

Building Resilience due to violence: The Struggles of Mexican Communities

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ABSTRACT

In Psychology the term resilience refers to man's ability to respond to stressful events in a positive manner. Cases of femicide in Mexican society provide significant information regarding the relationship between violence and the development of a capacity for resistance in order to preserve life in the long term. Given that the promotion of empowered actions is closely related with issues of community, power and precariousness, this article will discuss cultural and socio-economic factors in institutional violence against Mexican women and will provide a comprehensive look at a theoretical framework for understanding resilience within this context, starting from the relationship between suffering and vulnerability.

Keywords: Violence, Femicide, resilience communities, Latin America, vulnerability

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INTRODUCTION

In the 20th century, Sorel stressed the fact that the concept of violence was far from being fully comprehended (Sorel, 1906). Although not much has changed in this regard, various theoretical and empirical instruments have emerged, thus helping us to better analyze the discourse around violence and to reveal some of its more obscure aspects. A violent state, of which Latin American countries could prove a prime example, can be described as a place characterized by the extreme use of power, force and coercion. Mexico's history is riddled with corruption and structural violence owing to its colonial exploitation in the far 16th century and the capitalistic system imposed on it by the United States. The first factor to consider is its geographical location: situated between the two Americas, Mexico has become increasingly the scene for illegal drug trafficking as well as an attractive setting for international interests. In one hand, violence constitutes the weapon for the citizen who has to resist against a state of corruption and impunity, and on the other hand it seems to be the same instrument that governmental institutions use to defeat drug traffickers. As a result, violence impacts on the well-being of people who live in a state of terror and public insecurity, undermining the role of justice, and producing vulnerability and a sense of uncertainty. The term "legitimized violence" seems appropriate for the Mexican political system, in as much as the state acts within the logic of a "genocidal continuum" (Scheper-Hughes, Bourgoise, 2003), a political practice that creates both visible and invisible violence, legitimizing it into the social system. This situation is evidenced by the sudden increase of homicides, feminicides and kidnappings from 1990 to today, as confirmed by the recent murders of 43 Ayotzinapa students (BBC, 2015). In addition, we have to take into consideration institutional violence, which is manifested in the denial of access to the health system, government measures against border crossing and the exploitation of victims. The situation became more dangerous as a result of the political efforts of the U.S.A. to control the border zone and to eradicate illegal immigration and drug trafficking. In this regard, prime examples are Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, two border towns in which violence has reached levels of emergency to the point where they are internationally renowned, and have thus been extensively researched. The aim of this article is to bring to light the non-violent protective measures adopted by communities by means of an interdisciplinary method focused on suffering and resilience. In Ciudad Juárez, as a result of the increase in the rate of feminicide, mothers of the victims began to protest in earnest, joining the *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa A.C.* (May our Daughters Return Home, Civil Association) protest movement. These events had such an impact that they gave birth to actions against corruption, double victimization and the Mexican government's legitimacy. Furthermore, following the Merida Initiative, stipulated by former Mexican President Felipe Calderon and former U.S.A. President Georg Bush in 2008, the political strategies against the drug war became more violent and aggressive, resulting in an increase of victims and an alarming lack of justice within the administration. Both Mexico and America violate the law, breach security and infringe on human rights. As a consequence, the connection between power and violence creates issues related to the sense of recognition of human being, the legitimacy of safeguarding the right to live without violence and the assertion of a policy based on vulnerability and control. How can we react against violence without responding with violence? Following the example of Gandhi's powerful strategy of non-violent resistance, we believe that Mexican citizens have developed a very successful capacity for resistance through empowerment, which contributes to building a force called resilience.

