

4 Mental health and political repression viewed from a social and cultural perspective¹

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INTRODUCTION

Amongst the various essays and studies which have analyzed in depth the psychological, cultural and social effects of the repression experienced in Latin America in recent decades, there are very few which have done so from a multi-cultural perspective, that is, taken into account the multi-ethnic nature of the continent and the different ways in which the repression and its consequences may have been experienced, interpreted, and confronted by the indigenous and Latin communities. Moreover, researchers have focused their attention on the negative effects of the repression, attaching little importance to studying the positive strategies that the population has come up with. Presented here is information based on a study carried out at our university with the aim of describing and interpreting the psychological, cultural and social effects of the political repression carried out by the last military government in Chile between 1973 and 1990. It is a summary of part of a more extensive publication.

MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

A total of 177 cases of people executed for political reasons and detained-disappeared were recognized officially by the state in

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the 9th Province (Araucan'a) via the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as ones having a *conviction of serious violation of human rights* with a similar number of cases originating from both ethnic groups.

Sample A total of 119 interviews were carried out with 15 families of missing or executed Mapuces (58 and 61 people respectively from the two groups). Survivors were located both in Chile and Argentina. Each interview, lasting approximately 3 hours, included a part which was free conversation and a part which was channeled via a technique of guiding phrases. The great majority of the victims dated from the months immediately after the coup, which meant that their relatives were interviewed an average of between twenty and twenty-five years after the event.

Method Cards used were made up of textual sentences employed by other relatives of those detained-disappeared or executed, or extracted from previous interviews or from statements made in a similar context. These consisted of a total of 74 spontaneous sentences which someone could choose to identify themselves with or not, thus avoiding the need for categories to be pre-established by members of the team. If the person, after having the sentence read to them, considered that they had thought, felt or expressed something similar at some point in time during the course of the years, they were asked for concrete examples and the subject goes into depth during the free conversation, with notes taken or with the answers recorded.

The cards (available on demand) reflect a wide range of questions, for example, related to still living dependent of the missing person: *I keep his/her clothes clean and dry. Although I don't really know why, it will always be like that*, or how the cause of their disappearance is perceived: *My old man was the home loving kind, they took him off by mistake, because some mean neighbour told on him*, fear: *Even now I'm afraid of*

telling what I know because it's possible there are people who could use what we say and there could be reprisals', the effects on daily life: 'I don't let my kids get involved in anything, it's study, home and nothing more', strategies used for confronting the situation: 'The best way of carrying on is to keep your head down and say yes.' 'When s/he disappeared, I said what the others wanted to hear, I didn't let anybody know how much it was really hurting me', the period of grief: 'I couldn't cry for my husband because everyone had their eyes clamped on me', dreams and premonitions: 'Juan still comes to see me from time to time; he came once to tell me to take care of the children', the feelings of guilt: 'I didn't do everything I could to have prevented it from happening', the reactions of friends or neighbours: 'Practically all of them turned their back on me', 'I never realized how much they loved and respected him/her until s/he disappeared' etc.

From all of this it was possible to obtain both quantitative information, analysing it via comparative proportional statistics, and qualitative information based on the notes and transcriptions that were taken.

RESULTS

This article focuses on analysing the results related to inter-ethnic differences with a special emphasis given to the forms of confrontation employed by the Mapunche population:

1. *The ability to foresee events.* About a fifth of the Mapunche relatives recounted that the missing or executed person had advance warning or a premonition that something bad was going to happen and shared this sentiment with their family. There were three types of warning: Unusual bodily sensations, (especially muscular cramps and trembling legs), premonitions based on symbolic animals (e.g. the appearance of a snake with hairs on its back) and premonitions based on dreams.

2. *The search process.* While the Hispano-Chilean population went to make queries about their relatives at the place where they had been detained, in general, this did not occur with the Mapunche relatives, who had a tendency to *wait and see* how the situation developed. Two factors played a part in this: first, queries had to be carried out with organizations and authorities which were often geographically at some distance and were unfamiliar to the Mapunche culture, and secondly, the difficulties thus presented of a social, cultural and class nature. But in addition, account needs to be taken of the *contemplative* tendency of the Mapunche population, which is of a *reflexive* kind, where events are evaluated and a wait and see approach adopted.

