

Obstacles to Achieving Mental Health in Post-War Guatemala: The Intersection of Political and Structural Violence

Paula Godoy-Paiz

*Department of Anthropology
McGill University*

Abstract

From 1960 to 1996 Guatemala was ravaged by civil war and massacres. Despite the signing of peace agreements in 1996, however, the country remains haunted by the suffering and violence of the past. This essay focuses on the psychological consequences of the war and examines the various obstacles to achieving mental health in post-war Guatemala. It examines the climate of fear, reprisal, and intimidation still present as the residues of political violence, and argues that it poses great limitations on the possible outcomes of mental health work in the country. This essay also examines the structural violence that pervades Guatemala and demonstrates that the effects of political violence are exacerbated by the effects of ongoing structural violence, making the goal of achieving mental health more distant. Additionally, this essay considers how social problems resulting from the intersection of political and structural violence in Guatemala, such as the high levels of crime, insecurity and everyday violence, may become embodied by individuals.

Introduction

In Guatemala we are living a new phase in the history of the country in which the Peace Accords stand out, however; parallel to this we continue to live in a situation of insecurity, poverty and extreme poverty, privatization of social services, impunity, violence, intolerance, and discrimination.

-Georgina Navarro (1997:34)

In general, mental, social, and behavioural health problems represent overlapping clusters of problems that, connected to the recent wave of global changes and new morbidities, interact so as to intensify each other's effects on behaviour and well-being.

-Desjarlais, Eisenberg, Good and Kleinman (1995:6)

In the above quote Guatemalan intellectual and activist Georgina Navarro aptly captures the present-day situation in post-peace agreement Guatemala, a country which is attempting to confront and heal the wounds of its recent past. From 1960 to 1996 Guatemala was ravaged by one of the most brutal of armed conflicts in all of Latin America, a conflict that took the lives of over 200,000 people and displaced 1.5 million. Despite the signing of peace agreements in December of 1996, the country remains haunted by the suffering and violence of the past and is faced with the numerous social and psychological consequences of the war. The two truth projects in Guatemala, which document the horrific atrocities committed during the thirty-six years of war, conclude in their reports that as a direct result of acts of violence during this period, many Guatemalans and particularly Mayans, continue to suffer deep individual and collective wounds¹. Indeed the United Nations sponsored Commission for Historical Clarification (*Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico*, CEH 1999) recommended that the Guatemalan state design and promote a policy of reparation for victims and their relatives. The CEH recommended establishing a National Reparation Programme that would include, “measures for psychosocial rehabilitation and reparation, which should include, among others, medical attention and community mental health care” (CEH 1999 Recommendations III: 9). To this day, there has been no national state-initiated mental health and rehabilitation programme implemented in Guatemala. As a result, individuals and entire communities continue to be deeply affected by the violence and terror that was created during the armed conflict.

Drawing on Guatemalan newspaper articles and national studies collected in the course of my Master’s research in Guatemala City during the summer of 2003, this essay examines the various obstacles to achieving mental health in post-war Guatemala. Taking an understanding of mental health as a dimension of the relations between persons and their community (Martín-Baró 1994:109; and Desjarlais et al. 1995:7), this essay demonstrates that in addition to the state’s lack of concern with the issue, the goal of achieving mental health faces other serious challenges. To this end, I examine the climate of fear, reprisal and intimidation still present in Guatemala as the residues of political violence, and argue that it poses great limitations on the possible outcomes of mental health work in the country. I also

examine the structural violence that pervades the country, and argue that the effects of political violence are exacerbated by the effects of ongoing structural violence which makes the goal of achieving mental health more distant.² Additionally, this essay considers how the social problems resulting from the intersection of political and structural violence in Guatemala, such as the high levels of crime, insecurity and everyday violence, may become embodied by individuals.

Historical Context

Before examining the present-day situation in Guatemala, it is necessary, even if briefly, to examine the country's historical context. In 1954, within the framework of the Cold War and exploiting the pretext of a communist take-over, the CIA engineered a coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz, which had implemented progressive social and economic changes in Guatemala such as agrarian reform. In 1952, the Arbenz administration passed Decree 900 which enabled the government to expropriate primarily uncultivated portions of large plantations and turn them over to landless peasants. However, this reform would not last for long since Arbenz attempted to expropriate unused lands held by the United Fruit Company, a Boston-based multinational corporation. Arbenz offered the company compensation based on its fraudulent tax evaluation where it undervalued the land. Utilizing its close connections to the Eisenhower administration in Washington, United Fruit was able to convince the White House that a "Red Menace" in Guatemala threatened U.S. business and security interests (Schlesinger and Kinzer 1982). The company then persuaded the CIA to organize the overthrow of the Arbenz government, ushering into power a repressive junta, whose forces, protected by U.S. air strikes invaded from neighbouring Honduras (Schlesinger and Kinzer 1982). The coup restored military rule in Guatemala, revoked the land reform, destroyed labour unions, and initiated the killings (Chomsky 1985:155). In the late 1950's and 1960's, military governments in Guatemala carried out high levels of repression and acts of violence against those it classified as "subversive", such as trade unionists, students and social activists. It was at this point that an armed revolutionary movement emerged in Guatemala. In the 1970s and the early 1980s, bloodshed in Guatemala escalated and attacks turned primarily towards indigenous populations who were

seen as guerrilla supporters. Military bases were built across the country near Mayan communities, and one million Mayan people were forced into Civil Self-Defence Patrols (PAC) where they were forced to torture and kill members of their own communities. In addition, the army carried out Scorched Earth campaigns that included the complete destruction of villages and surrounding fields by burning villages to the ground. These campaigns also included the relentless hunt for survivors, with army helicopters dropping bombs on displaced civilians in the mountains and ground troops encircling and firing upon those fleeing aerial attacks (Sanford 2003: 149). According to the National Army's own admission, 440 villages were completely destroyed, while according to the United Nation's Commission for Historical Clarification (1999), the number of villages destroyed totals 626.

