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# Assessment of generative strategies in self-support groups in people affected by the Colombian armed political conflict

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## Abstract

*The paper presents a research applied from an appreciative approach that aimed to assess the use of generative strategies in self-support groups in a population affected by the armed political conflict in Colombia. The generative approach intends to build a notion of desirable and possible future, by means of dialogic strategies. These dialogues strengthen community ties, show new action strategies and stimulate metaphors in relation to violent affectation amid the conflict. The research sample was formed by 11 people divided into two groups, residents in the city of Bucaramanga, Colombia. The advantaged actions inside the self-support groups were the identification of the discursive links among the participants, the clarification of the thematic nodes among them, the selection of metaphors and the transformation of narratives. The results point out that the intervention generated the observation and identification of resources, action planning, search of new experiences, reflexivity, and recognition of the novelty to transform conflict affectation. It is concluded that through self-support groups, people transform the meaning of their experience by sharing stories and action resources for the future, which verifies the purposes of the generative approach. The psychologist was a facilitator of the process amid the relevance of language*

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*as a means of transformation. It was also concluded that through self-support groups emerges the truth of a conflict through public practices by telling the stories of affectation.*

*Keywords: Generative approach; Self-support Group; Language; Colombia; Narrative.*

## **Context**

The production of knowledge about a State's community and political situation by Social Sciences allows the comprehension and rapprochement to situations that generate levels of crisis inside a society and also affect its development. This is the case of Social Constructionist Psychology and the Colombian armed political conflict (CAPC), which along its evolution has modified habits and traditions of the regions that have been affected by it. Such affectations have caused the deterioration of social relationships due to the systematic violation of human rights, among other factors. Therefore, their reestablishment expects the reconstruction of the social fabric, starting from intervention strategies that tend to favor reconciliation and coexistence and also legitimate, from the protagonists involved, the conflict transformation.

For this reason in some Colombian regions, from constructionism and the appreciative framing, it is intended to implement methodologies that permit intervention on the subjective and collective affectations derived from actions of the Colombian conflict. For that purpose, it was proposed the development of the strategy of Self-support Groups based on the generative approach, which leads to the strengthening of support networks inside the communities, the intensification and identification of resources in the groups' participants, and the construction of alternatives for the future through the intervention process.

### ***Reference framework for the reestablishment of social fabric***

The model of Self-support Group with Generative Approach bases on the social constructionism proposed by Gergen (1982), Fried's theoretical proposal of a generative perspective (2002), and the methodology of Self-Support Groups derived from the concept of social support. This support starts from the supposition that positive social relationships and social networks favor the presence of well-being to face stressful or conflictive situations (Montenegro, 2001; Shepherd et. al, 1999). Some conditions for mutual support are: giving sense to reality, some space for encounter and relief, recognizing feelings, carrying on with solutions, and developing collective power (Beristain, 1999). Thus, the intervention through Self-Support Groups aims to create and fortify meaningful and significant

social links, so that they supply support to people facing critical situations or situations whose comprehension requires to be widened.

Inside this framework, knowledge is understood as a social product, giving emphasis to the importance of narration and the construction of social meanings starting from dialogic interaction. The generative approach is based on dialogues which develop meanings from experience and joint construction between a person and a therapist, always based on learning and succeed experiences. This type of relationship promotes dialogic creation; that is, “the gradual construction in the time of some knowledge, process or novel experience by means of reflexive dialogue and conversational learning in human groups” (Fried, 2004, p. 3).

Through their accounts, dialogues determine where the person is situated, the aspects of the experience that are told, as well as the way they are expressed. Likewise, they determine life effects and orientations and relationships in concrete actions (Epston, White & Murray, 1996). Therefore, the account is mediated by language, from which come up memories, ideas, and concepts that can be renewed through interaction (Hoffman, 1996). In this way, the reference framework in self-support groups is the story of each participant. The therapist must adopt a position of *ignorance*, which implies a posture of no judgment and acceptance beside the account without questioning its reality and looking for an encounter space to start the dialogue (Goolishian & Anderson, 1996).

From this approach, the group facilitator bases on communication, understood in a dialogic framework, in which the participants interact and support each other, building at the same time a joint version of the situation and the possible alternatives. In consequence, every therapeutic communication is co-constructive and every co-constructive communication has the possibility to be therapeutic. In synthesis, it is intended to recreate the reality from personal and relational comprehension, valuing the links built along the process (Fried, 2004).

