THE IMPACT OF REPRESSIVE VIOLENCE DURING THE ARGENTINEAN MILITARY DICTATORSHIP ON SURVIVORS AND RELATIVES OF THE DISAPPEARED

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of repressive violence during the last Argentinean military dictatorship's on a sample of relatives of people detained-disappeared for political reasons (n = 30) and people who survived imprisonment and torture (n = 22). Facing the experience from a political point of view, remaining socially active and positive social support are string elements in providing sense to the experience and generating a positive identity as a survivor. Vice versa, hiding and avoidance are related to post-traumatic symptoms, difficulties in the mourning process and a greater negative impact on basic beliefs.

Keywords: collectiveviolence; survivors; psychosocial consequences ; coping ; post-traumatic growth

Introduction

Various investigations in different contexts have shown that political violence has psychosocial repercussions on the people and communities that face it. One of the most used clinical conditions has been Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, although the symptoms often respond to initial reactions of limited scope and with a tendency to quickly return to normal levels (Summerfield,

1999). Kordon, Edelman, Lagos and Kersner (1995) raised the concept of mourning in contexts of political violence where the loss of many people and the absence of mourning rituals seem to be risk factors that affect its normal development.

In general, people who have endured traumatic events need to make sense of the experience of terror and violent and unreasonable death (Cabrera, 2006). The search for meaning generates collective discussions about the causes, the possibilities of having prevented the event and the attribution of responsibilities (personal, institutional, political, social, etc.). Sometimes, and following the logic of Martín Baró (1990), blaming the victims or their families becomes an instrument of social control that acts as a justifier of violence and impunity while distorting real responsibilities (Beristain, Dona, Páez, Pérez Sales & Fernández, 1999). 'Something must have been done' became the quintessential justification for disappearances in Argentina.

Collective traumas break the ties of relationship between the individual and the community, generating a feeling of exclusion and existential loneliness (Blanco, Díaz & García del Soto, 2006). They also alter beliefs in the goodness of people and trust in them, as well as diminish the value we place on social contribution—the feeling that what we do is valued by the community—and, therefore, our motivation. and dignity. Finally, they cause the feeling of not knowing where the world is going, one is unable to understand, predict and control it (Pérez Sales, Eiroá, Olivos, Barbero, Fernández Liria & Vergara, 2012; Corsini, 2004; Janoff-Bulman, 1989) .

Despite everything, various experiences indicate that victims and survivors have developed coping strategies marked by mobilization and/or political

commitment. The fight against forgetting and testimonial commemoration transforms individual suffering into social testimony and a political weapon; it seems to serve to reduce symptomatology (Becker & Lira, 1989).

This research seeks to identify the psychosocial consequences of the political repression carried out during the last military dictatorship. Specifically, we want to know the impact in terms of post-traumatic stress, grief, the search for meaning and impact on the belief system, as well as the coping strategies used to face the traumatic event and the social support obtained for it.

Method

Sample

The sample (N=52) includes former detainees (n=22) and relatives of disappeared detainees (mothers, fathers, siblings, children or wives/widows) (n=30). The family group is predominantly made up of women, while the distribution is more equitable among the former detainee population.

Research techniques and instrument

The use of questionnaires alone can be aggressive for people, who may have the perception that they do not capture their entire experience. To face these obstacles, interviews became a good method to promote trust and understand the population's discourses (Arnoso & Eiroá, 2010). Once the link with the people was built, a questionnaire was delivered that would allow some of the issues to be quantified.

The questionnaire included the following variables: *Post-traumatic stress disorder* (Brewin et al., 2002) in the months immediately after the traumatic event (at 0.78) and currently (at 0.76), using as a criterion the existence of at least six (6) symptoms of the scale. A subscale of twelve (12) items from

the *Revised Texas Grief Inventory* (García, Landa, Trigueros & Gaminde, 2001), with a response format where 1 = completely true and 5 = completely false (a 0.86) (12 = not at all). altered and 60= totally altered). *Search for meaning:* two (2) items from the VIVO scale (Pérez Sales *et al.,* 2012) with a dichotomous Yes/No response format. *Social support:*eight (8) items (Pérez Sales, Bacic & Duran, 1998; Pérez Sales *et al.,* 2012) with a dichotomous Yes/No response format.