During the worst phase of the violence (1978-1984, commonly referred to as *La Violencia* or "The Violence"), the state not only engaged in brutal acts of violence, but also applied mechanisms of psychological terror. The terrorization of the population at a psychological level was a central component of the state's counterinsurgency strategy. Linda Green (1999:111) argues that the political violence that occurred in Guatemala during the late 1970s and early 1980s maimed and killed people both literally and figuratively. For instance, the following passage from the CEH's (1999) report provides a picture of how terror and fear were (re) produced in Guatemala during *La Violencia*, and serves as an illustration of how those who were not injured literally could be maimed and killed figuratively.

The counterinsurgency strategy not only led to violations of basic human rights, but also to the fact that these crimes were committed with particular cruelty, with massacres representing their archetypal form. In the majority of massacres there is evidence of multiple acts of [cruelty], which preceded, accompanied or occurred after the deaths of the victims. Acts such as killing of defenceless children, often by beating them against walls or throwing them alive into pits where the corpses of adults were later thrown; the amputation of limbs; the impaling of victims; the killing of persons by covering them in petrol and burning them alive; the extraction, in the presence of others, of the viscera of victims who were still alive, the confinement of people who had been mortally tortured, in agony for days; the opening of the wombs of pregnant women, and other similarly atrocious acts, were not only actions of extreme cruelty against the

victims, but also morally degraded the perpetrators and those who inspired, ordered or tolerated these actions. (CEH 1999 Conclusions II: 87)

The CEH (1999) concludes that since the terrorizing of the population at a psychological level was central to the state's strategy of counterinsurgency, it is now necessary to address the psychological effects of the war.

Fear, Reprisal and Intimidation- A Legacy Of Political Violence

The goal of addressing the mental health consequences of the civil war outlined by the CEH (1999) faces many challenges, not least of which is the continued presence of a climate of fear and intimidation. In addition to the highly publicized murders of Archbishop Juan Gerardi and anthropologist Myrna Mack, there have been countless events in Guatemala, which similarly demonstrate that fear, reprisal and intimidation are still very much present, working to diminish the prospect of 'healing' and 'well-being' for many Guatemalans. Below, I describe two such incidents occurring in the summer of 2003 during the course of my stay. The first of these events occurred on June 14th in Rabinal, Baja Verapaz and the second, on July 24th in Guatemala City.

On June 14th 2003, the re-burial of 70 victims of the armed conflict, whose remains had been exhumed from clandestine mass graves, was set to take place in Rabinal located in the department (province) of Baja Verapaz.³ Rabinal was widely targeted by the state during the war due to its large indigenous population, who at the time were regarded as allies to the guerillas. On July 18th 1982 the state-backed military carried out the "Plan de Sánchez" massacre in Rabinal, killing 268 persons who were subsequently buried in mass clandestine graves and their families denied the right to know what happened to them and where they were buried.⁴ After much anticipation and hard work on the part of the families pressuring Guatemalan authorities to exhume their deceased loved ones, the reburials of June 14th 2003 would finally allow the deceased to have dignified burials. Numerous families in Rabinal, with the help of non-governmental organizations, had been preparing for the re-burial during the previous weeks. On the morning of June 14th 2003, hundreds of townspeople converged on the town's central square carrying the coffins containing the exhumed remains of their relatives.

However, the same morning that the much-awaited re-burials were to take place, supporters of the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) political party arrived in Rabinal to conduct political campaigning for the then president of the Guatemalan National Congress, General Efraín Ríos Montt. Ríos Montt had not yet received authorization from Guatemala's Constitutional Court to be eligible to run in the November 2003 presidential elections, but had nevertheless launched an election campaign.⁵ Ironically, Ríos Montt ruled Guatemala at the height of the civil war (Mar. 1982- Aug. 1983), and hundreds of state-led massacres against the Mayan population, including the Plan de Sánchez massacre, were committed during his time in government office. In Rabinal, between September 1981 to August 1983 alone, approximately 20 massacres were carried out against Mayan communities (ECAP 1999:2) by Ríos Montt's military forces as part of his Scorched Earth campaigns. Ríos Montt, therefore, had a direct responsibility in the deaths of many of those whose remains were being carried to the town's center on June 14th, 2003 to be given a church service and subsequent reburial. Showing up in Rabinal that particular day represented a deliberate act of provocation against the people he himself terrorized in the early 1980s.

According to an article in the national newspaper, *Prensa Libre* (15 Jun. 2003), tensions immediately began to rise on the morning of June 14th 2003, with both sides, the families of the victims and FRG supporters who showed up from neighboring towns, hurling insults at each other. The families of the victims yelled "*asesinos*" (assassins) and "*queremos un buen gobierno no uno manchado de sangre*" (we want a good government not one soaked in blood) (*Prensa Libre* 15 Jun. 2003). FRG supporters, on the other hand, were heard yelling that, "foreigners should be thrown out of the country as they manipulate and brainwash the population", referring to members of the international community present (*Prensa Libre* June 15th 2003). Tensions would only rise further that morning as Ríos Montt appeared and began to address the crowds. At this point, families of the victims became enraged: their voices grew louder as they yelled, "assassin/assassin" and began throwing sticks and rocks at the former president, who was quickly rushed out of the area.

On June 17th 2003, the *Prensa Libre* ran another article reporting on the incidents of June 14th and indicated that according to the Human Rights Office of the Archbishop, "the incidents that took place in

Rabinal demonstrate that the wounds of the past have not healed". The incidents that took place in Rabinal also demonstrated that there are many obstacles to 'healing those wounds', since the days that followed June 14th revealed the fear, reprisal and intimidation still present in Guatemala. For example, Guatemalan journalist Luis Perez Barrillas received numerous death threats that forced him out of the country and into hiding for reporting the events of June 14th 2003. Rights Action (2003), a human rights non-governmental organization in Guatemala, indicates that bombs were also thrown at his house on July 4th, 2003. Furthermore, in the days following the event, the people of Rabinal were intimidated; helicopters and cars with tinted windows encircled the town stirring fear in the population (*Prensa Libre*, 17 Jun. 2003). Since helicopters were commonly used by state agents during the civil war to drop bombs upon displaced civilians in the mountains, they have the great capacity to easily incite fear in those who lived through *La Violencia*. The flying of helicopters over Rabinal following the incidents of June 14th was a direct attempt on the part of Ríos Montt and his supporters to incite fear among town residents. While the re-burials had been aimed at contributing to a 'healing' process, Rabinal residents lived in fear during the days that followed because of the intimidation tactics used against them by the then president of the Guatemalan National Congress and his supporters.

