Spirituality in a refugee camp

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KEY WORDS

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ABSTRACT

Occupational therapy intervention guided by clients' spiritual beliefs can be a powerful force for change. This paper describes an occupational therapy project with Maya Indian families returning to Guatemala after 14 years refuge in Mexico. The project was designed and carried out over a 12 month period. Its aim was to assist the families to re-adapt to village life and to establish roles and habits which would ensure a better quality of life.

Mayan cosmovision was used to guide the project. The needs of the community were assessed using the model of human occupation. Community enablement was used to guide the intervention. Different problems were faced by the different age groups in the community, i.e. the children, adolescents, adults and older adults, and the project was tailored to meet the needs of each group. Outcomes of the project demonstrate the utility of occupational therapy intervention guided by client spirituality.

RÉSUMÉ

L'intervention ergothérapique orientée par les croyances spirituelles du client peut être une force de changement très puissante. Cet article décrit un projet ergothérapique effectué auprès de familles mayas qui sont revenues au Guatemala après s'être réfugiées pendant 14 ans au Mexique. L'élaboration et la mise en oeuvre du projet se sont étendues sur une période de 12 mois. Le but du projet était d'aider les familles à se réadapter à la vie du village et à développer des rôles et des habitudes qui leur assureraient une meilleure qualité de vie.

La vision des Mayas sur l'univers a servi de base au projet. Les besoins de la communauté ont été évalués à l'aide du modèle de l'occupation humaine. L'intervention a été guidée par une approche visant l'habilitation de la communauté. Comme les différents groupes d'âges de la communauté, c'est-à-dire les enfants, les adolescents, les adultes et les personnes âgées, étaient confrontés à des problèmes spécifiques, le projet a été conçu dans le but de répondre aux besoins de chaque groupe d'âge. Les résultats du projet démontrent l'utilité de l'intervention ergothérapique orientée par la spiritualité du client.

" The biggest treasure I have in life is the ability to dream; in the hardest moments I have been able to dream a more beautiful future."

Rigoberta Menchú.

Spirituality can be viewed as a way of living which demonstrates essential values regarding the role of the individual in the world (Heminiak, 1996). These values are generally transmitted through culture. When individuals are forced to flee their communities and live as refugees, transmission of cultural values can be disrupted. Disruption of values can produce role loss and occupational performance problems (Kielhofner & Burke, 1985).

Approximately 53 million people, or 1 in every 115 people world-wide, have been displaced by armed conflict (UNICEF, 1996). The plight of refugees remains a challenge for humanity. In the following paper, we describe the occupational therapy component of a bidisciplinary project with Guatemalan refugees. This project was designed and carried out by the first two authors, one an occupational therapist, the other a social worker, over a 6 month period. The objective of this programme was to promote the health, occupational performance and quality of life of Maya Indian refugees returning to Guatemala after 14 years of exile in Mexico.

Project design was guided by the model of human occupation (Kielhofner & Burke, 1985) and traditional Mayan cultural values. In keeping with the model, a developmental approach was taken. First, the meaning of the past, present and future for all members of the community was considered. Next, the traditional values of the community were recovered. Finally, community members redeveloped traditional roles guided by these values. These roles guided their occupational performance. Following a brief description of the events which led to the present situation of the community, the phases of the project are described, and preliminary outcomes are reported.

Guatemala – an injured land

" Inhuman are their soldiers, cruel their fierce mastiffs ".

El libro de los libros de Chilam Balam (as cited in Menchú, 1983/1984)

The history of the Maya people reflects a proud past mired by four centuries of European domination. Maya people established the first known villages in the Americas in approximately 2000 BC. By 100 BC Mayan land was divided into a system of states, each with its own complex social, political and economic systems. The Maya people demonstrated advanced techniques, particularly in astronomy and architecture. By 1500 AD, for reasons not completely understood, the Maya civilization was in decline. Any renaissance that may have occurred was cut short by invasion of the Spanish, beginning in 1524 (Sharer, 1994).