A factor analysis was carried out that yielded two factors: the first, which grouped the lack of support items (28.89% of the explained variance; a 0.71) and a second factor that collected the positive support items (21.73% of the explained variance; to 0.55). *Impact on basic beliefs:* six (6) items from Corsini's (2004) basic beliefs scale (1 = completely false and 5 = completely true). The factor analysis grouped the items into a single factor that explained 59.85% of the variance (a 0.85). *Coping strategies:* an *ad hoc* scale of eight (8) items based on the review of the proposals of Lazarus and Folkman (1986) and Pérez Sales and collaborators (2012) with a dichotomous response format (Yes/No). Factor analysis with rotation*varimax* produced two factors: the first grouped those items that mentioned a type of active coping (31.99% of the explained variance; a 0.67); the second, which grouped those items that characterized a type of coping of avoidance and withdrawal (20.79% of explained variance; a 0.66). *Identity associated with trauma:* seven (7) items from the VIVO scale (Pérez Sales *et al.,* 2012) with a dichotomous agreement/disagreement response format that converge on a single factor (40% see).

With the sum of the items, a continuous variable was constructed where 0= anchoring in victim identity and 7= identity of survivor and protagonist of the experience (at 0.71). The *sociodemographic variables* that were collected were: sex, age, political ideology and level of exposure to violence (relative of missing detainee or former political detainee).

Descriptive, factorial and correlational analyzes were carried out using the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences statistical program.* Differences are analyzed depending on the level of exposure to violence. The qualitative data were analyzed through the Atlas T program. A content analysis was used between 3 blind and independent judges who confirmed a highly reliable system of categories.

Results

Post-traumatic symptoms

The majority did not suffer and do not suffer today from post-traumatic stress, although some symptoms persist today. Episodes are described that reflect isolated symptoms, such as irritability, hypervigilance reactions or nightmares derived from the experience of confinement and adaptation to the 'total institution'. These reactions, although they were more common in the past, usually reappear when faced with episodes that mention the events (commemorations, exhumations, visits to places of memory, anniversaries, etc.). *You're the one who jumps, don't let anyone wake you up suddenly [...] because of all that happened, when they took us out to torture us at night and woke you up at dawn with beatings, so anything makes you jump like that, as if the same thing were going to happen.* (David, former detainee) *When I talk a lot about what happened, then I go crazy for several days, I get very upset and I need to*

relieve myself. I sleep and I am with the images there, I go out and I am with those images. (Ernesto, former detainee)

Search for meaning

The majority of the affected population knows why it happened, they assume their role in the militant activities and consider that it is necessary to rescue the reasons for the struggles and disappearances. Although most could make sense of their experience, only half said that understanding why things happened gave them peace of mind. A minority believed that their experience had depended on chance, they do not find meaning in what happened and they strive to deny social and/or political activity. This occurs significantly among the relatives of detained and disappeared persons.

They took my dad away because he was a popular activist who fought for the rights of others and was a very good companion. (Nora, daughter of a disappeared detainee)

I refuse to say that I don't know why it happened [...] we were looking for a different Jujuy; That is what we must rescue [...] the reasons why so many colleagues disappeared. (Gastón, former detainee)

My brother was very good, he didn't mess with anyone, he was an exemplary student, he didn't deserve what happened to him. (Nadia, sister of a missing detainee)

I think they detain me because of confusion, [...] because I can't understand [...]. I wasn't directly interested in politics, just some group meetings, but that was normal. (Rosario, former detainee)

Former detainees often had the feeling of having to apologize to their families for having survived repression while others did not. Thus, causes anchored to chance or the arbitrariness of the military are attributed to confront the induction of guilt and responsibility for what happened.

Sometimes we have felt how they blamed us, why my mother or father is not here and you are here and we had to explain that we were not to blame, that life did not depend on us, that it was not that they killed the others to that I was left alive, that it is not that they have exchanged the life of a companion for mine, that our lives were in the hands of people who did whatever they wanted. (Alfonso, former detainee)

Perceived social support

The majority of affected people felt that society turned its back on them, almost half felt blamed by society, a third perceived that even their friends left them alone, and almost a fifth expressed moments of humiliation due to their condition. Conversely, more than a third acknowledged that people loved and respected them. Although the majority found support in people who had gone through similar situations and also in the family space, less than half expressed that they had never felt alone. That is to say, even having found spaces of support, the majority felt many moments of loneliness linked to their repressive experience.