The events of June 14th 2003 serve as a clear example of the obstacles for mental health workers and organizations in Guatemala. The Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH 1999) and others (e.g. REMHI 1998; Suazo 2002) document that the existence of clandestine mass graves and not knowing what happened to their relatives, have caused many Guatemalans to experience distress and suffer from altered grieving processes. The CEH (1999 Conclusions I: 54) indicates that addressing the collective suffering of communities across Guatemala requires the exhumation of secret graves, the identification of bodies and their reburial with the appropriate death rituals. In response to this recommendation, NGOs such as the Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team (*Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial*, ECAP) that runs various psychosocial projects in Rabinal have based their mental health work on supporting families and communities in the exhumation and reburial processes.

On June 14th 2003 the reburial of 70 victims of the armed conflict was set to take place and a space created for the victims to have a ‘proper’ and dignified burial. For the Maya-Achí of Rabinal the dead are more important than the living, and the performance of rituals for the ancestors to ensure they rest are intimately tied to the well-being and happiness of the living (Suazo 2002). One Achí informant of the anthropologist Fernando Suazo succinctly described this relationship by stating that the “dead are not resting, and because of that we also do not see peace” (Suazo 2002:71). The lack of a proper burial, and being denied the right to perform the rituals for their deceased has given rise to immense sadness and feelings of guilt among individuals and Mayan communities at large (Suazo 2002). Suazo’s findings resonate with the findings of the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH 1999) that are outlined below.⁶

The testimonies received by the CEH bear witness to the wide range of circumstances which during the armed confrontation, prevented thousands of Guatemalans from observing the rites that normally accompany the death and burial of a person. This has caused deep and persisting anguish in those sectors of the population affected. [...] For all cultures and religions in Guatemala, it is practically inconceivable that the dead not be given a dignified burial; this assaults everyone’s values and dignity. For the Mayans, this is of particular importance due to their core belief in the active bond between the living and the dead. The lack of a sacred place where this bond can be attended is a serious concern that appears in testimonies from many Mayan communities (CEH 1999 Conclusions I: 53). The CEH has concluded that the existence of clandestine and hidden cemeteries, as well as the anxiety suffered by many Guatemalans as a result of not knowing what happened to their relatives, remains an open wound in the country. They are a permanent reminder of the acts of violence that denied the dignity of their loved ones. To heal these particular wounds requires the exhumation of secret graves, as well as the definitive identification of the whereabouts of the disappeared (CEH 1999 Conclusions I: 54).

On June 14th 2003 the family members of 70 victims of the civil war in Guatemala would finally have the opportunity to lay to rest the bodies of their deceased and perform the death rituals they had not been able to perform during the war. However, this space was intruded upon by the very person who was responsible for the deaths of many of those being buried, bringing another of Guatemala’s paradoxes to the surface. At the same time that there is significant work being

conducted surrounding the exhumations, an important part of addressing the mental health consequences of the civil war⁷, the forces largely responsible for that grief continue to hover over communities and haunt them as do the deceased.

The second event that points to the challenges facing mental health work in Guatemala occurred on Thursday July 24th, 2003 (now called “Black Thursday”) in Guatemala City. During the months of June and July 2003, Ríos Montt was appealing to the Guatemalan Constitutional Court to permit him to run for the presidency in the November 2003 elections. On the morning of July 24th, 2003 Ríos Montt and his supporters staged a large protest and riot in Guatemala City in favour of his inclusion in the presidential elections. That morning, busloads of people—men, women and children—from across the country were converging in the downtown area of Guatemala City. The men, with their faces covered with ski masks, began to take over the city. Some of them waved machetes and clubs, and large groups surrounded the United States embassy, the Guatemalan Constitutional Court and human rights offices, such as the Attorney General’s Office and the offices of the Mutual Support Group (*Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo*, GAM). Demonstrators smashed windows, burned cars and tires, and blocked traffic. They also chased away reporters covering the riot, including one journalist who subsequently died of a heart attack and brain hemorrhage. There was disarray in Guatemala City that morning: businesses, universities, and schools closed down as students and workers were sent home. The headlines of the July 25th, 2003 *Prensa Libre* read “Black Thursday: FRG Mobs Cause Terror in the Capital” and “City Residents Lived Chaos”, pointing to the general sense of terror and disorder city residents experienced that day.

“Black Thursday” not only demonstrated the continued use of violence and repression on the part of the Guatemalan state, but also the great obstacles to mental health in Guatemala by revealing the general sense of insecurity among the Guatemalan population that at any given moment “those times” could return.⁸ Indeed the day was named “Black Thursday” in reference to Guatemala’s ‘past’ dark days of repression, death and mourning. “Black Thursday” also demonstrated how the tactics of fear and intimidation still operate successfully within Guatemalan society.⁹ Ríos Montt used his power on that day to intimidate members of the Constitutional Court, who

not long after the riot ruled that he could run for the presidency. With his acts of intimidation, Ríos Montt not only made the Constitutional Court rule in his favour, but to this day, he has not been held accountable for the terror he caused or the death of journalist Héctor Ramírez. While it is widely known in Guatemala that Ríos Montt orchestrated “Black Thursday”, in January of 2006 Judge Víctor Hugo Herrera ruled that the former military president was without fault in the incidents of July 24th, 2003 and closed the case against him.

Further, it is important to note that the government in office at the time, the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) led by Alfonso Portillo, did not step in and stop the violent demonstrations. There are a few possible explanations for the government’s lack of action. First, it was members and supporters of the ruling political party (the FRG) who were demonstrating and, second, the events of that day were orchestrated by the powerful president of the Guatemalan National Congress, Ríos Montt. No one dared to control the actions of Ríos Montt because of the power he represented as leader of the National Congress. The lack of government action against the violent demonstrators on “Black Thursday” also demonstrated the lack of will on the part of the Guatemalan state to promote stability and security in the country.

