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The Politics of Helping: An Example from Guatemala

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Abstract. This article identifies a complexity of helping others based on beliefs in the therapeutic value of such constructs as reliving memories, venting, catharsis, and the return of the repressed.

The premise that helping others is and/or should be positive valued can be supported in at least two main ways. First, helping may have instrumental merit through generating (1) expectations for reciprocity from those who are helped, (2) positive self-esteem and increased self-worth within the helper, and (3) feelings of pleasure within the helper. Second, it may have ideological merit in that helping is conceived as positive based on faith in a myriad of belief systems of which helping is a part.

Once one launches into a helping effort, one must call on helping resources. The two most common helping resources are materiel including money and applied knowledge. Most often, the first serves to provide the infrastructure for the second, while helping may be subverted by too much or too little of the first and the wrong kind of the second.

A case of the second may be occurring in Guatemala through an extremely well-intended effort to psychologically help people who have experienced the violence of the recent civil war. As reported by Gonzalez (2003) and exemplified by the work of Cabrera (1998, 2000), the helping effort comprises combinations of clinical psychology, social praxis, and culturally appropriate religious belief. A key to the helping effort is the premise that remembering, expressing, and venting painful experience is therapeutic, while suppressing, repressing, or ignoring such experience is antitherapeutic.

The above premise is at the core of 20th century Western psychotherapy and formal counseling and has become a core belief of lay helping as well. And there are theoretical works and empirical data to support the core belief (e.g., Frasure-Smith et al., 2002; Smyth & Greenberg, 2000), as well as hugely profitable helping industries based on it and ineluctably resistant to theory and empirical work suggesting a need for the belief's reassessment.

Yet, there is such work--suggesting not only that the commonly conceived untherapeutic may be therapeutic, but also the converse (cf. Bonnano et al., 2002; Fonagy, 1999; Ginzburg et al., 2002; and Lindstrom, 2002). And in some accounts of mental health intervention with those who experienced the violence of the civil war in Guatemala (Gonzalez, 2003) and of the civil war's residua and sequelae (Guatemala: Memory of Silence, 2002), psychological functioning does seem to be static or deteriorating even with mental health intervention. In addition, requests of those seeking help seem to center much more on receiving what would be needed to plant crops and raise cattle than on dealing with inner demons--a phenomenon that, admittedly, could suggest malignant defensiveness as easy as benign repression and the quest to move on adaptively.

It may well turn out that different kinds of people within any population will most benefit from different strategies based on very divergent psychological premises. Applying a repression-phobic technology for all may not only not be helpful, but exemplify an unfortunate, if unwitting, cultural imperialism that may have helped nurture the civil war to begin with. (See Bonanno, G. A., Field, N. P., Kovacevic, A., &

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