Europeans eventually conquered the Maya people through both military might and the transmission of diseases previously unknown to the region. From the 16th to the 19th centuries, the Maya people were co-opted to work the plantations of wealthy European landowners. They lived in poverty under this domination. Guatemala declared its independence from Spain in 1821, however little changed until the election of Juan José Arévalo in 1945. Arévalo allowed the initiation of a labour movement, and land reform was begun. In 1954 a Conservative coup d'état supported by landowners, clergy elite and the CIA put an end to any such progress (Woodward, 1992) and began over 40 years of military-dominated rule.

In 1960 a Cuban-supported revolt failed. The guerrillas fled into the hills where they continued a civil war against the military. From 1965 onward the military stepped up its campaign against the guerrillas. Death squads hunted and killed thousands of guerrillas and suspected sympathizers. Maya villagers were at particular risk. The guerrillas would often enter villages to stage an attack on the military. When the guerrillas fled back to the hills, villagers were often severely punished by the military for their aid to, or suspected collusion with the guerrillas. By the late 1970s, soldiers were slaughtering entire villages. Maya Indians began to flee to Mexico (Jonas, 1991; Lovell, 1995; Woodward, 1992).

In 1978 the Guatemalan army began a scorched earth campaign in the countryside inhabited by Maya Indians. The result was the destruction of 440 villages (Barry, 1992; Falla 1983). Forty-five thousand women were widowed, 150,000 children were orphaned. One hundred thousand Guatemalans were murdered and a million were displaced. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) officially recognized 46,000 refugees. It is believed that another 150,000 Guatemalans went into hiding in the forests surrounding Chiapas, Mexico (Aguacayo, 1989).

Beginning in 1993, Guatemalan refugees living in Mexico began to make the journey home. Improving political conditions and plans for a peace process made it possible, but not completely safe, for Maya refugees to return to their beloved land (Lovell, 1995). Those who do go back are called retornos.

To speak of Guatemala today is to speak of a country of poverty, as well as fear. For the indigenous Maya people, who make up 55% of the population and form the second largest indigenous group in Latin American, life is devoted to agriculture. These people live in a situation of extreme poverty, where 70% of the land belongs to 2% of the population (Krauss, 1991). In the rural areas 82% of the children are malnourished (Ronstom, 1989).

Life at the refugee camps

In preparation for travelling back to Guatemala with the refugees, the two senior authors lived in camps in Campeche and Chiapas, Mexico. Over the course of two months, we came

to know the story of the community. This was an invaluable experience for our later work.

While conditions were somewhat better at the safe camp of Campeche, the situation at the refugee camp in Chiapis was grim. There were high levels of malnourishment, infant mortality, alcoholism, disability and domestic violence. It is estimated that, in 1991, 78% of the children in the camps were malnourished. Only 34% of the women were literate, and on average, each mother had experienced the death of at least one child. Marital problems were prevalent. Over a third of the women had an alcoholic spouse, and 12-23% reported domestic violence (Farias & Arana, 1991).

Under such difficult conditions it seems unlikely to speak of spirituality. However the extreme conditions of the refugee camp offer testimony to the importance of spirituality in the lives of human beings. Frankl spoke of how finding meaning in daily life helped him survive imprisonment in the brutal concentration camps of Auschwitz. Paraphrasing Nietsche, he wrote that if one has a reason to live, one can survive anything (Frankl, 1968).

Mayan cosmovision – a resource for healing

" In the name of the Heaven's heart, in the name of the Earth's heart..."

Mayan prayer.

In Guatemala one cannot speak of spirituality or meaning without considering Mayan cosmovision. As outlined previously, spirituality can be understood as a way of living which demonstrates essential values regarding the role of the individual in the world (Heminiak, 1996) Cosmovision informs Maya people of such essential values and ways of living. Cosmovision is an ancient system of beliefs which describes the place and purpose of all things in the universe. It influences every human activity and involves convictions, beliefs, habits, roles and feelings. Mayan beliefs regarding the origin of illness, the role of the individual within the Universe, and the meaning of evil and suffering guided our work.