The Intersection of Political and Structural Violence

In addition to the challenges of achieving mental health in Guatemala posed by the continued presence of fear, intimidation, and reprisal, other factors such as social inequalities along class, gender and racial lines, pose further obstacles. Linda Green (1999) writes about the intersection of political violence and structural violence in Guatemala. One of Green’s (1999) central arguments is that the multiple dimensions of survival (social, psychological, cultural and political) in Guatemala operate within a dynamic of both structural and political violence. In other words, Green is concerned with examining how political violence and repression in Guatemala interact and are intensified and exacerbated by systemic violence stemming from vast class, gender and racial inequalities. For example, Green writes that,

For most of the century, Mayas have been struggling to maintain their traditional economic base (the land) and their traditional support network (their kin) as both steadily eroded under the forces of modernization.

Women's roles within their communities and households have undergone major transformations as their contributions to subsistence were undermined by the increasing dependency on cash, which altered the balance of power between men and women in households. Political violence accelerated and exacerbated these trends, breaking apart families and communities. (1999:107)

Therefore, while continued political repression makes life difficult and creates obstacles for the goal of achieving mental health, structural violence stemming from class, gender, and racial inequalities further exacerbate the suffering of large segments of the population, particularly for Mayan communities who have been targets of systemic discrimination for over 500 years and continue to be its primary targets in the present.

One measure of social inequalities in a society is its levels of poverty, and in Guatemala these are quite high. According to the World Bank document *Poverty in Guatemala* (2003:8) in the year 2000, 56% of Guatemalans lived in poverty and 16% lived in extreme poverty.¹⁰ The report also documents that 68% of children under six and 63% of all children under 18 live below the poverty line (World Bank 2003:10). *Poverty in Guatemala* (2003) also indicates that there are regional differences in poverty rates. The report indicates that poverty is predominantly rural and extreme poverty is almost exclusively rural.

A disproportionate share of the poor and extreme poor live in rural areas in comparison with the share of rural residents in the national population. Over 81% of the poor and 93% of the extreme poor live in the countryside. Three quarters of all rural residents fall below the full poverty line and one quarter live in extreme poverty (World Bank 2003:10).

There is a strong correlation between rates of poverty across regions in Guatemala and racial inequalities. Poverty is higher in areas where the indigenous population is greater, that is, the northern and northwestern regions of Guatemala. As *Poverty in Guatemala* notes, "although the indigenous represent about 43% of the national population, they account for 58% of the poor and 72% of the extreme poor. Over three-quarters of the indigenous population live in poverty, as compared with 41% of the non-indigenous" (World Bank 2003:10). *Poverty in Guatemala* (World Bank 2003:10) also indicates that pockets of poverty are present throughout the country, but there is also a significant "poverty belt" in the northern and north-western regions, which were largely affected by the country's 36 year-long

civil war. While the World Bank by no means represents a neutral source of information and can be implicated in Guatemalan poverty through the types of development it promotes and fails to promote¹¹, its report does signal alarming trends. Moreover, while not all poverty can be attributed to the civil war, poverty and its effects interact with and exacerbate other social and psychological effects of the armed conflict.

There are also other indicators pointing to the structural violence derived from systemic inequalities in Guatemala. High malnutrition, infant mortality and illiteracy rates among the poor serve as other examples. Malnutrition among Guatemalan children is extremely high: 64% of extremely poor and 53% of poor children suffer from malnutrition (World Bank 2003:14). Compared to other countries in Latin America, Guatemala ranks poorly with respect to health indicators: life expectancy (65 years) is the lowest and infant mortality (40-45 per thousand) is the highest in Central America (World Bank 2003:14). Furthermore, literacy in Guatemala ranks far below average in Latin America. *Poverty in Guatemala* reveals that with an illiteracy rate of 31% in 2000, primarily represented by women, the poor and rural residents, only Nicaragua and Haiti rank worse (World Bank 2003:63). Given the present social landscape, it seems more than reasonable to suggest that the effects of the civil war in Guatemala are only intensified by present-day social problems and systemic violence.

Everyday Violence, Crime, and Insecurity in Guatemala

We were capable of killing ourselves between brothers, as the report of the Commission for Historical Clarification describes quite well. This has led, for example, to the de-valuing of the life of the other by delinquency, and for stealing a wallet they kill you. (INCEP:1999:47)

One of the consequences that arises from the intersection of social inequalities and political terror in Guatemala, are high levels of everyday violence, crime, and insecurity. For example, according to the National Civil Police (*Policía Nacional Civil*, PNC), in 2000 the number of homicides in the country totaled 2324, 1728 of which were killed as a result of firearms (Zepeda, López and Monzón 2001:10). Furthermore, 2443 persons were injured with firearms and 1788 with other weapons, making the total reported number of

persons' whose lives were targeted in 2000, 6555 (Zepeda et al. 2001:10). Women have become the most visible yet unrecognized targets of gruesome violence in Guatemala. The Amnesty International (2005) report *Guatemala: No Protection, No Justice: Killings of Women in Guatemala* reveals that the number of women murdered annually has risen from at least 163 in 2002, to 383 in 2003, to over 527 in 2004. In addition, Amnesty International's report (2005) points out that from 2001 to 2004 the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights registered the murders of 1,188 women in Guatemala.¹²

The figures on violence in Guatemala are alarming, however, they do not come close to capturing the full extent to which violence is embedded within everyday life. In addition to homicides with firearms or other types of weapons, and the brutal assassination of women, another common expression of violence in Guatemala is the occurrence of *linchamientos*, the stoning of persons to death. According to the Central American Institute of Political Studies INCEP (1999:49) in 1999 alone, 96 persons were killed by *linchamiento*. The United Nations Mission for Verification in Guatemala (MINUGUA 2001:1) found that between 1996 and 2001, there were a total of 421 *linchamientos*. The *linchamientos* occur primarily in Mayan communities that were affected by the violence of the armed conflict (in the northern and north western Altiplano). According to the INCEP (1999:51) the *linchamientos* are the result of the high levels of insecurity in Guatemala, the exclusion and lack of trust of the majority of the population in the judicial system, and the impunity prevalent in the country. In other words, as a result of being excluded from the judicial system and given language and social barriers, as well as the discrimination and racism they face, individuals from Mayan communities have taken 'justice into their own hands'. *Linchamientos* are also described as residues of the armed conflict, which is argued to have lowered the value placed on human lives (INCEP 1999:51).

