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*Some Present-Day Asylum Seekers in the U.S.: Machismo and
“Women on the Run”*

Abstract

Following a brief review of international asylum law (The Geneva Conventions), and the role of American mental health professionals in the asylum process, this paper attempts to understand the ways in which the often trauma-creating custom of machismo is transferred across generations in Central American families. Using as background the work of self psychologist Alan Roland (1989, 1996, 2005), I have described families from these areas as so powerfully father-centric that children develop a sense of themselves based largely on their ability to sustain their father's positive regard. In addition, without discussion, they present a positive image of him to the outside world, even when his behavior at home is brutal. To do otherwise would be humiliating. Having no place to reflect on these customs, often they are acted upon/acted out in the next generation.

Attraverso una breve rassegna delle leggi internazionali sulla richiesta di asilo (le Convenzioni di Ginevra) e sul ruolo dei professionisti della salute mentale americana in questo processo, il lavoro mira a comprendere i modi in cui la valenza spesso traumatizzante del machismo si trasmette di generazione in generazione nelle famiglie del Centro America. Utilizzando il paradigma di lavoro dello psicologo del Sé Alan Roland (1989, 1996, 2005), il contributo descrive le famiglie provenienti da queste aree come fortemente sottomesse al potere del padre, in cui i bambini sviluppano un senso del Sé basato sulla loro capacità di meritare la stima del padre. Inoltre, questi stessi bambini rimandano un'immagine positiva del padre all'esterno, anche laddove il suo comportamento sia tra i più brutali. Agire in modo diverso sarebbe, infatti, troppo umiliante. Venendo a mancare spazi di pensiero in cui poter attivare una riflessione su

questi valori, si ritiene che essi vengano spesso agiti e trasmessi di generazione in generazione.

Keywords: asylum, machismo, women on the run, transmission of trauma across generations

Parole chiave: asilo, machismo, donne in fuga, trasmissione del trauma tra le generazioni

Introduction

My paper will address two separate issues. Its main focus will be on women asylum seekers who are presently coming to the United States from Mexico and Central America. In addition, it will illustrate some of the ways in which the provisions of the Geneva Conventions, expanded at the end of World War II to protect the humanity of refugees, potentially people like ourselves, are being violated.

Asylum Seeking in the U.S. today: the people, the laws, the process

In contrast to the immigrant crisis in Europe, women alone from Central America are a large part of the current refugee crisis in the U.S. These women come any way they can because violent drug-related gangs have taken over in their home countries, where they, above all, are victimized. A woman alone, without the protection of husband or father, is increasingly perceived by other men as potential for victimization. No one is with her to keep marauders away. Nor will anyone protect her from the abuse of a partner, when one is present, for the police, often already corrupted by drug cartels, will inevitably side with her man. Indeed, the situation for women from Central America (and Mexico) is now so dire that, in October, 2015, a report with the title, *Women on the Run*¹ was issued by António Guterres, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. There, he tells

¹At: <http://www.unhcr.org/5630f24c6.html>. A similar publication, *Children on the Run*, at <http://unhcrwashington.org/children> was published in 2014 by the same organization.

us that Central American women “face a startling degree of violence that has a devastating impact on their daily lives.” It is drug-corrupted governments, along with a group of culturally held beliefs about masculine power, designated by the single word “machismo,” that are responsible for the trouble women have in these countries.

Refugees, most of whom seek asylum, are fleeing the threat of torture or death in their country of origin. They are persecuted because of their membership in a group of some kind. Generally asylum seekers are intelligent. Intelligence is required to manage the journey and, before leaving, to collect money and family support in order to do so. Asylum seekers are also often very courageous. Courage, often fired up by terrible fear, is required to summon the personal resources necessary to take on such a journey. A recent case of my own, a widow from Central America, a woman alone, exemplifies these qualities.

I met Ms. Juanita last summer in a prison in Dilley, Texas. She and her 4 year old son had been illegally placed in this prison by the U.S. government. A very attractive young woman, Ms. Juanita’s only language was Quiche, an ancient native language. Because none of us spoke Quiche, her translator was contacted by telephone. Once we had him on the line, she talked freely.

Two previous attempts to come to the U.S. had failed, she said; she had been sent back home. Because she could not read, she had inadvertently signed documents which were in fact deportation documents.