We learned about cosmovision from an Ajgiji, or Mayan priest. The Ajgiji is the leader of the community. His goal is to maintain the balance between human beings, nature and God. The loss of this balance is the origin of illness. As the Ajgiji told us, " The Earth is my mother; the Earth is a living being. She feeds me, I live for her. We live from water, wind, fire, rain... If a person turns his back on nature, he'll become hopelessly ill."

According to Mayan beliefs, humans are charged with the care of the earth, as the earth gives life. Corn is a gift of the earth which is particularly important in sustaining life for the Maya. Mayan philosophy clearly outlines the responsibilities of each member of the community in relation to the earth and to each other. It states that individuals must contribute to the universe through their skills. They must work for their community using their talents and knowledge. This belief underlies the Mayan importance of cooperation and respect for life.

The meaning of suffering and the reason for the existence of evil were ever present issues for the community. Mayan philosophy grapples with the problem of evil as embodied in the violence experienced by the refugees. As the Ajgiji told us, "In the Universe, Good and Evil exist in a never-ending fight in which we participate, as did our predecessors and the rest of the holy forces".

As enablers of the community, we were guided by the teachings of the Ajgiji. This included a more holistic vision of man and nature, as well as the special role that healers have in the community. In addition to theoretical knowledge about health and illness, the Ajgiji modelled a great amount of integrity and respect for the Maya people. From him we learned to appreciate the importance of always remembering the human dimension of suffering.

Homecoming

"We have always lived here; we have the right to go on living where we are happy and where we want to die. Only here can we feel whole; nowhere else would we ever feel complete and our pain would be eternal".

Popol Vuh, The holy Mayan book.

We returned to Guatemala with two groups of refugees, one destined for Quetzal and the other for Esmeralda, at Peten, North Guatemala. The refugees returned with a mixture of feelings: sadness for friends and family left behind, happiness at returning to their ancestral land, hope for a new start. All these feelings inside so few bags!

The refugees also carried insecurity and fear. They were returning to the place where massacres had occurred, where kidnapping, torture and murder were everyday occurrences. And while images of the death squads were still alive in their memories, a new massacre took place at a returnee community called Aurora Ocho de Octubre, in Alta Verapaz. The fear of renewed violence was ever present.

The new community

" Naked land, awaked land, corn land with dreams... corn land covered by the rivers of green water in the sleeplessness of the scarified jungles by the corn made corn sower man".

Popol Vuh, The holy Mayan book.

This is the refugees' reality. They return to Quetzal, a village in the middle of the jungle. They are approximately 210 families,

indigenous peoples of mixed ethnic background.

Life in the jungle is extremely hard. During the rainy season the community is essentially isolated as it is only accessible on foot or horseback, after a journey of at least five hours through deep mud. As the community attempts to re-establish itself, families live in crowded tents. Food is scarce; many of the children are malnourished and some have died. Health services will only be present in the village until the end of the year.

Identified problems for the retornos

Children

> *"In the future I'd like to live in Guatemala. It's better there, because we have land there. Here, every three or four years they kick us out and we have to move to a different location. It's a lot of work carrying all our things".*
>
> *Child's testimony from Miller (1996; p. 103).*

Studies of children in the refugee camps in Mexico have revealed a surprising absence of psychiatric illness brought on by their experiences, such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This is in contrast to the situation, for example, among children in the Bosnian camps (Miller, 1996), probably due to the fact that the Guatemalan children were not directly exposed to violence. However, this does not mean that the refugee experience was not stressful for these children.

Unlike the children, parents and other adult relatives suffered directly from the violence. These adults, in turn, transmitted some of their pain to their children, who then demonstrated secondary trauma associated with indirect exposure to violence. This secondary trauma manifested itself in malnourishment and mental health problems. Farias and Billings (1993) found malnourishment in children at the Chiapas refugee camps to be positively correlated with PTSD in mothers. Miller (1996) found a positive correlation between the mental health of mothers and daughters. What is clear from these studies is that the traumatic experiences of the parents had affected the lives of their children.