The generative perspective moves away from the intervention around deficit and works inside a framework based on resources, learning, and innovation. This approach considers that sense creation, experience, and knowledge are constructive processes which in certain events and episodes have the potential to transform the guidelines of social relationships (Fried, 2008a). With the purpose of increasing the abilities for handling problems and establishing alternatives in the participants of self-support groups, the generative strategies are used to create intersections among dialogues. These intersections are identified from the detection of nodes (encounter spaces) and links (relationships) in the account, a structure of topics in networks and thematic nodes; that is, the generation of new meanings and alternatives from new subject matters, construction of metaphors that symbolize experience, and monitoring of the account variations as well as their meaning in the process development (Fried, 2008a, 2004).

Every generative process is transversally traversed by generative questions as a strategy that makes the identification of possibilities of construction and re-interpretation possible, as it facilitates the recognition of interpretation and action alternatives as well as their impact on the solution of a problem.

The transformation in the discourse and the transformation of the discourse have the potential to generate alternatives for the future from the identification of common elements, new resources, and the constant reflection about the actions implemented. The process by means of which learning and acquired knowledge are both recognized is called *generative cycle*, which is characterized by: (a) observation, (b) experimentation, (c) reflection, and (d) innovation recognition. This cycle is continuous and open, that is every time an action is implemented, the process starts taking into account the learning acquired and the resources developed (Fried, 2008b).

### **Methodological route for the construction of new relationship spaces**

The research was carried out with 11 people that formed two self-support teams. In the moment of intervention, the people were part of organizations of people affected by the conflict, who were sent by the National Commission of Reparation and Reconciliation – Northeast Seat of Bucaramanga (Colombia). The number of people who turn out for this type of help is low with respect to the estimated number of people affected by the conflict in the country; approximately 4 million people. This situation suggest to think about the priorities the population has when requesting help, as well as their time availability for processes developed along two months.

The first group (Group A) was formed by 6 affected people (1 man and 5 women). The common type of affectation of this group was forced disappearance. The attendants were between 40 and 73 years old, and the facts occurred between 1987 and 2001 in different places of Colombia.

The second group (Group B) was formed by 5 affected people (1 man and 4 women). The common denominator in this group was forced disappearance. The attendants were between 23 and 68 years old, and the events occurred between 1985 and 2003 in different places of Colombia.

The development of each self-support group was organized in seven phases maintained by generative principles: *observing, identifying resources, planning action, experiencing, reflecting, recognizing the novelty, and abstracting the novelty*. During the development of these phases was searched the identification of contents, by means of which *meaning nodes and links, structures of topics in networks and thematic nodes, metaphors and accounts* will provide evidence (Fried 2004).

## Generating renewed relationship places

The results of the model of Self-support Groups with generative approach will be presented according to the phases that structured the process: *observing, identifying resources, planning action, experiencing, reflecting, recognizing the novelty and abstracting the novelty*. In the development of these phases are identified fragments related to the following categories: *nodes and links, structures of topics in networks and thematic nodes, metaphor and accounts* (Fried, 2004).

During the first and second phase, *observing and identifying resources* (1st session), the participants remembered the facts that surrounded the disappearance of their relatives and the consequences that such fact brought to their personal and family life. At the moment of recreating the experience lived, the participants related the loneliness felt after the loss, assuming the functions carried out by the person who disappeared such as the economical support and the role of father and mother for their children. They also expressed the abandonment by the State institutions and, in some occasions, the persecution and threats uttered by illegal armed groups.

In the third phase *Planning action* (2nd and 3rd session), the participants chose current situations and targets, whose securing depended on themselves by means of their own resources and not on other people or institutions. Such situations were represented by means of photographs and cuttings regarding them. The situation or the target choice led to the presentation of action alternatives, taking into account the consequences brought by their carrying out. Among the situations chosen by the participants were: doing a degree course, looking for psychological consultancy for the family, and dialoguing with the people involved in the family conflicts.

Once the action alternatives before the chosen situation were identified, the participants chose the one which demanded less time for its execution. This choice was influenced by the comments that the members of the group made about them; a fact that supposes an exercise of shared transformation of meanings by dialoguing about available resources.

