

IN DEPTH

A resilient hug. Relevance of accompaniment in cases of enforced disappearance

Karla Salazar Serna

Member of the UNAM Regional Centre for Multidisciplinary Research

When a human being experiences difficult or extreme situations, accompaniment is recognized as a fundamental support in the face of new realities he or she confronts. An example, which most individuals can relate to in their daily lives, is when news about a health problem is received. It is not difficult to visualize the following image: a doctor notifying a patient about a terminal illness or a chronic condition. Both the manner and sensitivity with which he or she transmits the news, along with the fact of whether or not the patient is accompanied, will greatly influence the impact. In these moments, there is a possibility that the patient will experience the stages of grief over the latent loss of his or her health. Having emotional support through accompaniment can have such emotional strength that the adverse event can be assimilated more calmly allowing for the reflection of strategies that affect the patient's quality of life.

In Buddhist thought there are several phrases and fables that help people to focus less on what they face in life and more about how they face it. Is this possible in cases of enforced disappearance? Let's analyze this in detail: among the various expressions of violence, the enforced disappearance of people is considered to be one of the most serious due to the fact that the uncertainty it generates has the capacity to mentally destabilize the family and loved ones of the person who has been disappeared.

Repercussions in the families of the disappeared include feelings of pain, terror, emotional distress, guilt and anger, among others. The disappearance of a loved one

marks a milestone in the lives of family members where, despite the time elapsed, the suffering remains present due to the feelings of hopelessness and frustration with government agencies and the financial difficulties generated as a result of the disappearance. The experience of having a disappeared relative generates, over the years, various changes in perceptions, feelings and beliefs: in the first stage, anguish and anxiety predominate, while in a second stage, the most prominent feelings are tiredness, sadness and hopelessness¹.

“ Having emotional support through accompaniment can have such emotional strength that the adverse event can be assimilated more calmly ”

The feeling of uncertainty is a constant that generates suffering due to the existence of an ambiguous loss that will persist until the whereabouts of the disappeared loved one is determined. This is related to what has been referred to as an ambiguous mourning: the disappeared person is perceived as physically absent, but psychologically present, since there is no certainty about whether this person is dead or alive. The experience of going through an ambiguous mourning as a consequence of an enforced disappearance entails deep pain. The unavoidable enigma about the disappearance of a loved one is tormenting. Mental blocks are observed in the management of the loss, which generates continuous trauma².

It is important to recognize the suffering of the affected families and the effects that befall them; that this practice represents a flagrant violation of the rights of the victim's relatives and that it causes prolonged mental anguish among its members. When seeking reparation for harm suffered, the return to the families of the disappeared person, dead or alive, is essential, since this influences the satisfaction of the relatives and the pain is mitigated. In addition, government efforts to investigate and find those responsible for the enforced disappearance are also necessary³. Faced with these exhausting processes, the following questions arise: How does one cope with

the uncertainty and adversity that this situation generates? Does accompaniment have any impact in these cases of profound complexity?

Fortunately, it is possible to develop resilience factors that can help to cope with adverse scenarios, which are generated by search operations, emotional commitments with the disappeared person, family unity, faith and religion, as well as social support from friends, groups and peers which occur in different moments of accompaniment. But what are we talking about when we talk about resilience? Let's look at the concept more closely, its relevance within the phenomenon of disappearance and its development through accompaniment.

“ Resilience allows to build or rebuild both personal as well as relational and spatial alternatives based on the social dynamics of coexistence ”

What do we mean by resilience?

The word *resilience* comes from the Latin term *resilium*, which can mean “go back; jump back; return to initial state”. The genesis of the concept of resilience comes from physics and it was used to refer to the elasticity and ability of a body to regain its original size and shape after being manipulated⁴.

The conceptual origin of resilience regarding the study of human beings has been related to the processes of positive adaptation of children living in conditions of adversity. From a psychological and psychiatric point of view, this is related to the fact that during the 1970s, groups of psychologists and psychiatrists focused their efforts on the study of resilience in children who were raised in contexts of risk⁵. However, the idea of resilience has evolved: from being conceived as something that was absolute, it has become something that is relative, that depends on the dynamic balance of personal, family and social factors. Moreover, lifecycle moments also have an impact on the

process of resilience. Resilience also involves an evolutionary progression that responds to new vulnerabilities. Therefore, the term resilience leads to a broad conceptual umbrella that encompasses various concepts related to positive responses in contexts of adversity. This means that different significances of resilience correspond to concepts related to: adaptation, capacity and process⁶.