We observed that there was an absence of therapeutic intervention available to these children, who had been growing up under difficult conditions in the refugee camps and were now returning to a Guatemalan community marked by spousal and child abuse. As well, education of the children was formal and rigid with no attention paid to creativity and emotional development. Additionally, the cultural identity of the children had not been developed. Finally, one of the children had a specific disability, cerebral palsy.

Adolescents

> *"Yes, I remember a little bit of our journey to Mexico. We came with our parents carrying our things. The soldiers shot a man in the back. They followed us into the mountains, and grabbed those who could not run fast enough. My father carried me, and we ran quickly. Those who stayed behind died, and those who could not run fast enough died. My father says they killed many women, and then grabbed their babies and killed them with poles."*
>
> *Adolescent testimony from Miller (1996; p. 101).*

Unlike the children, who at times saw the return to Guatemala as an adventure, the adolescents of the community were anxious and angry. Having grown up in refugee camps with access to large cities such as Cancun, they feared isolation in the jungle. As one adolescent remarked, "For us, the teenagers, it is now that the refugee experience starts".

While the children had not fully formed a cultural identity, the adolescents had grown to identify with the North American influenced culture of the Mexican cities. For them, the move to Guatemala represented a loss of this cultural identity. Some were even ashamed of their indigenous cultural heritage. As one teen exclaimed, " I am not indigenous; I want to be a Castilla [person of Spanish origin]." However, while they rejected the Mayan culture, it was apparent that many were not knowledgeable of it.

The adolescents felt both sadness and fear at leaving a way of life they had known. Many felt that their life plans were being disrupted. As one said, " All I can do here is sow corn." Others remembered the violence left behind in Guatemala, and the fact that many young boys had been conscripted into military service. These youths had much to fear. In many parts of Guatemala, the violence has continued, and service in paramilitary civil defence patrols remains compulsory (Lovell, 1995).

Adults

> *" I feel desperate here. There is only mud, snakes and malaria; my children are hungry."*
>
> *Adult testimony.*

The long term symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder were prevalent among the adult members of the community. The continuing presence of these symptoms is linked to the difficult psychosocial conditions associated with life as a refugee and a retorno (Saenz, 1992/1993). Prior to leaving Guatemala, most of the adults had suffered one or more traumatic events, including the witnessing of tortures and rapes (Melville & Lykes, 1992).

The symptoms of PTSD are given new life on returning to the place where the violence occurred. As one adult commented, "We have returned to where it all happened. The same soldiers who massacred us are still living in the village."

Many seek to dull this pain with alcohol. Alcoholism is a very common problem. It is linked to poverty and domestic violence. Continuing loss of the indigenous cultural identity further fuels the despair.

Elders

> *"In life we are walking like this. My life is sadness; I am just waiting for death. People say that the elders have no value. Nothing is as it used to be. They do not respect you; they have forgotten what our ancestors taught us."*
>
> *Elder testimony.*

Life in the jungle is physically hard for the elders. Above all, though, they experience anger and pain at the loss of their traditional role within the community. Customarily, elders are viewed as guardians of knowledge, who play an important role in passing on their wisdom to the next generations. Deprivation of this role represents not only a lack of usefulness for them in the community, but also loss of ancient knowledge on the part of the community.

Occupational therapy intervention

Intervention models

1. Community empowerment

We developed the project based on a community empowerment model. We did this to ensure that we would not create dependency. As well, we believed in the abilities of the community. It is important to empower the cohesion of the community, as this is a primary protector of mental health for the community (Allodi 1980; Garbing, Folsterby & Dubray, 1991). As well, service to the community and the feeling of belonging to the community empowers and protects Guatemalan youth in the face of violent forces (Brabeck, 1991). Community empowerment projects must begin with the people, as there is no government support for community development.

