cold and rain, the children often got sick. Besides, Ramil's wife grew heavier with the child she was carrying in her womb. For fear of the prevailing sickness and his wife's condition, Ramil was forced to move his family to Bulacan where he had worked when he was a young man. But the memories of Leyte still haunt the family, especially the children.

On April 7, 1990, Ramil's family was referred to the Children's Rehabilitation Center (CRC). During Art Therapy session, Richard drew images of war: people running, guns and helicopters. He also drew trees, frogs and flowers. But what was very disturbing were the images of burning houses in the background. Elsie was trying to cope with her shock and to confront her unresolved grief for a lost home.

Take the case of Napoleon (Pajadura & Bunda, 1992). At about eleven o'clock in the evening three unidentified men called for Napoleon. They identified themselves as NPA guerillas who needed some rice. Napoleon asked them to come back in the morning since it was quite late. But the three men insisted that he open the door.

Napoleon's wife, Melicia, tried to peep through a slit in the wall and saw three armed, masked men in fatigue uniform. Frightened, she went back to her children. On her way back, she heard gunshots coming from underneath their house. Then he saw her husband lying dead and her two children bleeding; Namelyn wounded in the right leg and Napoleon, Jr. in the left foot. The children were rushed to the hospital for immediate operation.

At present, Melicia tills their small farm. She is not sure what lies ahead of her and her two children, especially sixteen-year old Namelyn, who remains physically defective. She feels ashamed of the wound on her lower right leg and tends to isolate herself. What is worse is the ongoing infection caused by bacteria. She may need another operation which might necessitate amputation. Still worse are the series of nightmares she experiences. She gets frightened at the sound of firecrackers and finds herself in tears remembering the incident which caused the wound.

Such sights are common among the estimated 16,743 families caught in the eye of the storm raging between the military and the rebel elements. The exact number of them is uncertain as the conflict is still going on and there may be unreported cases undergoing inner turmoil as a result of their experiences. The results of such experiences may even be worse than the examples I have mentioned earlier. Furthermore, what is really happening inside of them may be difficult to fathom, as some members of the family may be uncommunicative about their feelings and experiences. We can only gauge the extent of the damage done to their psyche from their behaviors and from their nightmare disturbances.

The emotional scars of such experiences are visible in the way these victims of atrocities show mistrust in strangers; by their vacant stares at them or inability to look at them straight in the eye; in their constant worry as to what might happen anytime of the day for many days, or months or years of their lives; in the children's shouts; in problems with urination and vomiting; in the look of fear in their faces; in their social isolation; and in their distorted concept of family life and community.

In my five years with CRC, as a member of the Board of Consultants in Davao City, when children of families victimized by armed violence underwent therapy, I have observed aggressive behavior, withdrawal from other children and adults, the suspicious looks of a girl who was a rape victim, children cowering with fear at the approach of another, some even running away to hide at the sound of helicopters and airplanes, sleep disturbances and many more signs of anguish and fear.

The traditional role of the family becomes shattered as it becomes distorted with the turn of events caused by a state of mass evacuation and forced displacement of whole villages or clusters of families. With parents undertaking solo responsibility in the absence of the other spouse, the children are left unattended to as the solo parent is besieged on all sides with economic, social and psychological problems. In the absence of both parents, the children are left in the care of relatives or foster parents who oftentimes are unable to appreciate and understand the gravity of the trauma undergone by the child or children and also unable to cope with problems which they cannot emphasize with, or much less internalize.

Children exposed to the armed conflict live in a relatively constant state of stress. Fear and apprehension are the predominant emotions that are involved in most situations and relationships. Helplessness and uncertainty pervade their lives as they witness the collapse of parental security and protection. They find themselves confused, for they cannot figure out why they are made to undergo hardships when they know that neither they nor their parents have done anything wrong. This sometimes leads to feelings of shame and isolation.