There are three fundamental qualities in resilience: 1) an understanding and acceptance of reality; 2) a belief that life has meaning; and 3) an ability to generate strategies or alternative solutions. There are also distinctive characteristics in an individual that facilitate resilience, such as: intelligence, a sense of humor and optimism, self-control, high self-esteem, social capital management, autonomy for decision making, initiative, and forming a life project⁷. These are all personal factors, although it is important to point out that there are also factors that depend on interactions with others.

“ Resilience is forged through adversity. This implies integrating the experience into the individual, family, group and community identity in a relational and narrative manner ”

In the studies on resilience and disappearance that I have developed as a researcher on the subject, I assume a conceptualization on resilience that allows it to be recognized as a process involving internal and external factors to face adversity, in which, from adverse situations, there are possibilities to build or rebuild both personal as well as relational and spatial alternatives based on the social dynamics of coexistence⁸.

The study of resilience within the phenomenon of enforced disappearance is understood to have led to a paradigm in which relational ties that unite people and systems allow embarking on a shared journey. It is important to state that no factor promotes resilience individually; various factors acting together must be involved in order to promote development. These factors respond to different contexts and circumstances, so it is necessary to discern and understand strategies according to the

WHERE ARE THE MISSING? TRUTH AND JUSTICE AS A REQUISITE FOR PEACE

logic and situation of people when they have to deal with difficult situations.

Within the phenomenon of enforced disappearance, it is important to point out that resilience is forged through adversity, not in spite of it, so it is necessary to recognize it, and this implies integrating the experience into the individual, family, group and community identity. In other words, when interweaving in a relational and narrative manner, possibilities of self-restoration and growth in adversity are discovered through narrative reasoning. This happens because “it promotes a series of communicational capacities that allow sharing beliefs and narratives; fostering feelings of coherence, collaboration, effectiveness, trust and confronting difficulties”⁹.

For example, for women looking for their disappeared relatives in Mexico, resilience processes occur more often when they belong to groups of families and people looking for their own disappeared relatives. Feelings of identity arise in these groups, where they identify as “sisters and brothers of the same pain”. According to their narratives, they can understand each other more deeply by sharing experiences, feelings and even by evoking the memory of their loved ones.

“ The supportive accompaniment of people who do not have disappeared family members has generated an increase in the hope and confidence of those who do ”

The resilience process usually happens in a differentiated way: each individual may have very different reactions to the same event or may need more or less time to process the experience. This all depends on variables such as age or the significance attached to this experience. In short, the contexts where resilience can be reproduced are under constant transformation, and individuals involved in violent events have different ways of reacting to them, which may not always result in resilience processes. The existence of community resources and the fact that people and families are willing to use them can have a favorable impact on resilience processes because, through

WHERE ARE THE MISSING? TRUTH AND JUSTICE AS A REQUISITE FOR PEACE

these resources, social capital and the feelings of empathy that contribute to giving meaning to life can be reinforced¹⁰.

With regard to the latter, it is worth noting how families that have organized to search for their disappeared relatives in Mexico have found an echo and received empathy from some sectors of the population where they have conducted their searches. For instance, by organizing search brigades in areas where the existence of clandestine graves is suspected, they have been able to establish community support networks through several churches, where empathy is developed and solidarity with the brigades is encouraged. The supportive accompaniment of people who do not have disappeared family members has generated an increase in the hope and confidence of those who do.

It is, therefore, important to know and recognize the main challenges and obstacles faced by people and families who are looking for the missing, especially when they decide to carry out search operations during which they can experience processes that sometimes suggest grim episodes. For example, finding corpses and remains can result in an oxymoron: the joy of finding potential victims of disappearance together with the feelings of sadness regarding the situation. Similarly, it is also important to consider that these people face the institutional inability to carry out a timely and relevant forensic investigation. Given the importance of the relational approach that the resilience process entails, it is important to look at accompaniment in cases of disappearance as an important factor in coping with adversity since isolation can have a serious effect on resilience processes in an individual who has suffered a traumatic episode.

**“ The roads that are built during the search
require spaces for emotional expression,
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Psychosocial accompaniment is the best way for families and people looking for their loved ones to develop resilience. Psychosocial accompaniment is seen as an accompaniment that includes the processes of well-being from an integration of the emotional and the relational in certain contexts. Accompaniment with a psychosocial perspective requires an understanding of the multiple social, cultural and political contexts in which identity and the emotional and relational world are constructed and deconstructed. Its purpose is to build a reflective process between the victims, their social network and their companions, which helps overcome the social and emotional effects of violence through the redefinition of identity and the recognition of social and personal resources. Metaphorically, this accompaniment works like an engine with a compass inside to guide the process¹¹.