Carrying out the alternative pointed out the beginning of the fourth phase called *Experiencing* (4th session), in which the participants, after executing the chosen alternative, evaluated emotions before, while and after the exercise. In the same way, they identified the elements that favored the exercise, such as: friends' support, the backing they felt from the group, access to services and disposition from the people involved. The experience of staging the chosen alternative and then sharing it supposes the first exercise of account transformation as well as the choice of new discursive resources to refer to the way someone has a bearing on

the world through his own action, what constitutes on its own an effect both therapeutic and generative.

The fifth and sixth phases, *Reflecting and Recognizing the novelty* (5th session), were developed from the learning that the participants related inside the process, such as: learning to be more tolerant, recognizing capacities and developing them, fighting the fear of sharing the story, which implies confidence building, learning from other people's experiences, transforming the situations without any fear, being more confident about the decisions made, being more supportive with the others, working in group, searching alternatives for the future, and building confidence bonds. This joint of transformations prove a qualitative change in the relationship with themselves and the relationship with other people from the closest or more necessary contexts.

Besides, there was an inquiry concerning the changes implied by the fact of belonging to this process, by identifying aspects like: learning to express feelings and thoughts, making decisions, understanding that every situation has alternatives and consequences, carrying out what they had not done before because of fear, looking for help when necessary by means of social networks, keeping relative control beside some situations, and being able to speak in public. The participants recognized that the learning obtained throughout the process could be transferred to other scenarios different from the group, such as family, friendship networks, work, and diverse social organizations. The strategies or resources identified for this transference were the dialogue, support, and backing offered by the member of the group and close people, the orientation received by the intervention facilitators, dialogue, and perseverance during the process of the group.

To end, the seventh phase was *Abstracting the novelty* (6th session), in which the facilitators got the two groups together in the same activity with the purpose of generating a space to share experiences of life and also the results of the self-support process. For that, a Mandala or collective plastic art was made by using art as a means of expression for a closure exercise.

Taking into account that the categories of Generative Approach analysis corresponding to the generative instruments (*nodes and links, structure of topics in networks and thematic nodes, metaphor and accounts*) were found along the sessions in which the process was structured, the results are presented below.

As for *the Nodes and Links*, they were identified in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th session. Due to the diversity of targets, the links were established among people with similar experiences. The nodes and links generated by means of the participants' accounts intertwine and form a network. Due to the diversity of the thematic nodes identified in the process, it was necessary to organize them starting from topics, that is, structures which gather the different situations around which the process was developed. This relates to the category of *Structure of topics in networks and thematic nodes* constituted by alternatives of solution for the

situations chosen, taking as a starting point the opinions provided by the group members with respect to the different situations. Now, some examples:

*“The only fact of stopping studying and stopping working in order to fulfill needs was a change that I didn’t expect because I thought about studying first and becoming a professional and then working in the profession chosen.” (Group A, participant 3).*

*“I depended on my husband a lot. He was everything to me; he gave me everything. I ended up, as my fellow said, with my hands tied; I didn’t know what to do. I had it all. I had to start working, become responsible for my three children.” (Group A, participant 2).*

*“Because in that, we are similar to her (referring to Mrs. M.M.), because he was the one who worked and supported home. Later, I had to start working on any thing that came out so that I could help my three daughters to progress. I had to take the role of father and mother.” (Group B, participant 4).*

With the objective of abstracting the alternatives and the actions carried out by the participants, the meanings, and the learning proved inside the process, metaphors were used as a means that allowed to condense and to represent the situations through images, drawings and phrases. As in the case of the former categories, the *metaphors* were found in the 1st, 2nd, 4th, and 5th session.

Four types of metaphor were identified: bridge metaphor and the three generative metaphors (relational, transitional, and visionary):

By means of the bridge metaphor the participants represented in a tree what life means to them. They put the strength of the tree on a level with the strength they have had to face situations. The roots of the tree and the hands intertwined represented each of the participants and the support and backing they found in their fellows.

The situation of disappearance of their relatives was exemplified in the steps that represented the constant search of their beloved. The feelings before the situation lived were reflected in incomplete hearts, significant of their sadness and joy.

The fortitude the participants referred to implied the way they had to start over after the violent event; the family reconstruction which had to take place after the disappearance, that is, conceive the step from a difficult situation to a situation in which it the access to resources was possible in order to face the loss and develop new abilities. This indicated the appearance of *metaphors of transition*.