While there is a lack of clarity surrounding who orchestrates the *linchamientos* due to the incapacity and failings of the judicial system to investigate these cases, MINUGUA indicates that those behind the *linchamientos* "are persons linked to structures of political and social control arising during the counterinsurgency war" (2001:6). These persons include ex-military commissioners or the Mayan boys

and men who were forced into the system of “Civil Self-Defense Patrols” put in place by the military during the war, and where Mayan men were forced to torture and kill members of their own communities as well as perform surveillance of them. The *linchamientos* perhaps serve as the clearest example of the consequences of the intersection of political and structural violence in Guatemala, for they occur more readily in the northern and northwestern regions of the country where the communities most severely affected by the civil war are located and where the highest levels of poverty in the country exist.

While the *linchamientos* may be linked to poverty and the exclusion of indigenous people from state institutions (structural violence), they can also be seen as a product of wounds left gaping from the failure of the government and the world to seriously address the horrors witnessed in Guatemala over the past four decades. Former military personnel who may be responsible for the *linchamientos*, were trained in the most brutal torture tactics during the war, but never received any sort of rehabilitation or support for re-integrating into society after the signing of peace. Similarly, former guerrilla combatants too were not re-integrated into civil society or provided with viable job options. Against this backdrop, we can see how the unresolved problems resulting from the 36 year-long civil war may interact with social problems like poverty and marginalization resulting from unequal structures of power to intensify the suffering of many Guatemalans.

In addition to the difficult social circumstances in Guatemala outlined above, Guatemalan women must also contend with domestic violence, adding another layer to their experiences.¹³ Domestic violence often goes under the radar as the most gruesome forms of violence, like sexual assault and murder, make the headlines. Nevertheless, domestic violence touches the lives of thousands of Guatemalans on a daily basis and should not be overlooked. Anthropologist Judith Zur (1998) draws attention to the effects of *La violencia* on gender roles and finds that one of the effects of *La violencia* has been an increase in domestic violence which is oftentimes intensified by men’s alcohol consumption. Zur found that widows entering a second marriage already having children, and thus no longer virgins, often found themselves in vulnerable positions where respect towards them was diminished. The widespread killings

of Mayan men created a gender imbalance in many communities, making it difficult for widows to find a second husband. As a result many widows tolerated abuse because of their emotional and financial vulnerability.¹⁴

Examining structural violence within Guatemala is important in order to comprehend the obstacles to mental health and well-being in the country. However, it is also necessary to look beyond the national context to fully understand the difficulties in addressing inequalities as well as the magnitude of the barriers for achieving mental health. During the most violent phase of its civil war, Guatemala was somewhat insulated and cut-off from the world. The peace process, therefore, facilitated Guatemala's incorporation into the world economy, which by that time (the late 1990s) had undergone significant structural modifications that has affected post-war Guatemala (Jonas 2000:218). The peace process in Guatemala made it possible for the country to integrate into a "globalized" world in which nations and economic enterprises were increasingly linked with a world market. The most common expressions of this tendency has been the drive for 'free trade' and elimination of trade barriers as well as privatization of state-owned enterprises, the elimination of state 'interferences' with market operations, the dismantling of welfare institutions, cutbacks to state-supported social programs and structural adjustment programs (Jonas 2000:218-22). Guatemala's incorporation into this "globalized" world meant it would have to follow similar trends. Structural Adjustment Programs in Guatemala have resulted in a reduction in social spending and the destruction of social networks already weakened by the civil war, such as Social Security. Another important element that has contributed to the impoverishment of Guatemala is paying for the servicing of its foreign debt. As Jonas states, "[t]here is no question that globalization and neo-liberalism have dramatically increased Guatemalan poverty, both nationally and locally" (Jonas 2000:224). Structural violence in Guatemala is not only a result of national social inequalities, but global restructuring. As a result, the goal of achieving mental health faces challenges at multiple levels.

Embodying Violence and Social Suffering

A number of medical anthropologists have successfully demonstrated how social conditions, ranging from civil wars to racism

and poverty, may become embodied in various forms by individuals (e.g. Farmer 1999, 2003; Green 1999; Jenkins 1991; Low 1994). Paul Farmer (1999) examines inequalities in the distribution of infectious disease and asks why certain people are likely to die of infections while others are spared the risk. Farmer explores the creation and maintenance of such disparities, which he argues are biological in their expression but are largely socially determined. His main contention is that social inequalities often determine both the distribution of modern plagues and clinical outcomes among the afflicted. In his more recent book, "Pathologies of Power", Farmer (2003) again examines suffering and structural violence. Farmer asks, whether certain 'event' assaults, such as torture or rape, are "more likely to lead to later sequelae than is sustained and insidious suffering, such as the pain born of deep poverty and racism?" (2003:30). Farmer also asks, "[b]y what mechanisms do social forces ranging from poverty to racism become *embodied* as individual experience?" (2003:30). In the section below I attempt to answer a similar question; by what mechanisms do social forces ranging from political violence to poverty become embodied by certain individuals in Guatemala?

In her study Green (1999) found that the Mayan women physically expressed the pain and suffering they had lived through. Green argues that, although the voices of the women have been silenced by the state of fear and repression in which they live,

their bodies speak poignantly of trauma and sadness, of loneliness and desolation, of violence; through their bodies they also chronicle the social, cultural, and political transgressions that have been perpetrated against them. The widows' voices have been silenced by a repressive state, but their illnesses are the language of the body. (1999:112).

The women in Green's (1999) ethnography spoke of experiencing *susto* (fright), *nervios* ('nerves'), 'sadness in the heart', headaches and other chronic pains. Their bodies and illnesses stood as evidence of the violence perpetrated against them, as well as sites for remembering those who were killed and generating 'safe' discussions among themselves. While directly speaking out against the perpetrators put the women at risk, speaking of their illnesses permitted the widows to express their grief about the horrors they lived through in a less dangerous manner.

The experience of *nervios* described by Green's (1999) informants serves as a strong example of how social conditions may become

embodied as individual experience. Setha Low (1994:157) argues that, cross-culturally *nervios*/nerves are often experienced as trembling, shaking, twitching of the body, sensations of hot and cold, body aches, sense of disorientation and dizziness, insomnia, weakness and debility, losing control, losing consciousness, fainting, temporary paralysis, and not feeling like oneself or feeling outside of oneself. Low argues that the form and experience of *nervios* suggest that the bodily experiences are metaphors of self/society relations, with the body acting as a mediating symbolic device.