Ms. Juanita, the only daughter in her family comes from the mountainous regions of her country, an area without any electricity. She is a weaver by trade, a tradition she inherited from her mother. At home, she did well financially. She sold her products in the market in a local town. Because she is female and descended from an artisanal tradition (she described her work with considerable pride), Ms. Juanita was never sent to school. Thus she cannot read or write. She also does not think sequentially, as we tend to do. In her culture thinking tends to be holistic. Thus the details of her story were not always added in sequential order.

Ms. Juanita’s husband, with whom she had 2 boys (the eldest, aged 4, is in the U.S. with her) died approximately 18 months ago, after his strength gradually ebbed away, probably from cancer. No medical help was available to him in her community. A week

after his death, Ms. Juanita received an anonymous telephone call from a man who said he wanted her as his wife, even though he already had one. When she refused to accept him, he announced that he was going to get her anyway. Soon after, 3 men came at night and entered her house. One had a gun, two had knives. One grabbed her and attempted to push her down, trying to rape her. A struggle ensued, during which her hand and leg were cut. But then the attacker dropped his knife, whereupon all 3 men got down on their knees in the dark to search for it.

By this time, Ms. Juanita was out in the street making a great deal of noise. The whole town was aroused. The men followed her. «Ok» they said. They would not rape her this time. In exchange, they demanded all the money she had. This she gave them. The next time they came, they said, they promised to rape and kill her. Terrified, especially for the safety of her children, she telephoned her brothers who were living in Atlanta. They suggested she come to Atlanta as well. Hence the process of immigration began.

Ms. Juanita has flashbacks of the struggle that ensued between herself and the man who wanted to rape her. These occur perhaps once a week. She also has difficulty sleeping because at night she becomes anxious thinking about what will happen to her if she is forced to go home. Frequently, she dreams that the men who entered her house are standing there waiting for her to return. She often wakes from sleep crying. She startles easily. These are symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

As the interview was drawing to an end, because she had a Quiche interpreter on the phone, Ms. Juanita requested help in understanding the immigration documents she had thoughtfully brought with her to her interview, documents which earlier she had not been able to read. This intelligent assessment of her needs and her assertiveness in asking for help, seemed to characterize her way of proceeding with life. She is not a passive bystander by any means. She is a woman used to caring for herself and for her children who also can learn from her experience. She will no doubt learn English and to read and write because she will need to, in order to keep up with her children.

My interest in asylum seekers, people like Ms. Juanita, began perhaps a dozen years ago. I answered an announcement on the list serve of my psychoanalytic institute, which advertised a day of training for those interested in volunteering to evaluate asylum seekers. I signed up and completed the training.

As I mentioned earlier, laws granting the right to asylum, for people persecuted at home, were written because of World War II. Many of those who fled Hitler's concentration camps left without their citizenship papers and therefore had no legal protection. Without these, their humanity was disregarded and they were turned away from the countries to which they fled. Because of this, after the war it was determined, by the United Nations that the world needed laws to protect the human rights of all of us. Thus, the Geneva Conventions, designed originally by the Red Cross in the nineteenth century to protect wounded fighters and prisoners of war, were expanded, specifically to protect refugees.

A refugee, according to the Geneva Conventions, is not only persecuted at home, but experiences a *well-founded fear* that if (s)he returns home, (s)he will continue to be persecuted because of his/her membership in a hated group of one kind or another. Indeed, the Geneva Conventions hold that people with such well-founded fear cannot be penalized for entering another country illegally, unless they are suspected of having committed war or other serious crimes. Most important of all, such people cannot be sent home (principle of *non-refoulement*). In addition, the Convention «lays down minimum standards of treatment for refugees» which include: access to courts, to primary education, to work. The provisions for documentation, include a refugee travel document in passport form (the "Nansen passport," this is called). Italy subscribes to these laws, but lately with caveats. The U.S. subscribes too.

That being said, in the U.S. and in parts of Europe too, we are not abiding very well by the Geneva conventions. The human rights of refugees are not being respected. We are doing this and breaking the law in the U.S. by putting some women refugees from Central America, with their children, into prison.

Although the prison feeds, clothes and keeps prisoners relatively safe it is still a prison and difficult especially for the children to understand². In my experience, physical and mental health are also not well treated in such places.