2. The Model of Human Occupation

The main focus of the programme was in the area of mental health. We used the model of human occupation (Kielhofner & Burke, 1985) to influence the human subsystems and promote mental health. Focusing on the volitional subsystem, our objective was to prevent the loss of goals, interests and values. This was accomplished in part by: assisting community members to analyse their new life situation in Guatemala, and identify new goals adapted to their new reality; encouraging recovery of the values inherent in Mayan culture and the philosophy of this system of beliefs; and attempting to promote an inner locus of control through this empowerment, thus ensuring that the villagers saw themselves as the main characters in their life stories. This is an especially important consideration in humanitarian interventions, since traditionally such work has adopted a paternalistic position.

With regards to the habituation subsystem, we analysed the roles and habits within the community. Our goals were to encourage the adolescents in the role of Community Promoters and to return the role of guardians of ancient wisdom to the elders. Finally we attempted to discourage damaging habits such as alcoholism, and its consequences such as domestic violence, by promoting healthier ways of life.

The performance subsystem was influenced through the development of new skills in community promotion and carpentry among the adolescents, and the recovery of the traditional weaving skills among the adult women.

Main objectives of the intervention

The main goals of the intervention were:

1. To train the adolescent community promoters in mental health and rehabilitation, and enable them to work with the children, other teenagers and the adults of the community.
2. To help the community recover the Mayan culture through the position of the elders as transferrers of wisdom.
3. To assist the adult women to develop a weaving project.

Specific goals

1. To provide therapeutic intervention for the children. To promote an education programme sensitive to their creativity and emotional development within their culture. To train teachers to carry this out.
2. To work indirectly with the feelings of fear, isolation and shame that the adolescents expressed.
3. Through the Community Promoters, to give therapeutic attention to the adults' problems of anxiety and fear through the community promoters.
4. To initiate weaving and carpentry projects that would generate economic benefits. One must consider both the therapeutic and economic benefits of activities when the environment is marked by poverty.
5. To develop a programme to discourage alcoholism.

Intervention with the children

The workshop outline, "Playing to grow" (Miller & Billings, 1994) was used as the basis of the intervention. In this workshop, children participate in a wide variety of activities including expressive art, puppetry, role playing, collage, story telling, games and songs. Play is vital to children's emotional, cogni-

Table 1
Topics in Community Promoters' training

Children

areas and phases of childhood development: physical, psychological, social, emotional
stimulating creativity

Adolescents

Mayan culture: Past – Who were they? Philosophies and values
Present – The indigenous reality of Guatemala today
alcoholism and its prevention

Adults

mental health promotion
major problems in the community: post traumatic stress disorder, depression
alcoholism, domestic violence

tive and social development. The goals were to help the children discover and develop their creativity, improve their self-esteem, encounter their cultural identity and express their feelings and anxieties about life. This workshop does not pretend to replace psychotherapy for children with psychological problems. Rather, its aim is to prevent problems and facilitate the healthy development of children growing up under difficult conditions.

One way to help children express their feelings is through projective activities. In these activities they express themselves indirectly; their feelings are expressed by a puppet or an actor. Afterwards, it is easier for them to express their feelings more directly.

We trained both the Community Promoters and the teachers to carry out this workshop. In turn, these individuals entered into contact with their cultural heritage, through the legends and stories of the Mayan culture, as told by the elders.

While most of the interventions were carried out at the community level, there was one individual-specific intervention for a two-year-old child with cerebral palsy. The child's parents and one Community Promoter were trained to look after the specific needs of this child. This included the provision of learning activities to stimulate the child at each stage of development and the construction of adapted equipment with the tools available in the community.

Intervention with the adolescents

The adolescents received training in carpentry and community promotion. Carpentry training was developed by a Guatemalan nongovernmental organization. Through the use of their carpentry skills, the adolescents were able to obtain economic benefits and to work for the community; their first projects were wooden toys for the children.

While training the adolescents in community promotion, we were able to work with all of the feelings that they had expressed. This was done in an indirect way when, as part of their training, they practised dealing with feelings of anxiety, fear and sadness. The benefit of dealing with these feelings more indirectly than might be done from a framework of mental illness cannot be overstated. Previous experience of the first author in Bosnia taught the importance of this. As one Bosnian refugee stated, "First I lose my family and my home, and now the doctors come and tell me that I am crazy." Clinical labelling of his problems served only to bring him further grief.