1. CONCEPTUALIZING VIOLENCE AND VULNERABILITY

In 'On Violence' Hanna Arendt summarizes her considerations on violence suggesting an examination of its roots and nature (1966, p. 243), at which point explaining such a phenomenon by assigning it into the sphere of power would be reductive. What perhaps eludes Arendt's evaluation on the nature of violence is the cultural context as a root of its development. Gender-based homicide ranks as one of most extreme uses of violence as it is considered the norm and constitutes a social practice carried out through the use of physical, psychological and socially destructive methods. The presence in society of a violent attitude cannot only be explained by its relationship with power, as the power itself acts primarily in the cultural context where the process of encoding and decoding is constructed, deconstructed, fought and burned. Firstly, we will review theories that show the normative use of the term violence, so that violence is not an instinctual act, but rather a product of an ideological construction. Moreover, we will evaluate the bond between violence, vulnerability and resilience within the context of the struggles in Mexican society. Capacity for resilience is analyzed through interdisciplinary theories based on psychology, philosophy and cultural studies which are channeled into a strong political message that promotes empowerment. Resilience is therefore a fundamental factor in helping people to overcome traumatic events during their lives. In addition, the community's capability to manage bereavement and complicated events depends on social, environmental and cultural factors. Also, building resilient communities is a relevant protective factors that needs deep reflection and a critical evaluation. According to Hall (1980), who redefines the concept of "hegemony" developed by Gramsci (1971), the cultural dimension is understood as the battleground where power is disputed. For this reason, he appeals for the need to "deconstruct the culture" (Hall, 1980), the place where the battle for power is fought, won and lost and where awareness is created through policy. The author states that this battleground is the popular culture, which is a "contradictory space", a "negotiation space" where dominant and

subordinate groups fight against each other to establish hegemony (Hall, 1980). Similarly, violence is combated in the cultural sphere, and its recognition depends on the success of one of the two groups and on the political and economic role that the state has in the world. Power creates and modifies what can and what cannot be considered violence because it conditions the collective, supported by a 'nested doll principle'. As a result, social phenomena, such as stereotypes and prejudice, allow violent measures and conceptualize it against the understanding of sexuality, race and class. Consequently, sexual, racial and class-based discrimination has become a cultural and biological matter carried out by political and religious powers and whose terminal point flows into the legitimate use of violence, embodied by cases of kidnapping, homicide and femicide. The latter term refers to a form of physical, moral and psychological crime which includes all instances of violence against the female gender, such as rape, sexual violence, violence caused by laws related to the defense of honor or the right of dowry, and violence committed by intimate partners, by family members or strangers. Many activists, researchers and scholars have contributed with their research to give a legitimate definition of this phenomenon. This term was mentioned for the first time by Diana Russell (1976) who presented an international report on crimes against women to the Court of Brussels. However, a first definition was formulated in the work *Rape in Marriage* (1990) in which are collected the testimonies of 930 women living in San Francisco, all victims of rape and abuse within their marriage. In this book femicide is defined as the hatred towards women only because they belong to the female gender (Russell, 1990). The desire of man to subdue and control the female gender through the use of violence is a practice of terror that begins with an absolute submission and degenerates to complete destruction. As suggested by the anthropologist Marcela Lagarde, this connection between violent control and domination of the woman is based on the political and Judeo-Christian ideologies settled in the cultural space (Lagarde, 2011). Such reality attempts to redefine violence against women within a political and cultural framework as a consequence of human behavior. Cases of femicide in Juárez represent the manifestation of the ideological dominance of patriarchal hegemony and the use of terror as a political tool transferred to the culture. This interpretation suggests the inexorable triumph of phallocracy through a policy of "genocidal continuum" (Scheper-Hughes, Bourgoise 2003), and so violence is continuous, cyclical and reproducible. The word genocide refers to those crimes that are committed in social spaces, such as schools, hospitals, nursing homes, prisons and courts, places where the absence of any kind of violence should be ensured. Furthermore, Scheper-Hughes distinguishes visible violence, such as harassment, abuse, kidnapping, torture and infliction of pain, from invisible violence practiced in supposedly safe institutional spaces (e.g., hospitals and nursing homes). According to the author, invisible violence is structural because it is represented by poverty, hunger, social exclusion and humiliation, which inevitably gets translated into intimate and domestic violence (2003). Structural violence is therefore embedded into institutions and it cannot be promptly perceived. Otherwise, the continuum alludes to the human capacity to act with a type of violence that bestows upon victims a status of non-persons. The consequences of physical, psychological and sexual violence are irreversible. It dramatically dehumanizes and depersonalizes the victim, causing social exclusion and psycho-physical disturbances quite similar to the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Herman, 1992). Perhaps, it is a form of terror that echoes in everyday life and manifests itself in the public and private spheres. These realities transform legislation related to violence, so that it becomes a structural metaphor for an institutional policy of terror, forcing people to live in precariousness as well as suffering.