As the participants identified the transition or the changes produced from the moment of the disappearance until the group meeting, they proposed alternatives



facing the chosen situation. This constant search of alternatives was compared by a participant to the work carried out by a bee that contributes in the process of pollination of flowers, without caring about their type or color.

Inside the process, the flowers represented the members of the group who contribute to someone else's process basing on his experience and opinions. That fact made reference to a *relational metaphor*.

The last type of metaphors that was found inside the process corresponded to *visionary metaphors*, in which the participant exemplified possibilities for the future by being aware of the active role he could take in the development of actions addressed to modify current situations. In this metaphor one of the participants compared the life of each one of them to a sailboat whose control must be taken in order to give him a course.

Thus, metaphors constitute a reinterpretation from which people build and reflect on alternative meanings for the affectation experiences of the conflict. The metaphor resource transcends the direct description in a situation that has been related in several occasions to multiple audiences; and proposes new language games by means of which the experience reinterpretation is possible. Thinking and proposing a metaphor constitutes the exploration of alternative meanings beside the repeated situation of relating a situation, without having widened with it the alternatives of action and comprehension intended to transform the relationship.

On the other hand, the narratives were configured from the accounts given by the participants on the subject of the experience of their relatives' disappearance as well as the accounts given about their current situations, their alternatives and the evaluation of the groups. Through narrative it was possible to get evidence of the participants' transformation in the process, indicating the meanings affected and also the actions carried out which had positive consequences during the intervention and after the intervention. The transformation of the narratives permitted to prove the reach of the objective set by means of the Generative Approach in Self-support Groups, since it made possible both the search of alternatives for the future and the implementation of concrete and immediate actions. In consequence, the narratives constituted a framework of transformation and interpretation of events for the participants, in relationship with their story.

## Construction of coexistence and encounter spaces

In this chapter there will be a reference to the results of the Generative Model in the Self-support groups, recognizing its reach and its limitations. Moreover, there will be an identification of the methodological achievements and some of the difficulties that arose during their implementation. Finally some suggestions and recommendations will be specified for the development of subsequent intervention models, which may use the present document as a precedent.

The proposal of Self-support Groups with Generative Approach suggests the relationship as a basis for meanings interchange, the account and the language as a reality maker when facing situations resulting from the use of violence and the denial of others. Therefore, the accounts recognition allows the creation of a space which aims at coexistence and the reestablishment of links, as a social network of support from which people act as the protagonists of each intervention.

The accounts reflected the participants' lifestyle in their places of origin, associated to countryside work (agriculture and cattle livestock farming) and housework, which provided them with tranquility and stability. These accounts showed a meaningful episode in the participants' life which was enriched thanks to generative intervention, especially in the consideration of new ways of action comprehension and action strategies. Through the self-support model implemented it was possible to search solutions and identify resources in the construction of perspectives on the future (Shepherd et. al, 1999), a condition related to Fried's generative proposal (2002), who bases his work on the exploration of alternatives, identification of resources, and recognition of new opportunities of life.

Thus, the generative approach states that the construction of accounts, starting from the conversational interchange, allows the establishment of alternatives and new perspectives on the future, responding to the process objective: identifying and developing resources, opportunities and new perspectives on the future (Fried, 2008b) by means of actions and enriched meanings. The reach of this objective is recognized in the identification of multiple alternatives beside the situation chosen, as well as the execution of the action chosen, by identifying the learning, resources and achievements in the process, which are contained in the categories *carrying on with solutions and developing collective power* of Self-Support Groups.

The modification in the account of the participants positions the narrative as an axis around which experience is restructured and transformed, in order to facilitate the creation of new meanings from the metaphors along the therapeutic dialogue. As Goolishian and Anderson (1996) state, the conversations in the intervention context aim at the construction of different realities, new meanings, and the comprehension of the social relationship as dialogue promoter.

Along the discourse, beliefs, values, and habits intertwined; and words glimpsed the way the participants conceived the consequences of the violent and generative fact, aspects that constitute a condition of solidarity among the members of groups such as family, religion, friends and, in some cases, strangers (Fernando, 2010). This situation keeps a relationship with the purpose of the Self-support Groups since it intends to *Give sense to Reality* and also to generate links of hetero-reference by means of the contact with other people's meanings. The possibility to share stories with people who were in similar situations was a starting point to turn the group into a space for encounter and relief, which indicates the second category of Self-support Group. This space began to be part of the participants' life and configured as a place where the word, which was not listened or legitimized before, became legitimate. That concurs with Martín-Baró's approach (1990) who emphasized the group space as a transition place which allows the socialization of non-expressed feelings due to the conflict conditions.