Intervention was focussed on the prevention of alcoholism. Through role plays we introduced the discussion of alcohol abuse. Topics included the following: definitions of alcoholism; consequences of alcoholism including physical, psychological and social effects; the association between alcoholism and spouse abuse and; prevention of alcoholism in the community.

Training took place over three months, with each month having a different focus: children, adolescents and adults. Twenty adolescents started the training programme, and 12 completed it. The adolescents participated in the selection of the topics that were studied. The main topics are outlined in Table 1.

We wanted to create a practical training programme in which the adolescents could actively participate using their own knowledge and experience. It was very important for these adolescents to reflect on their own experiences before attempting to help others. Projects designed to allow this included projective activities to deal with their feelings regarding the refugee experience and the return to Guatemala. This group of Community Promoters are now in an excellent position to help new adolescent retornos, having experienced

many of the same things, and having learned techniques to deal with these feelings and experiences.

Intervention with the women

> *" As tears of a nation crying, it is the way the indigenous people express their joy in nature, in life. It is the voice of the silenced Mayan nation which talks through their work."*
>
> *Quoted from 'About Mayan textile' a pamphlet found at San Cristobal de las Casas Museum.*

A weaving project was developed. This was a meaningful activity, which helped the women earn money needed to survive. As well, it helped fill their time, time formerly spent continually reflecting on all they had lost. We worked through the performance subsystem (Kielhofner & Burke, 1985), developing their abilities and skills. The women who knew how to weave taught those who did not. In this way, the women were assisted in recovering this very important aspect of their culture.

This work was developed through the women's organization, Ixmucane. It included lending psychological support to the women via the adolescent girls of the community who were trained in listening and relaxation techniques. As well, we worked to help the women express their feelings and we introduced techniques of cognitive restructuring. Working with the volitional subsystem (Kielhofner & Burke, 1985), the women were helped in finding new goals in dealing with the problems in their lives.

Intervention with the elders

> *" Sons, wherever you stay, do not forget what Ixpiacoc taught you, because it comes from the tradition of your ancestors. If you forget you will betray your lineage".*
>
> *Popol Vuh, The holy Mayan book.*

The main goal with the elders was to assist them to recover their traditional role as guardians and transferrers of ancient wisdom. To do this a weekly workshop where the elders taught the Community Promoters about the Mayan culture was organized.

Outcomes

Following completion of their training, the Community Promoters were presented at the general meeting of the community. Now, twice a week they work with the children. They have had training in carpentry and are prepared to help new teenage retornos after having assimilated their own experiences.

Adults of the community now have psychosocial support. Ixmucane has developed its first independent project, producing textiles that can later be sold.

Each week the elders meet with the adolescents to teach Mayan traditions, legends and languages. Elders are in the process of creating a Council of Elders. Here they will discuss their problems and decide how to resolve them. As well, they will decide how best to continue working to preserve the Mayan culture.

Discussion

As stated previously, approximately 53 million people, or 1 in every 115 people world-wide, have been displaced by armed conflict (UNICEF, 1996). As well, over the last 10 years wars between and within nations have killed 2 million children, and left 4-5 million children with physical disabilities and 10 million with psychological trauma. Occupational therapists working in humanitarian aid have much to offer these children and their families, but the role of occupational therapy in this field must be further developed. Such development must take place within a holistic, transcultural framework, which is sensitive to the naturalistic, holistic and spiritual orientation of rural communities (Farias 1990; Farias & Arana, 1991; Low 1981).

Summary

An intervention project designed to promote the health and quality of life of Maya Indian refugees returning to Guatemala has been described. This project was guided by Mayan cosmovision, the ancient spiritual tradition of these people. Attention to these spiritual beliefs, along with consideration of the needs and strengths of the different age groups within the community, provided a firm basis for an intervention on which the community will build.

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