While the cultural context remains, the locus of the specific symbolic language of the metaphors - the body shaking, incorporation, extrusion, loss of feeling, and disappearance - suggest a kind of metaphoric transparency to the vulnerability of the individual sufferers with the hostile and sometimes violent contexts of their lives. (Low 1994:157)

Anthropologist Janis Hunter Jenkins (1991) makes a similar connection between *nervios* (self) and social relations (society). Jenkins attempts to extend anthropological theorizing on emotion and argues that while anthropologists have convincingly established the role of culture in shaping emotion, recognition of the state's role in constructions of affect has been slow in coming. Using El Salvador and Salvadoran refugees in the United States as a case study, Jenkins attempts to expand the scholarly discourse on emotions by examining connections between the role of the state in constructing a 'political ethos' and the personal emotions of those who dwell in that ethos. She examines the state's construction of affect by looking at the violent period commonly referred to as *la situación* ("the situation") in El Salvador and the variety of state practices and actions during this time. Jenkins describes state curfews, disappearances, and the ever-present evidence of intolerable death: decapitated heads hanging from trees or on sticks, mutilated bodies or body parts on the roadside or on people's doorsteps. Jenkins also describes the role of the official national radio station and its broadcasting of moral and political messages. Repeated in these broadcasts were messages of fear said to be engendered by guerilla forces, and the constant reiteration that the national armed forces were there to 'protect' the population's security. Through examining the experiences of Salvadoran refugees in the United States, Jenkins argues that their narratives of fleeing political violence and subsequent experiences of *nervios*, are suggestive of the relationship between state constructed affects of

fear and anxiety and “indigenously defined conditions of *nervios* (nerves)” (Jenkins 1991:146). The state induction of fear is shot through the “lived body” as anxiety, terror, and despair, often articulated as *nervios*. However, while demonstrating the link between state constructions of affect and the experiences of those who dwell in that political milieu, Jenkins does not account for the fact that not all persons express the same ‘response’.

In addition to *nervios*, anxiety, and chronic pains, there are other mechanisms by which social conditions are embodied as individual experience. For instance, in Guatemala levels of alcoholism have begun to receive attention, and while there is a lack of concrete comprehensive studies of the actual prevalence of alcoholism in the country, there are indications that the problem may be growing, particularly among adolescents. The REMHI (1998) report points to alcoholism as one of the ways that Guatemalans continue to suffer the wounds of the civil war. Guatemalan newspapers have also begun covering the issue, and recognize alcoholism as a growing social problem. For example, the *Prensa Libre* (30 Dec. 2001) reported that in 2001 the Roosevelt and San Juan de Dios hospitals in Guatemala City had not only reported increasing numbers of patients injured by fire arms and other weapons, but that the number of patients admitted for illnesses related to alcoholism increased. Not only did the hospitals report an increase in the cases of acute alcoholism, but also in cases of individuals suffering from withdrawal syndromes, such as digestive and pulmonary problems (*Prensa Libre* 30 Dec. 2001). In line with the reports by the hospitals, the Executive Secretariat of the Commission against Addictions and the Illicit Trafficking of Drugs (SECCATID 2003) conducted a nation-wide study that surveyed 8,500 adolescents between the ages of 12 and 20 regarding their alcohol use. This study found that 52% of the youth surveyed had consumed alcohol (SECCATID 2003).¹⁵ It is important to note that not all alcohol consumption and abuse may be traced to armed conflict. However, the REMHI (1998) and CEH (1999) reports both include alcohol abuse among the consequences of the conflict. Moreover, even in cases where alcohol is not a ‘direct’ consequence of the civil war, it seems that alcoholism represents a problem that interacts with and exacerbates the effects of other consequences of the civil war and current social problems in Guatemala.

The incidence of suicide is another alarming problem that is

beginning to receive attention in Guatemala. Like alcoholism, while there are indicators that the problem is growing, particularly among young men, “there are no national statistics on suicide rates in Guatemala as it is considered a taboo theme and often, for the same reason, families cover them up” (*Prensa Libre* 17 Aug. 2003).¹⁶ The *Prensa Libre* (17 Aug. 2003) notes that deaths due to suicide are normally recorded in terms of their final cause such as poisoning, strangulation, or gun shot, without necessarily indicating the death was provoked by the victim. Importantly, the suicide rate is likely underestimated because only those resulting in death are recorded and suicide attempts are not counted. In the article *Who Commits Suicide in Guatemala?*, René López (1999) reviews the results of a study conducted by Department of Medical Forensics. According to López (1999), the Medical Forensics Department recorded, for the department of Guatemala alone, a total of 408 suicides committed between January 1991 and June 1998. Three hundred thirty four (82%) of the suicides were committed by males and 74 (18%) were committed by females (López 1999). According to López (1999) the study concludes that “there is an average of 54 suicides per year, which means that *there are 1 to 2 suicides per week in the Department of Guatemala*”. The study also found that 51% of those who committed suicide in the department of Guatemala during the seven-and-a-half-year span were persons between the ages of 10 and 29. Even when considering the problems of the recording of suicides in Guatemala, the numbers presented by the study are alarming, particularly since it only considers reported suicides in one of Guatemala’s 22 departments. Like alcoholism, the high incidence of suicide demonstrates that political and structural violence in Guatemala may indeed become embodied in different ways by individuals, and work to make the goal of mental health less attainable.

Lack of Government Support for Mental Health Services

The lack of government support of mental health programs is another significant factor that poses challenges to mental health work in Guatemala. In their report, titled *World Mental Health: Problems and Priorities in Low-Income Countries*, Desjarlais et al. (1995) observe how although poorer countries have made great progress, they are plagued by continued infectious disease and by chronic medical, mental, and behavioural conditions. “Many in these poorer

nations face the worst of both worlds: they continue to suffer from high rates of parasitic and infectious diseases at the same time that they are being afflicted by a growing burden of chronic diseases and new social pathologies” (Desjarlais et al. 1995:4). Desjarlais and colleagues argue that while mental, behavioral, and social problems are an increasing part of the health burden in all parts of the globe, mental health problems continue to receive scant attention outside of the wealthier countries. They point out that hundreds of millions of women, men and children suffer from mental illnesses and others experience distress from the consequences of violence, dislocation, poverty, and exploitation (Desjarlais et al. 1995:4).