3. *Attributing the cause.* The traditional interpretation that the Mapunche population make of any setback (illnesses, crop failure, the death of livestock..) is to look for its cause in a *misfortune* resulting from a *transgression* of the norms of reciprocity with the environment, supernatural forces, the family or the community. Numerous testimonies attributed what happens to *envy*. This has the ability to summon a *power*, and this is how misfortune befalls either the person or the family of those who disturb the balance, with the misfortune being reflected in their disappearance or execution. In the Mapuche community of the nineties this model is simultaneously and indistinctly held alongside other interpretations of the disappearances which include the role of the state, the political parties and their corresponding ideologies.

4. *The response of the traditional authorities and of the community.* The traditional authorities have not been want either to make statements or give support to the victims partly because of the internal divisions within the Mapunche world which limits the possibility of any collective response, and partly, based on it being considered a conflict between *wingkas*, that is, having nothing to do with the Mapunche world, and that if any Mapunche has been affected it must be due to them

involving themselves too much in an alien culture at the expense of their own. Both Mapunche and non Mapunche families with relatives missing received very little support from their extended family. In traditional Mapunche society much weight is given, on the one hand, to family ties and on the other, to holding in deep respect the traditional rights and obligations transmitted orally from generation to generation. It appears that the break up of the Mapunche culture is leading to the loss of some of their traditional patterns of response.

5. *The response was individual and not community based.* The type of response given reflects the internal conflicts existing within communities. Our study showed the need to demystify the concept of the community as a unity, as a block.

At the same time, individual responses show the tension that exists on the one hand between the cultural pressure exerted on the individual not to rock the boat and not to break the community's norm of reciprocity, and the assumption on the other, also part of the indigenous culture, that to survive in difficult times everyone should be able to look after themselves, from their childhood days onwards, and not expect others to solve their problems.

6. *Integration strategies.* The relatives of the Mapunches affected opted for a strategy of *transforming and integrating* with the enemy instead of *confronting* it. This process took, above all, a religious form. The repression did not, therefore, lead to a reinforcement of the Mapunche identity, but rather coincided and went hand in hand with the generalized process of conversion to the evangelistic movement.

7. *The search for remains.* In the years following immediately after the disappearance of their loved ones, the desire to look for their remains was much less marked amongst the Mapuche community. At the present time we can observe how although many of the relatives of both Mapunches and non Mapunches who are missing have not lost the hope of finding them alive, they have in reality been acting and living their lives

for some time in the conviction that they will not now return. To openly affirm this would appear as a betrayal of the missing person and of what they themselves have been saying over the years.

It does not seem that at the time of carrying out the research the discovery of the remains of the missing person is seen as a priority. This does not imply that the deceased relative is considered unimportant or remembered less, but rather that powerful reasons exist for maintaining a psychological balance which act against mounting a search, reasons whose analysis it is not possible to go into here.

8. *Individual strategies.* The predominant tendency in both the Hispano-Chilean and Mapunche population is to employ non-confrontational strategies: to work harder so as not to have to think, to reject the possibility that the person is dead, to reject that s/he was engaged in militancy in situations where this was the case etc. This rejection appeared to us as a positive approach which opened up the possibility of functioning on a daily basis and confronting the problems related to surviving physically and economically while gradually and progressively coming to terms with the reality in manageable doses. Similarly it is worth noting there was not a single case of reprisals or acts of revenge despite the fact that the perpetrators, in the majority of cases, live in the same community and are known to everyone.