On many occasions those who show solidarity with the victims of the enforced disappearance of relatives or loved ones do not fully understand the meaning of psychosocial accompaniment; nevertheless, the accompaniment itself provides elements to promote resilience. After an enforced disappearance, the roads that are built during the search require spaces for emotional expression, for empathy, for rebuilding under new identities that allow family members to cope with the anguish, uncertainty, frustration and hopelessness. Therefore, the main aspect to consider for this anguish is that the supportive actions should be aimed at the needs that the people themselves perceive within their environment. Under these considerations, it is necessary to conduct an accompaniment that favours both resilience processes aimed at the emotional and identity dimension, as well as political resilience processes through search operations, demands for justice and acts in favour of memory. Political resilience has been visible in Mexico, where families affected by disappearances, with their different political struggles, achieved the enactment of the General Law of Enforced Disappearance Committed by Individuals, among other legal measures. Similarly, they have turned this phenomenon into one of the main public issues to deal with, which affects their perceptions of “doing something” in favour of their disappeared family members.

1. These statements are based on studies conducted by Giraldo, L.; J. Gómez and K. Maestre (2008). “Niveles de depresión y estrategias de afrontamiento en familiares de víctimas de desaparición forzada en la ciudad de Medellín”. *International Journal of*

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2. Reference in line with Cabodevilla, I. (2007). "Las pérdidas y sus duelos. Palliative Care Unit. San Juan de Dios Hospital". Pamplona. *Revista Sist. Sanit. Navar*. Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 163-176.
3. Rojas, N. (2013). "Ley de víctimas y desaparición forzada en Colombia". *Revista Logos, Ciencia & Tecnología*. Vol. 1, No. 5, pp. 39-50.
4. Based on: Kloterianco, M.; Cáceres, I. and M. Fontecilla (1997). "Estado de arte en resiliencia". Washington; Monroy, B. and L. Palacios (2011). "Resiliencia: ¿Es posible medirla e influir en ella?". *Revista Salud Mental*. Vol. 34, No. 3. México: Cd. de México; Villalba, C. (2003). "El concepto de resiliencia individual y familiar. Aplicaciones en la intervención social". *Revista Intervención Psicosocial*. Vol. 12, No. 3. México: Cd. de México.
5. In line with De Klinkert, M. (2003). *Resiliencia: la estimulación para enfrentar desafíos*. Buenos Aires: Lumen; Masten, A. (2001). "Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development". *American Psychologist*. Vol. 56, No. 3, pp. 227-238.
6. As noted by Masten, A. and J. Obradovic (2006). "Competence and Resilience in Development". *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*. Vol. 1094, No. 1, pp. 13-27; Villalba, C. (2003). "El concepto de resiliencia individual y familiar. Aplicaciones en la intervención social". *Revista Intervención Psicosocial*. Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 283-299.
7. Referenced in García, María Cristina and Elsy Domínguez (2013). "Desarrollo teórico de la resiliencia y su aplicación en situaciones adversas: una revisión analítica". *Revista Latinoamérica de Ciencias Sociales, Niñez y Juventud*. Vol. 11, No. 1. Colombia: Manizales.
8. Under the theoretical support of Cyrulnik, B. (2001). *La maravilla del dolor*. Barcelona: Gedisa; Quiñonez, M. A. (2007). *Resiliencia. Resignificación creativa de la adversidad*. Caldas: Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas.

9. Literal quote from Builes M. and M. Bedoya (2008). "La familia contemporánea: relatos de resiliencia y salud mental". *Revista Colombiana de Psiquiatría*. Vol. 37, No. 3, pp. 344-354.
10. According to Villalba, C. (2003). "El concepto de resiliencia individual y familiar. Aplicaciones en la intervención social". *Revista Intervención Psicosocial*. Vol. 12, No. 3. México: Cd. de México.
11. Based on: Arévalo, L. (2010). "Atención y reparación psicosocial en contextos de violencia sociopolítica: una mirada reflexiva". *Revista de estudios sociales*. No. 36, pp. 29-39. And Marín, V. and L.F. Zapata (2017). "Acompañamiento psicosocial en el marco del proceso de excavación en el Polígono 1 de la Escombera, Medellín, 2015". *Revista Khatarsis*. No. 23, pp. 142-165.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karla Salazar Serna is a member of the UNAM Regional Centre for Multidisciplinary Research in Mexico. She holds a PhD in Social Work Philosophy with a Special Focus on Comparative Social Welfare Policies, an MA in Social Work with a Special Focus on Social Projects, and a Law Degree. Her line of research is focused on the study of resilience and the processes experienced by people and families who have been victims of violent environments, drug trafficking, wars and armed conflicts.

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