Desjarlais et al. (1995) argue that in many poorer nations, government and health officials recognize the existence of these problems. However, faced with the choice of reducing deficits or establishing community health programs, they opt for the former. Meanwhile, social and neuropsychiatric problems become absent from the consciousness and official agendas of many international agencies and ministries of health. Desjarlais et al. (1995) point out that international agencies and national ministries have shown relative indifference to mental health issues and, until recently, international health professionals excluded much of this domain from standard assessments of global health. As a result, allocations in national health budgets for preventing and dealing with these problems are disproportionately small in relation to the hazards to human health they represent (Desjarlais et al. 1995:4). Desjarlais et al. (1995) also argue that while the burden of mental illnesses and behavioural problems is vast, these are greatly underrepresented in conventional public health statistics, as they have tended to focus on mortality rather than morbidity and dysfunction. “National and international health statistics do not reflect the enormous toll of misery from mental disorders because these conditions are not the immediate cause of death” (Desjarlais et al. 1995:5). For instance, they note that, “even when suicide represents a death due to depression or schizophrenia or drug addiction, it is tabulated as suicide” (Desjarlais et al. 1995:5). A particularly important point raised in by Desjarlais et al. (1995) is that economic constraints, particularly those resulting from mandated efforts to restructure economies under pressure, from globalizing bodies like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, have placed extreme limits on governments’ abilities to develop new

services or extend successful programs.

In Guatemala, the patterns described by Desjarlais et al. (1995) are familiar. Faced with high levels of malnutrition, particularly child malnutrition and the highest infant mortality rate of all the Central American countries, the Guatemalan Government has directed resources towards addressing these issues and largely ignores mental health. Guatemala's Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance, in its *National Health Plan 2000-2004* (2001) emphasizes maternal health, nutrition, and infant care as key health issues to be addressed. While the plan provides detailed information about the above-mentioned issues, such as background information and programs to be established, it is only in the very last page of the National Health Plan that the words *salud mental* (mental health) appear. However, mental health is only listed once, along with other health issues to be tackled on the last page. Absolutely no explanation as to what it means and how it will be addressed is given. It is clear from the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance's *National Health Plan 2000-2004* for Guatemala, that mental health is not a priority on the government's agenda.

In addition to the lack of resources and attention directed towards mental health by the government, the few organized mental health services that are available in Guatemala are not accessible to the majority of the population and often times, are inadequate as the following passage outlines.

In Guatemala, the National Mental Health Hospital is the only public hospital dedicated to psychiatric attention in the entire country. This hospital since its beginnings to date has not made any substantial changes or implemented new reforms. To this day, there are patients hospitalized in an insane asylum fashion, walking around nude, bathing in cold water, carrying their belongings (cup, spoon, sweater) in plastic bags so that they are not stolen. Here the patients and the staff live and work in unhealthy and sub-humane conditions. (Ortiz 2001:1).

Furthermore, poor people in Guatemala do not have access to a private and professional therapy. As Infopress Centroamericana (2002) notes, "in low-income areas, the minimal charge for a therapist is 50 quetzales per hour, about US\$6. This rate is equivalent to two days of work". Furthermore, "in wealthier neighborhoods, experienced clinical psychologists charge three times that (Q150 an hour), which is equivalent to close to a week's pay for a labourer, farm worker or

maid” (Infopress Centroamericana 2002).¹⁷

The scant attention given to mental health problems by the government poses a serious impediment to achieving mental health in Guatemala. Guatemalans are confronted with the stark reality of a society still suffering the social, political, economic and cultural consequences of war. In addition, the Guatemalan state is limited in its ability and is unwilling to provide the much needed social services that would promote (even partial) recovery from mental health problems engendered by the 36 years of armed confrontation and political terror. When combined, the deep social problems prevalent in Guatemala and the lack adequate health services, make it difficult for individuals to obtain a sense of well-being however defined for themselves and in relation to their communities. Guatemalans demonstrate tremendous resilience and not all suffer mental health conditions resulting from the civil war. However, for the thousands who may, the present social and political climate as well as the lack of mental health services available pose tremendous obstacles to the goal of healing the wounds of war.

Conclusions

This essay has demonstrated that the obstacles to achieving mental health in Guatemala are numerous. It draws attention to the fear, intimidation and impunity, legacies of political violence that are still present in Guatemala, particularly by examining two events surrounding the 2003 presidential political campaign of the ex-coup leader General Efraín Ríos Montt. I demonstrated that the intersection of political and structural violence in Guatemala poses serious challenges, obstacles and limitations to mental health work in the country. I also pointed to the high levels of poverty, malnutrition as well as everyday violence, crime and insecurity in the country, and how these social conditions may become embodied by individuals. Furthermore, I highlighted the lack of government support for mental health, and argued that not only is mental health work in Guatemala limited by the present social climate of fear and inequalities, but also by the government’s lack of concern with the issue. Until the larger social, economic and political problems presented in this essay are addressed, the outcomes of mental health interventions in Guatemala will continue to be extremely limited.

Notes

¹ The two truth projects I am referring to here are the United Nations Sponsored Commission for Historical Clarification (*Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico*, CEH) and the Inter-diocesan Recuperation of the Historical Memory Project (*Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*, REMHI) of the Catholic Church's Human Right's Office of the Archbishop.

² By political violence I mean the violence committed by the Guatemalan state against the population within the context of the civil war. This includes, among other things, torture, killings, massacres, disappearances, and the forced displacement of many Guatemalans, particularly those of indigenous descent. Structural violence refers to the more insidious forms of everyday suffering that result as a consequence of the unequal structures of power at the level of the family, the community, the nation and globally. For example, poverty, racism, and sexism and the suffering they engender are forms of structural violence (see Green 1999; Farmer 1999, 2003; Scheper-Hughes 1992).