Fear, present in 60% of the relatives in the months immediately after the disappearance, is still evident today in around 20% of them, a figure which is probably higher if we take into account those who at the beginning did not want to take part precisely for this reason. Those adopting resignation represented 44% of the Hispano-Chileans and 57.9% of the Mapuches; opting for silence as a strategy for adapting, around 60% of both ethnic groups; and trying to make themselves as little obvious as possible and to say yes, 44% of the Hispano-Chileans and 68% of the Mapunches. Only 18% of the Hispano-

Chileans and 36% of the Mapuches affirmed that given what had happened that they wanted to maintain a commitment to the victim's ideas, although approximately 50% recognized feeling a sense of admiration for the missing person.

9. *The Reparation Act.* The Reparation Act was conceived to be an important element in the process of rehabilitation from a psychological and social point of view. Our research showed its limitations in taking into account the ethnic element in at least three respects:

1) Economic forms of compensating the victims were given priority. This created problems in some communities. In some cases it provoked problems of alcoholism and apathy. In others, it broke up the stability of the community, producing a rapid increase in the level of family income, given that in proportion to the average monthly income earned amongst the rural Mapuche community, the totals received constituted considerable amounts of money. This was liable to generate conflicts, isolation and disputes amongst the missing person's family. Alternative forms of providing psychological and social forms of reparation would have been:

- To give more weight to forms of non-monetary compensation, or failing this, to give the family land or animals.
- To consult the families about the best way of administering the compensation.
- There should have been a process of monitoring the families in order to give guidance in those cases where, because of the long time lapse until the legislation came into force, there had been an accumulation of money amounting to huge sums.

2) Compensation at an individual or community level? Our research showed the degree to which there had been a breakdown of community ties and the extent to which responses were individually rather than communally based, something which questions the viability of this type of proposal. The

involvement of the community in any such task needs to follow certain guidelines which take into account the social and cultural reality of each community. What do we understand to be the community? At the present time its boundaries appear blurred and it is not easy to be objective about the feeling of belonging to a group. Even assuming that it is possible to determine what is understood to be the community, it is not clear which subjects can be assumed to correspond to its real interests and desires. There is a real possibility of producing the contradictory effect where the Act benefits those people who are seen as having intervened directly in the disappearance or death of a relative.

3) It was considered an aid to the process of reparation to include in the report the facts (the truth, in the terminology used by the Commission) despite failing to include the names of the perpetrators or of those who were responsible for the crimes being carried out, and without the judicial processes mounted, except on certain numbered occasions, resulting in them being sanctioned. Alternative forms of psychological and social reparation would have been:

- To consider other forms of punishment for the perpetrators more in accordance with the cultural traditions of the Mapunches, as, for example, isolating or expelling them from the community, or to have them carry out acts of compensation for the victims' families etc. None of the existing laws of the indigenous population of Latin America contemplate imprisonment as a form of punishment, rather they utilize forms of isolation by banishment or direct forms of compensation via work carried out for the victims or for the community.
- To allow the names of those who perpetrated and those who were responsible for the crimes to be known in those communities that want that information to be public knowledge.

4) The construction of monuments commemorating the people missing or executed was considered to aid the process of reparation although the state only took responsibility for the construction of the present Memorial in Santiago cemetery. Other types of commemoratives are being realised by the personal efforts of the victims' families.

Alternative forms of psychological and social reparation would have been:

- The construction of the Memorial in a place not connected to a cemetery
- The construction of monuments and commemoratives in places where popular initiatives existed
- Consulting the communities most affected and their traditional authorities about how best to rehabilitate, commemorate and pay homage to the victims (religious ceremonies, public or emblematic acts...) in the case of communities which as such have been involved in the reconciliation process.

There is another matter of great symbolic importance: the very name of the legislation, instead of being called the Reparation Act, it should have perhaps been called, more appropriately, the Act for Lessening the Damage. It is impossible to make up for the loss of a loved one and particularly so, in economic terms. The legislation can only be understood in ethical terms as a governmental measure aimed at giving economic aid to those families that were put in a vulnerable situation after losing a member of the family and it would have been more appropriate to have used some other title for the legislation which expressed more closely this idea.

NOTES

The terms Mapuce (people living on the land) and Mapunche (people living in the territory) are used indistinctly in implicit acceptance of the element of Mapunche national revindication contained in the expression.

QUOTED

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