Even more serious than the trauma experienced by the child or children is the trauma experienced by the adults themselves, for this can be transmitted to the children in some form. Hence, their respective traumas affect each other. Signs of stress of the parents, such as irritability, mistrust, fear of others or even crying affect the children in no small manner and the latter manifest this in violent forms of behavior, cheating, lying, disrespect for their elders and low self-esteem.

War and all forms of political violence have slowly destroyed the structure of the family. The conflicts leave the family in shambles, with either one or both parents dead or missing, or some children dead, or one of the parents arrested by armed men, most often never to return to the fold of the family. Thus, children and their parents hardly perform the traditional roles in the family. Disruption of the family functioning and role patterns is particularly evident in these cases of political detention, disappearance or death. Separation or loss of either or both parents necessitates changes in the family structure and individual responsibilities. Changes in the family structure are even more upsetting than changes in residence, although people who move, experience major changes in their environment, and such changes are always stressful. Stress resulting from environmental change is hard on the adults, but it is even harder on young people whose coping systems are less well formed and immature.

Children in these circumstances lost the sense of structure that a normal upbringing, with its adult-imposed schedule of eating, sleeping, playing, growing and learning provides. Many, particularly those whose contact with their family has been severed for a long period of time, are without a sense of morality acceptable in the wider society. They slide into stealing and are

prone to self-destruction activities such as deliberately wanting to be run over by a car when crossing the street, refusing to speak at all, or hiding under the bed or at the back of a door for hours and hours. (Marcelino, 1992).

The absence of fathers because of desertions or death creates special stresses for children. Research has shown that the development of their moral judgement is somewhat retarded, especially in boys (Hoffman, 1971).

Many, however, are highly adaptive to their own sub-culture and are efficient and resourceful survivors; but they are poor in self-care and their loss of a sense of identity reinforces their alienation from the regular world. Their keenest sense of deprivation is their lack of familial love. Almost all still maintain vision, whatever sadness they may feel or their experiences of being loved and of belonging to a mother or a father.

Most single-parent families have far more than their share of problems: their incomes, housing arrangements, and lifestyles clearly reflect the disadvantages they suffer in respect to her families.

There seems to be little doubt that children suffer when the normal family relationships is disrupted. Every study that has been made of the children of single-parent homes have shown that the greater the instability of the family and its living arrangement, the greater the likelihood that the children's emotional and behavioral problems will be aggravated (Lindgren, 1983). The problems that the children of these "incomplete" families experience at home are reflected in their school careers. For in contrast to children from intact homes; they are more likely to become truants, to be suspended, to drop out, or to be expelled from school.

Violence is a phenomenon that may be observed directly by the children where they are, like a bomb exploding in their backyard. Or the children themselves may be the targets of the violence when they are sometimes asked to carry messages. Most of all, children become recipients of unmotivated violence directed towards parents, relatives and friends. War games become an exciting game. For them the gun, the grenade, the knife and the clenched fist become the symbols of their age—and their innocent acceptance of brutality is terrifying.

The child of war is caught in chaos. As a result of this experience, children are seen to be irritable, aggressive, and unconsciously find expression of their emotional upset in unsocial patterns of behavior. Some withdraw, other engage in fantasizing. Physical complaints, unexplained fever and headaches and other psychosomatic illness may be shown. Furthermore, sleep disturbances, like insomnia and nightmares frequently prevail. The child without symptoms is probably worse than the child with symptoms. At least, the child with symptoms is trying to work hard to break his/her way through this chaotic environment. He/She is able to allow others to see his/her fears, griefs and sorrows. However, it is quite difficult to deal with such children, since they are not very communicative of their problems, much less of their emotions.

There is then a need for an intervention by others in the forms of guidance and counselling and therapeutic sessions over a period of time for the victims of violence to talk about their experiences so these can be processed, accepted and put behind them as part of an unpleasant past experience. Then they can cope with the present situation and look forward with the hope for the future.