The support from society has been very bad here, like you had a plague on you. [...] with the other exes [...] it took time until we got back together. Freedom at first is strange, it is uncertainty, it is loneliness. (Camilo, former detainee)

The alteration in the grieving process

Even today, the grieving process is altered, both among family members and among former political detainees. Although the passage of time and research into the past have allowed the murders to be confirmed, the absence of the body and the persistence of uncertainty make this process difficult. Former detainees report that in addition to mourning the loss of loved ones, they interpret the dictatorship and prison as the disappearance of a political project, of fellow militants, and of a generation committed to a different future.

We have not even mourned, [...] we live in uncertainty [...], because when do you convince yourself of a death? When you see even the drawer, but like this... (*Mónica, wife* of disappeared detainee) *It is not only family mourning, [...] they were also our colleagues [...] and they were such brilliant people, so lucid, it is a community loss as well, the generation that they have taken away, the political project that we had, [...], we dreamed of a different country, and that has been taken away [...]* (Rodrigo, former detainee)

The impact on the belief system

In general, the system of basic beliefs has been able to be reconstructed, although the relatives have had more difficulties in doing so than the former detainee population, especially in relation to the vision of the self with dignity and respect, the loss of confidence in life or the impact on the benevolent worldview. Furthermore, and to a greater extent, the former detainee population felt more distant from people and that life had stopped making sense. In the testimonies they made reference to these issues, both in negative terms and in terms of reconstruction and strengthening. This is the case of religious beliefs, how can we understand that, if a supreme being existed, it would have been able

to tolerate so much barbarity? Or conversely, how can we understand having survived without God's help?

I lost three children, a granddaughter. My daughter and I spent almost seven years locked up, torture, we went through everything, [...] my life has been very painful. How am I going to believe in God? Before yes, but now? [...] suffering and did nothing? (Esther, former detainee and mother of disappeared detainees) *Why wasn't it our turn, [...] sometimes I can't explain how I was saved from so many, how I was able to be born again many times, sometimes I say that I already I'm on loan here, after so many dangers we've been through [...] so in some way I think God must have helped me.* (Gaston, former detainee)

As mentioned above, many testimonies affirm that life ceased to have meaning and even some family members took their own lives as a result of the events. However, in general people found new motivations to live.

My mother suffered a lot when my father disappeared. She [...] she raised us both, until we grew up [...]. She then committed suicide. I think her life stopped making sense to her after her dad disappeared. (Sonia, daughter of a disappeared detainee)

When my daughter Alejandra was murdered [...] everything became dark, the world was very gray [...]. But Monica [. . .] Oh , when we get my granddaughter back! There I did see the light again, life made sense again. (Norma, mother of murdered politician)

Coping strategies

The strategies most cited by the subjects are related to social mobilization, specifically: the organization with other affected people, the search for information about what had happened and the strengthening of the political

struggle accompanied by pride in what their relatives did. or fellow activists. About a third of the people interviewed indicated that they had remained silent and preferred to carry their grief inside or had made efforts to distract themselves with other activities and thus avoid remembering what had happened to them. A quarter of the population said they had kept quiet at some point to prevent something from happening to them and a minority indicated they had resigned because they had stopped believing in justice. The strategies that the interviewed population used to face the traumatic situation were similar depending on the level of exposure to violence. In the case of former detainees, among the multiple strategies described, clarity and political awareness are the most recognized strategies to confront the horror, even having been strengthened as a consequence of the experience.*"If you are not ideologically consolidated, no matter how strong you are, you'll leave [...]"* (Darío, former detainee).

When I entered the prison I did not know that I was a political prisoner, I realized in there, with the discussions, because I started to believe that what I had done was only defend some workers. (Camilo, former detainee)

The active coping of the family members was initially characterized above all by the search for information in police stations and penitentiary centers, and currently, by the organization around victims' and human rights organizations to demand memory, truth and justice. Nerging around organizations has made it possible to keep memory alive and promote the trial and punishment of those responsible, as well as finding spaces for ventilation and emotional support.