With regard to the studies on violence against women, the cultural method emphasizes the bond between aggressive human behavior within the logic of power and social manipulation explained through a feminist perspective. In this scenario vulnerability is the human condition caused by practices of socialization, which are legitimized and regulated by the state. In addition, it should be inferred that the presence of violence in public and private spheres is simply the product of a political governance established by the organs of power. The community perceives violent acts as being necessary, justifying them as lawful actions which are socially required. In this context, emotional manipulation plays a central role in the somatic dimension, in which the physical pain inflicted on the victim causes psychological vulnerability. According to Judith Butler (2004), the human body belongs to the social sphere because of its political constitution. With regard to the recognition of life, we should consider its precariousness caused by the exposition to violence. Psychological and physical vulnerability is part of our sociability, and so we live in a state of subjection (Butler, 1997). The term subjection indicates that our life is dominated by an external political power. Following Althusser's (1970) definition of interpellation and *assujettissement*, Butler argues that we are subordinate to a normative system of control and manipulation, so that power acts on us defining our needs, desires and ideas about the world and about ourselves. The practice of power, understood as the control of men over men, follows the Hegelian theory of recognition in which a human being recognizes itself as a subject through the judgment of others. This process of self-consciousness generates the master-slave dialectic, a kind of relationship that establishes the nature of power. As a consequence, we are the product of this dialectical relationship between power and identification, which clarifies our inevitable embodiment with power. Such a concept is discussed in Foucault's work, the *maitre a penser* of contemporaneous human science. In his work *Discipline and Punish* (1975) he proposes an analysis of our society through the study of those systems of punishment that have been sanctioned by a specific "political economy" of the body, in which institutional powers flow into the body, owning it. The author underlines the need to unmask the "micro

power” through the knowledge of those historical events which have favored the political hegemony of the social body, both in the collective and in the individual. The result of this process is defined by the term "biopolitics" or "biopower" (Foucault, 1975-76), i.e., the invasion of institutional powers and ideologies over physical human beings with the purpose of bringing hegemony to it. Finally, it forces us to live in a state of vulnerability, so that the political system creates a norm for the recognition of human life, declaring one life as "grievable" and not the other (Butler, 2004). A re-evaluation of the meaning of both vulnerability and pain could be a good way of re-politicizing violence. If victims learn to take advantage of the force of suffering, they can use it as political force for empowerment, forming a multi-level recognition of identity through the unmasking of political constructions of violence and halting the process of re-victimization.

2. RESILIENCE

Resilience is a term that in physics refers to the capacity of an object to resist against external powerful stimulation without breaking (Oxford Dictionary, 2013). It has since taken on different meanings in various fields, such as in ecology, engineering, computer science and psychology. Consequently, when research in psychology promoted the focus on positive psychology, its meaning was shifted both to the words resilience and recognition with eudemonic response (Keyes, 2007). The concept of eudemonia is an Aristotelian term which means happiness, and it refers to the human practice of flourishing within a socio-emotional context. For positive practice purposes, social science has adopted the term resilience with a eudemonic approach to define the human capacity to react in a positive way against adverse circumstances. According to Bonanno (2004), resilience is "*the ability of adults in otherwise normal circumstances who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disrupt event, such as death of a close relation or a violent or life-threatening situation, to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning*" (2004, p. 20). Moreover, within the concept of resilience the concept of empowerment is stressed: a process which aims for the acquisition of agency (Rappaport, 1977). In psychology, many resilience models have been developed to show how this process works and most of these privilege factors such as personality, educational systems, family and the social environment. One of the most well-known was proposed by Gilligan (1997) who stated that resilient operations rely on the good responsiveness constituted by a secure emotional base, self-confidence and emotional self-efficacy (1997, pp. 22-23). These three factors are focused more or less on the individual capacity.

Alternatively, there are other models, such as the ecological model that considers different protective factors and promotes the cultural and environmental influence for tolerating stressful events. Bronfenbrenner (1996) argues that building resilience is an interactive process constituted of different systems, such as microsystems (the family atmosphere), mesosystems (relationship with peers, teachers), exosystems (Social setting, community), macrosystems (culture) and chronosystems (socio-historical circumstances), (1996, pp. 39-40). Furthermore, the ecological model privileges the relevance of culture, and the number of different ways for a community to overcome vulnerable situations and to understand what a resilient action constitutes as opposed to one that is not. The cultural and social determination of resilience offers a wide and complex key for the interpretation of problems that cannot avoided, considering the individual and collective interaction inside a troubled community. The capacity to react positively, linking positive emotions with the force of adjustment, is character-building for victims who undergo a transformation process until eventually succeeding. However, in psychology some methodological problems exist relating to the concept of positive mental health and resilience. They concern the measurement of resilience factors, because in most cases to be resilient means the absence of depressive disorders or psychopathological disturbances after a traumatic event (Bonanno, 2009). In this article, we do not discuss such scientific gaps. Rather we focus on the link between vulnerability and resilience as important an issue connected with empowerment capabilities. We believe that victims, through a re-evaluation of suffering and a politicization of vulnerability, are able to reinterpret the dimension of symbolic violence which are culturally connected, and to re-establish non-violent social practices.