History reflects the admiration that society has always held for those who have overcome physical handicaps to achieve notable success: the man, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was paralyzed by polio in both legs at thirty-nine, but later became the President of the U.S. and a wartime world leader; the girl, Helen Keller, who was deaf and blind from the age of two, but became a successful author and lecturer; and the deaf musician, Ludwig Van Beethoven, to name a few - - are examples of successful achievers who overcome physical and psychosocial adversity. The achievements of these and others, despite their handicaps, are notable, but history has failed to record the tragic losses in human potential that have occurred because of lack of attention, other than medical, for those who are disabled physically or psycho-socially. However, the expansion of rehabilitation counseling into public as well as into private agencies has provided a dramatic increase in opportunities for the handicapped to receive special counseling assistance in overcoming their disabilities. It is for these reasons that the CRC was established.

For the past nine years, the CRC has been giving direct attention to children and families caught in the armed conflict. Its focus has been on helping children and their families who suffer economic, health, emotional, and psychological problems due to arrests, torture, forced displacements, trafficking, massacre and other forms of human rights violations as a result of the ongoing militarization in our country.

Since its foundation in 1985, the CRC has always tried to come up with ways and means to meet the needs of its clients — the families.

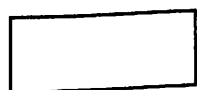
For those who need structure, social structure is

therapeutic. We place a child with foster parents or we provide groups where they can express what they want.

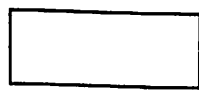
Parents as well as their children need to talk to understand fully their war experiences and to release tensions and hang-ups. Story telling, art therapy, and drama serve as vehicles to cope with fears, anger or loss. Counseling helps both parents and children adapt healthier beliefs about their situations, accepting those aspects that cannot be changed and working toward possible social changes in their lives so that concrete steps can be taken and stress can be alleviated by realistic solutions within the social context.

Play plays a very important role in the lives of children. Francisco (1993) arrives at the conclusion that planned and supervised games are useful tools for promoting the development of positive social behavior. Children exposed to such treatment show significant responses and become more friendly, more cooperative, more responsible and more skillful in coping with problems. Furthermore, play has been used many therapists in rehabilitating children in war (Hay, 1946; Simson, 1947; Moustakas, 1953; Axline, 1964 as cited by Acuna).

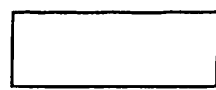
In a theater group the child, vis-a-vis other realities, can reflect on their reality and create alternative realities. Take for an example what happens in Image Theater. The children are asked to form a sculpture answering the questions: 1) what is happening now? (real image) 2) what should be? (ideal image) 3) how do we go there? (solution image).



Real Happening



How do we go
there



Ideal Situation

Sports are also offered. In football the child can learn to fight without killing; in basketball, the child can release feelings of aggression; and in following the rules of the game, he can make mistakes without being punished for it.

To avoid separation from parents of children under treatment, parental support is offered. All efforts to assist children in war must include the parents (Halpern, 1976; Quiroga, 1982; Rogers, 1984 as cited by Acuna). To leave out the parents means splitting the family. This may affect the children at their weakest spot — the fear of separation. Supporting the family in taking care of their own children in all rehabilitation work.

Finally, there is the need for community support and for rebuilding trust in others. The community in the form a group work develops support for one another. Thus we make use of the family approach system, cognizant that the problems of the child cannot be isolated from that of the family and community. Through the above activities, we hope to strengthen the remaining structure and nurturing qualities of the family and thus support a healthy atmosphere for the development of effective coping mechanisms. In this sense, both parents and children are part of the same process of rehabilitation.

To combine these five elements — structure, talking, cognized play, parental support, and community involvement in a pressed-for-time therapeutic session — becomes a problem. We need trained and committed people who can go out of their way to support and help in the process of rebuilding the structure of the family, for the stability of the nation depends upon the stability of the family.

The challenge of the 1980s remains in the 1990s.

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