My mother went out to look for news about my brother, to see where he was, they told her that he was in this place and they could give you news there, and

while she was walking around all day, because she left my house at seven in the morning to San Salvador and returned at 12 at night. (Felisa, sister of missing detainees) *The support that my companions have represented for me, on a path that I found alone. Being able to find a space in the association and give my testimony helped me recover my identity as a social fighter and feel closer to my peers.* (Lucrecia, former detainee)

Surviving identity

The interviewed population developed an identity of survivor *versus*victim, significantly among former detainees. Despite the abuses endured, it is maintained that all suffering is an opportunity to improve. They saw themselves as strong and resisted the situation; they say that the experience strengthened them and that in the end they were left with a deep sense of dignity. Furthermore, globally, an identity of belonging and closeness was developed with people who had gone through the same thing. It is also evident that in general, they consider that witnessing the experience gives meaning to their lives, especially among the former detainee population and not so much among their families. Only a third of the population interviewed felt they had been broken by what happened (especially family members).

I feel that it marked me, that I have to be a permanent fighter, I embraced that commitment, it is the life that I was given, the utopia that I chose, [...] it is what I get for my companions. (Dario, former detainee) *These sons of bitches are not going to think that they broke us, no, I don't want to be a victim, I don't want them to enjoy the pain they have caused [...]; On the contrary, my whole objective is to fight so that these sons of bitches go to prison.* (Bartolina, daughter   of   a   murdered   politician)

It marked my life, it definitely did [...]. I had this issue of staying a victim [...] I grew up with my mother's speech: we are victims. And that did have consequences for me [...] not being able to get out of the place of victim. If you are a victim you suffer all the time, she was a person who suffered for everything [...]. Getting away from that place has cost me a lot. Actually I feel better now that I feel like I am the protagonist of my life. (Elisa, daughter of a missing detainee)

TABLA 2.
Afrontamiento e identidad de sobreviviente

		Familiar	Ex -detenida	Sig.	Total
Afrontamiento	Me organicé con otros familiares	66.7%	54.5%	0.78	61.5%
	Traté de buscar información	56.7%	59.1%	0.031	57.7%
	Reforcé mi lucha política	40	63.6%	2.83	50%
	Media afrontamiento activo	2.30	2.72	1.25	2.51
	Preferí callar y llevar la pena por dentro	30%	27.3%	0.046	28.8%
	Trataba de distraerme en actividades para evitar pensar	26.7%	31.8%	0.16	28.8%
	Me callé para evitar que nos pasara algo	23.2%	22.7%	0.003	23.1%
	Me resigné porque dejé de creer en la justicia	16.7%	9.1%	0.62	13.5%
	Media afrontamiento evitación	.096	0.90	0.029	.93
Identidad sobreviviente	Creo que me he quebrado con lo que pasó	46.7%	9.1%	8.41**	30.8%
	Todo sufrimiento es una oportunidad de superación	60%	72.7%	0.90	65.4%
	Ser testigo da sentido a la vida	75.9%	100%	5.89**	86%
	Me siento muy cerca de quienes han pasado lo mismo que yo	70%	90.9%	3.32	78.8%
	Me vi fuerte, resistiendo	71.4%	90.9%	2.92	80%
	Hay experiencias que me han hecho más fuerte	83.3%	95.5%	1.82	88.5%
	Me quedó una profunda sensación de dignidad	82.8%	90.9%	0.70	86.3%
	Media identidad sobreviviente	4.96	6.28	8.25**	5.62

Fuente: elaboración propia

From the impact to psychosocial growth: associated variables

In the analysis, correlations were found between the existence of PTSD in the past, forms of coping marked by avoidance, a greater alteration in the grieving process and the negative impact on basic beliefs. Likewise, positive relationships were found between active coping, greater positive social support,

the possibility of making sense of what happened and the generation of a survivor identity.

Tabla 3.