The group was conformed as a scenario of participation, support, and cooperation where feelings non-expressed by the participants were recognized in other spaces. Among the feelings that the members of the group recognized were the sadness caused by their relatives' death, the rancor that some of them felt towards the armed group, and the fear of the events happening again. The recognition of feelings derived from a non-expressed fact and experiences is one of the arguments proposed by Shepherd et. al (1999) as the purpose of the Self-support Groups. The thematic nodes and the metaphors, as resources for the production of accounts, facilitate the appearance of feelings that get the possibility to be named through objectivation exercises during the encounter sessions. The conditions of participation, support, and cooperation of the group constitute conditions for the therapeutic effect to emerge, which is understood as the consequence that generates subjective well-being in people (Molina, 2010).

In a few words, the Self-support groups, from a generative approach, were conceived as a space for encounter in which feelings were recognized, concrete actions were set in motion, and alternatives for the future were proposed, considering that positive relationships and social networks favor the presence of well-being to face stressful or conflictive situations (Montenegro, 2001).

The role of facilitators through the Generative model development was framed in a position of ignorance, in which the participant is the one who know his reality and has the resources to transform it. Thus, the facilitator participated in the processes of re-signification along with the participants and also fostered dialogue for the identification of relationships and places of encounter in the different accounts, following the premises of Gergen (1996) and Goolishian & Anderson (1996). The facilitators' interventions aimed at the creation of new perspectives, the reestablishment of relationships between the participants and their accounts,

as well as the promotion of an atmosphere of respect and acceptance of the other's account.

This permits to infer that the objectives accomplishment, the therapeutic task, and the way the process was facilitated permitted the reestablishment of a space propitious for the development of the model of Self-support Groups oriented from the Generative approach. The model was designed in a way that the participants succeeded in establishing relationships among their stories, expressing feelings, and configuring encounters as a way of emotional reparation at the moment of finding support in the other participants. The narrative exercise developed in the Self-support Groups legitimates renewed forms of relationship through the validation of the word in dialogue and the co-construction of an including reality aiming to generate perspectives on the future.

Recognizing the word as a tool that generates change is one of the achievements of the model confirmed in the implementation of self-support groups. The person's account and the common listening point out experience and singular interpretation referents which might not have been analyzed, for example the fortitude to face the consequences of the violent event by means of a position beside everyday life and the possibility of control and action beside it (Gergen, 1996). In the processes were identified resources and strategies that allowed the participants to reconstruct their accounts and propose new alternatives for the future away from fatalism. Among the resources identified by the participants were identified: the support of friends and close people, the group's support, dialogue, professional consultancy, subsidies from government and private institutions, and the fortitude provided by believing in a god.

According to Beristain (1999), people usually rely on different strategies of problem facing such as religious convictions, in the first place, to understand what has happened to oneself and give the events a meaning. In the two groups in which the process was carried out, the people referred to comprehending the violent affectation from the divine, being a referent when facing the loss and its consequences.

As for the impact of the strategy, it can be stated that the group intervention model has an impact on a greater number of people in the same period of time in comparison with the development of individual processes, which focus on a dyadic relationship against wider opportunities for re-signification. The implementation of this model in and from the Colombian context constitutes a contribution of the academy to the conflict transformation and the reconstruction of the social fabric, starting from the conformation of networks, the re-signification of violent facts, and the generation of perspectives on the future legitimized on dialogue as a facilitator of the process. In this sense, the self-support groups represented a contribution to the securing of truth and memory in the historical process of the country because the participants understood them as a space to tell their stories, what they felt and what they had to keep to themselves, and where the most

important was not how it happened but what it arose in them. Silence, even after the intervention in the group, is considered necessary, taking into account the presence of active armed groups while the self-support encounters are carried out. However, and in a reflexive way, it is recognized that not everything is still silenced. This type of intervention is not only therapeutic but also political in the way it has been described and constitutes a way of elucidating truths by making them public by means of academic papers which keep anonymity but show evidence of the facts; getting recognition from the society from the affected people's testimony; an idea that is shared by Shepherd et. al (1999).

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