3. MEXICAN RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

Mexico has a long history of violence and corruption, and its society has long been living in pain, suffering as well as emotional and mental distress. Over the past two decades, the number of victims has grown dramatically and due to the lack of justice, people have begun to adopt a powerful civic response, creating a unified social bond against criminality. This initiative was taken up by the victims themselves, who formed social movements demanding effective response by the government and the implementation of a security system. The most famous action arose in highly dangerous places along the border, in cities such as Ciudad Juarez. Since 1990, this border town has been afflicted by the kidnapping and murder of women, called feminicide. There are a variety of aspects that expose the citizens of Ciudad Juarez to such criminal development. This area has become a crime scene due to its geographical position, the increase of urbanization and migration, the installation of international industries *maquiladoras* and the presence of narco-trafficking, known as *el Cártel de Juarez* (Fragoso, 2000). After the shocking revelation of desert deaths in the Lote Bravo, Lomas de Poleo, Cotton filed and Cristo Negro areas, there have been no positive resolutions to the cases of feminicide and the crimes still remain uninvestigated and unpunished. Such impunity motivated the victims to become aware of this exploitation

and to promptly search for the truth themselves. In 2001, the mothers of the murdered women founded the civil association *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* with the purpose of fighting through civil engagement against impunity and corruption. These mothers and relatives are unified by the desire for justice and the will to release their murdered daughters from the deprivation of their human rights. This association offers moral and legal support to the victims of kidnappings and femicide, with the goal of fighting for justice and protecting human rights, as well as avoiding double victimization from the authorities. The organization *México Unido Contra la Delincuencia* (Mexican United Against Crime, MUAC) has a similar background, as it was founded after the kidnapping of Raul Nava on 6th May 1997 and found dead six months later (Amnesty International, 2010). Despite some accusations against this organization and its implication in scandals, its work is significant as an example of civil empowerment. The MUAC has promoted several marches, such as the “Let’s rescue Mexico” march that took place in 2004 in Mexico City, which had the aim of encouraging victims to demand justice and of attacking the authorities for lack of security (Villagran, 2014). Other cases of parents who have shown resilient capacity after the loss of their daughters and sons could be illustrated through the actions of Isabel Miranda de Wallace, founder of the *Asociación Alto el Secuestro*, the *Fundación of Mexico SOS* promoted by Alejandro Martí, the *Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad* formed in 2011 by the poet Javier Sicilia and the *Fuerzas Unidas por Nuestros Desaparecidos y Desaparecidas en Mexico*. These are movements which strive to unite victims and to encourage the creation of a network for fighting against organized crime, asking for justice and punishment, supporting the respect of human rights and civil protection. The work of these numerous civic organizations is relevant because they identify themselves as a heterogeneous community unified in the same suffering. Victim is a word of the collective memory, and through this term people have built psychological and political capacities for resilience. On the other hand, the focus on vulnerability, i.e. the psychological and mental precariousness of a human being, and on resilience, as the ability to afford and change distress, link from the individual to the collective experience, and is eventually translated into community resilience. Adger (2000) previously defines the term of community resilience as “*the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political and environmental change*” (Ibid. 2000, 350). That means that resilience is the ability to act against vulnerability. With regard to Mexican movements, resilience emerges as the shared abilities to overcome trauma and violent situations, whilst gaining empowerment through communication, self-organization and social union. Even if these organizations began to enforce the impunity system because of personal tragedies, entire communities would join to them in fighting for the same cause, i.e. claim the right to be recognized as human beings, reporting the violation of fundamental rights and accusing the Mexican government for being corrupt and unequal. The solidarity around social exploitation is one of the basic attributes to building resilient communities. In addition, social unification can be translated into the building of social capital as an aspect that ensures flexible and resistant relationships based on trust and transformative capacity. Considering Oxley’s qualitative approach (as cited in Frankenberg, Mueller, Spangler, Alexander, 2013) by the measurement of community resilience, we show that Mexican communities act in a resilient manner, re-politicizing their recognition through suffering. As Oxley states, they show ‘preparedness’ in perceiving the risk and for coping with trauma; ‘responsiveness’ in protecting the victim and working on their behalf with legal, social and health initiatives; ‘learning and innovation’ referring to the ability to be flexible and innovative, and transforming mistakes or difficult conditions into instrumental growth; ‘memory’ with regard to the sharing of the same history of Hispanic colonization and capitalistic exploitation, a past that reconstructs Mexican identity on the basis of victimization and deprivation of their religion, language and tradition. The common status provides force and the ability to fight for the same rights; ‘self-organization’, i.e. the ability to rely on own capacities without any institutional, economical, financial and legal support; ‘diversity’ alludes to the existence of different resilient responses from individual to collective, including the different ways of control distress on a physical, emotional and psychological level; ‘inclusion’ means the creation of a cohesive and cooperative community formed by different members; ‘aspirations’ includes the same goal and a common vision of the future that people unanimously have.