Correlaciones de las variables de afectación psicosocial

	Identidad sobreviviente	TEPT antes	TEPT ahora	Afrontamiento activo	Apoyo positivo	Apoyo negativo	Afrontamiento evitación	Duelo	Impacto creencias básicas	Me tranquiliza entender por qué sucedieron las cosas
Identidad sobreviviente	1									
TEPT antes	-0.250	1								
TEPT ahora	-0.080	0.334*	1							
Afrontamiento activo	0.577**	.0015	-0.173	1						
Apoyo positivo	0.489**	-0.223	-0.208	0.605**	1					
Apoyo negativo	0.081	0.209	0.064	0.149	0.114	1				
Afrontamiento evitación	-0.222	0.281*	0.119	-0.223	-0.158	0.383**	1			
Duelo	-0.089	0.352*	0.171	-0.003	-0.013	0.183	0.008	1		
Impacto creencias básicas	-0.448**	0.464**	0.144	-0.363**	-0.345*	0.375**	0.506**	0.282*	1	
Me tranquiliza entender por qué sucedieron las cosas	0.404**	-0.125	0.079	0.288*	0.186	0.250	-0.109	-0.050	-0.206	-1

Fuente: elaboración propia

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this work show that the majority of the population did not develop severe post-traumatic pathology, although some of these symptoms could emerge again in the face of events that activate the traumatic past. An avoidance coping style would be associated with greater post-traumatic symptoms and greater difficulties in the processes of mourning, made more difficult by the non-existence of remains to confirm the death and the absence of symbolic elements such as rituals (Kordon et al., 1995). ; Lira, 1991). In addition to traditional mourning, a political mourning was found capable of integrating the multiple losses that political violence usually entails (Becker et al., 1990). For its part, Coping strategies characterized by avoidance were associated with the feeling of not understanding the reasons why they had been

affected by repression, as well as greater psychological distress measured in terms of post-traumatic stress. In other words, those people with less political clarity about their actions or the activities carried out by their detained and missing relatives reported greater psychological discomfort associated with the impossibility of finding meaning in the events.

Resisting to accept what happened, denial, hiding feelings and isolating oneself from the environment have been defined as long-term maladaptive behaviors by previous literature. The meta-analyses by Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen and Wadsworth (2001) confirmed that lack of commitment or behavioral abandonment, cognitive and behavioral avoidance, were associated with greater anxiety and depression, less social adjustment and illness. A study carried out in Northern Ireland at the time of collective violence confirmed that avoidance coping was the one most strongly associated with distress (Brown, Mulhem & Joseph, 2002).

Likewise, it was found that the lack of social support is associated with a greater alteration in the belief system and with selecting more avoidance strategies to face the traumatic experience, consistent with what has been indicated in previous studies. The research by Zapata-Sepúlveda, López-Sánchez and Sánchez-Gómez (2009), whose main objective was to study the psychological effects of experiences of prison and political torture on the world conception of a group of Chilean survivors, found that the negative conception of the world was related to the interpretation that they live in a world influenced by the former Chilean military regime and with dissatisfaction with Chilean society, because they perceive support on its part for the same political regime.

Consistently, although some studies have found that tortured people or direct victims report a worse image of themselves compared to the victims' relatives (Magwaza, 1999), in the present study it was found that the vision of the self as dignified and *respectful*It was significantly more negative among relatives of missing detainees than among the former detainee population. This finding could be related to the fact that the victims' relatives had more difficulties making sense of the events, making more attributions of meaning to chance than to the sociopolitical explanations put forward by the former detainee population, which stated that clarity and political confrontation had been the main elements to stay strong and not break down in prisons and/or torture sessions. These data are consistent with the study by Basoglu and collaborators (1996), who found a lower symptomatology and prevalence of PTSD in tortured Turkish political activists (18%) than in tortured non-political prisoners (39%),

On the other hand, although previous studies have insisted on the long-term effects of the negative impact of violence on the basic belief system (Cabrera, 2006; Corsini, 2004; Janoff-Bulman, 1989), the alteration in the sample analyzed was moderate. In it, the affectation of those related to trust in others prevails, while the rest of the dimensions were reestablished over the years. That is, although violence generates an impact on basic beliefs, the results of this study suggest that positive life experiences can collaborate in their restoration, which suggests that this alteration is not necessarily definitive (Arnoso & Eiroá, 2010).

In short, the destructive and dehumanized violence and the effort to end the resistance were relatively unsuccessful: survival and organization prevailed over intended death and this type of coping was associated with better psychosocial

well-being (Becker & Lira, 1989). Involvement in collective activities, whether helping or participating in the community, is a form of group activity that helps formulate and find meaning in traumatic events, collaborating with the recovery of collective loss (Lifton, 1980).

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