³ The exhumations of the bodies of persons who were murdered and buried in mass graves, and their subsequent reburials, is something that both Truth Commissions in Guatemala concluded would be necessary for 'healing'. Many Guatemalans continue to suffer from altered grieving processes, not knowing what happened to their relatives, or being unable to give their deceased a 'proper' burial.

⁴ In June of 2005 the International Court of Human Rights ruled against the Guatemalan state in the case of the Plan de Sánchez massacre. This unprecedented ruling held the Guatemalan state responsible for the massacre of 268 persons and ordered the state to publicly apologize for its actions and to provide compensation for the families of the victims. The state made its apology in July 2005. However, whether it will pay compensation to the families remains to be seen.

⁵ In 1982 Ríos Montt led a coup that put him power. The Guatemalan Constitution stipulates that anyone who has overthrown a government cannot stand for the presidency. In both 1989 and 1995 Ríos Montt

was not able to participate as a candidate in elections for this reason. In 2003 Ríos Montt appealed to the Constitutional Court to be given authorization to run for president on the basis that the constitution had been adopted after his coup. Ultimately, the Constitutional Court ruled in Ríos Montt's favour though it is believed that Ríos Montt bought the yes votes.

⁶ In the introduction to his book "Pathologies of Power", Paul Farmer (2003) relates an anecdote which similarly points to the deep bond between the well-being of the deceased and the living among Mayan indigenous peoples of Guatemala. Farmer describes how he and a colleague were approached by a health committee made up of surviving victims of the war in the department of Huehuetenango, a department which saw some of the highest rates of violence in the country. The committee, Farmer explains, wanted assistance with a mental health project. Much to his marvel, however, at the centre of this mental health project was the committee's goal of exhuming the dead from the mass graves and clandestine cemeteries created by the army and giving the victims a 'proper' burial. According to the committee, the victims had "been buried with their eyes wide open" and "neither they nor their kin would know peace until they were buried properly" (Farmer 2003:4). In their case, restoring their mental health entailed more than what a Western bio-medical treatment perhaps would and was underscored by an element of justice; the return of the bodies of their loved ones. Consequently, the non-profit organization, Partners in Health, that Paul Farmer co-founded has worked with the *Equipo Técnico de Educación en Salud Comunitaria* ('Community Health and Education Team', ETESC) in Huehuetenango, Guatemala on exhuming the dead.

⁷ It is worth noting that the exhumations also have a human rights and justice goal; to find the necessary evidence that massacres and genocidal acts were committed so that those responsible can be brought to justice.

⁸ I observed a general sense of panic in Guatemala City as that day I heard comments like "those days are back", making the fear many Guatemalans continue to experience clear. "Black Thursday" also demonstrated how "those days" are still very present in people's minds.

⁹Ríos Montt was eliminated in the first round of the November 2003 elections.

¹⁰The World Bank report on poverty in Guatemala defines the extreme poverty line as “yearly cost of a “food basket” that provides the minimum daily caloric requirement of 2,172” for an individual, and yields an annual cost of Q.1,912.00 (approximately \$248.31 U.S.) (2003:7). On the other hand, the full poverty line is defined as, “the extreme poverty line (the cost of food that satisfies the minimum caloric requirement) plus an allowance for non-food items” or Q.4,319.00 (approximately \$560.90 U.S.) (World Bank 2003:7-8). In other words, according to the World Bank (2003), persons earning below Q.4,319.00 annually are poor and those earning below Q.1,912.00 are extremely poor. These cut-offs are problematic in the sense that they are set quite low, limiting the percentage of those that can be classified as “poor”. Nevertheless, despite the low cut-offs, the report points to alarming poverty trends.

¹¹For example, the World Bank recently granted a \$45 million loan to the Canadian-U.S. owned corporation Glamis Gold Ltd. for a gold mining project in the north-western province of San Marcos in Guatemala. While the corporation stands to make huge profits from the gold mine, it will only pay Guatemala 1% of its profits, which will have to split between the municipalities of Sipacapa and San Miguel Ixtahuacan. Rather than finance the development projects designed by and for the people of Sipacapa and San Miguel, the World Bank has decided to fund the Glamis Gold corporation that will take 99% of its profits and leave the people of Guatemala to deal with the environmental and social consequences of open-pit mining. This is a clear example of a World Bank funded project that will benefit a multinational corporation rather than reduce poverty.

¹² Parallel to the steep rise in killings of Guatemalan women, their murdered bodies have increasingly been discovered with signs of rape, torture and mutilation, which follow patterned forms, a patterning which distinguishes violence against women from that committed against men. The increase in murders of women in Guatemala is accompanied by increased sexual violence, as well as gruesome forms of aggression, where violence is enacted not only

to inflict pain and kill the victim but to terrorize others who are affected by those acts, such as family members, coworkers, and notably, other women.

¹³According to a *Prensa Libre* (13 Dec. 2003) article, Guatemala's Public Ministry has indicated that they receive between 500 to 600 reports of intra-familial violence a month. These figures do signal a large problem, particularly in light of the fact that these numbers do not include incidents that go unreported.

¹⁴ It should be noted, however, that according to Zur (1998) some widows, witnessing the abuse suffered by fellow widows at the hands of their new husbands, actively decided not to remarry.

¹⁵This study is not conclusive as one drink may not necessarily signal an alcohol problem, however, the study does point to alcohol consumption among youth.

¹⁶ One possible explanation for suicide being considered taboo, and its subsequent under-reporting, is the Catholic Church's position against suicide.

¹⁷ There are no national statistics on the number of psychologists in Guatemala. There is a National Association of Psychology (*La Asociación Guatemalteca de Psicología*), however, it does not encompass the majority of mental health professionals in the country. The association was formed in 1996 in the absence of a College of Psychology to which all psychologists would belong. Furthermore, while not the focus of this essay (and while there is also a lack of national statistics), there are folk and religious healers in Guatemala that carry out 'mental health' work, which are more accessible to the population and should not be overlooked. Green (1999), for instance, describes how *cultos*, nightly services in Evangelical churches, provided women with a space to participate in communal activities. Moreover, the clapping, shouting, and praying central to the *cultos* "provide a pleasurable diversion. The ritual of the nightly service offers women some emotional respite from the enormous pressures under which they live" (Green 1999:160).

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