CONCLUSION

The question surrounding violence needs an analysis through an interdisciplinary perspective under the lens of cultural studies. This is a field that is connected to human rights discourse and praxis including feminist and psychological theories. The central aim of this contribution is to examine the relationship between vulnerability and pain as a process that generates resilient force. In this regard, Stuart Hall’s invitation to investigate ideas of justice and agency into a cultural dimension suggests we focus on the struggles evident in cases of femicide. This is suggested due to the effectiveness of women-led movements. In these cases, Mexican communities began to react against violence following the example of Ciudad Juárez’s initiative after its cases of femicide. After a long history of exploitation and colonization, Mexican people have reached the capacity for using their suffering as a weapon to reconstruct their identity. Our aim is not only to question violence, but rather to start from this point with the intention of showing the efficacy of resilience. Principally, in psychology the capacity to cope with adverse events is related to individual factors, whereas the ecological view promotes the cultural and environmental dimension, underlying the bond between outside/inside factors. On the one hand, theories from psychology are useful for scientifically explaining how people adopt resilience and how it can be observed through measured parameters. On the other hand, we argue that an interdisciplinary work is fundamental in understanding complex relations between violence and resilience, keeping in

mind the strong relationship between policy, body discipline, culture and ideology, and violence, vulnerability, empowerment and resilience. Considering the bond between these factors, we argue that violence and resilience coexist in a dialectical relationship, in which they interact simultaneously (Cirami, 2014b). Focusing on the dialectic meaning, the search for truth about violence ensures that the political use of such opposing forces determines the affirmation of one above the other. The instrumental use of these coexisting forces is embedded in structural, social, cultural and political dimensions, so that in the context of high levels of crime and persisting violence, people learn to manage them. The high levels of illegality can reproduce negative social reactions, such as narco-trafficking, kidnapping, criminal social practices, as a means of instinctive defense and survival. Otherwise, violence becomes an instrument of cohesion, building social trust and civil engagement which gives rise to resilient capability. This is to say that stressful situations produce a kind of agency, i.e. the capacity to engage into the social structure, through resilient force generating a resilient agency (Cirami, 2014b). According to Sampson (Sampson et al. 1997), collective efficacy is more stable and increased in such emergency contexts where the community resilience flourishes on a structural and social level. When structural corruption concerning employment, education, inequality, urbanization and health treatments persists, it directly produces violence, represented in physical, emotional and psychological contexts. Nowadays, violence still keeps threading through society and justice or human rights seem to be reverberating sounds in everyday life. The mass kidnapping of 43 male students that occurred last September in Mexico's Guerrero State remind use how brave, unified and determined the Mexican community is. All walks of life protested against this state of terror, sharing the pain, the suffering and the indignation of the victims' parents. The slogan "*Todos somos ayotzinapa*" ("We are all ayotzinapa"), was embraced worldwide, and was adopted by supporters of justice, human rights and of freedom from violence. Protests and resistance actions have been an essential instrument in contributing to the unmasking of state guilt. Even if a way of finding an efficient cure for the metastasis of violence is very difficult and requires co-operation, obstinacy and love for the search of truth, resilient capacity still remains the best antidote for fighting against the uncontrollable raging hunger for the domination of men over other men.

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