It was to protest this imprisonment, and to make asylum available to women from Central America, that I went, last summer, as part of a team, to the prison in Dilley Texas

²Pictures drawn by the children, some representing their incarceration, can be found at: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10153751127998632.1073741850.130496628631&type=3>

Teams of volunteer helpers go to that prison every week. This makes it possible for many of the women incarcerated there to begin the process of applying for asylum in a legally recognized way so that they have a better chance of avoiding deportation.

In the U.S. and in Europe as well, the process of applying for asylum takes place in steps. In the U.S. an asylum seeker needs to have a good attorney who will present his/her plea to an asylum officer or judge. As part of the process, psychological evaluations are often requested because the presence of symptoms such as Post Traumatic Stress disorder, dissociation, severe depression/anxiety, etc. are assumed to be *proof* that the client is telling the truth about what he or she experienced. This is an area in which feelings very much matter to the law.

As a psychologist, I am referred an asylum client by an attorney for evaluation. Ms. Juanita, above, was such a one. Then I do an interview, I probe, trying at the same time to be kind and compassionate, into the *feelings* the client experiences. Then I write an affidavit, summarizing her story, with, appropriate psychological diagnoses or impressions. A good interview and write-up from a mental health professional, can make a big difference in whether or not the client is granted asylum because it describes in detail what the person experienced and validate the reasons they have to fear return.

Over the years, the stories I have heard have taught me things about the different family groups I have seen. They have made me want to learn more about the cultures from which they came, in order to understand them better. Most recently, because of the flood of refugees from Central America, I have gotten interested in machismo, the label for the *extreme degree of power* men in Central America (and other Latino cultures) are given to exploit and abuse women.

The phenomena of Machismo seen from different points of view

Machismo in a recent review, is defined as a «sense of masculine pride so embedded in culture that it is not only accepted, but often expected» (Mendoza, 2009). In Central America, machismo might have had pre-Columbian origins, or have begun with the Spanish invasion, either because it existed already in Spanish culture or because it evolved as a compensatory effect of the «deep feelings of inadequacy» (Mirandé, 1997,

p. 67) caused in men as a result of the Spanish conquest. Although originally associated with positive characteristics (courage, bravery, responsibility, honorableness, protection of family, etc.), these days it is more likely to be associated with negative traits such as bravado cowardice, and violence, signs of weakness, perhaps, as if men are trying to hold on hard to a show of power when inside they do not feel so strong.

Machismo in Central America is presumed to be mirrored in women by marianismo, a set of characteristics modeled on idealized qualities, which are presumed to have existed in Mary, the Virgin Mother. In line with this tradition, women are supposed to sacrifice themselves totally to the “needs” of their men. Although as a result, Latina women may perceive themselves as morally superior to their husbands (Mendoza, 2009), in actuality, they occupy an inferior social position in which their labor is exploited. They are expected to do all the chores and to bear and care for many children to prove their husband’s machismo. The Catholic church has supported this female role and may well have participated, not only in keeping fertility rates in Central America high, but in telling women that maintaining the family unit is more important than their own well being (Torres, 1995).

As for education, men are preferred in this universe as well, particularly light skinned men – the elite – who are presumed to be decedents of the Spanish. According to one source (Navin, 2004, p. 2) education is «seen as an elite right, more than a human right and more than an elite right, a male right.» Although this situation may be beginning to change, (Forman, 2014) traditional views of the position each gender is supposed to occupy still control access to well-paying jobs and education.

Many Central American women who seek asylum in the U.S. continue machistic customs once they get there. Many have no idea how to live independently or how to choose partners who wont abuse them. Thus, when women come to the U.S., a few researchers have found (Torres, 1995; Valdespino, 2012, Gurvinder & Bhugra, 2013) the machismo tradition is to some extent passed along to their children. Daughters get sexually abused, children get beaten without family complaint. Sometimes professionals notice the effects of this tradition, a teacher perhaps, or a doctor or nurse. These people must, by law report the abuse they observe. Often, in such cases, mothers dislike the interference of outsiders: they want family life to resume as “normal”, with the abusing

spouse reinstated in the home (Valdespino, 2012), sometimes because the money he contributes is so needed.

How, as a psychoanalyst, I ask myself, do I explain the continuation of this extraordinary cultural system? Beyond economic need, what are the emotional ties that keep in place such a threatening power differential between men and women, even after migration to the U.S.? What customs help to pass it on from one generation to another?

In trying to explain this to myself, I have turned to my psychoanalytic background for help. My focus is on the family and the unconscious implications of attachments that take place there. Here I have found the work of Alan Roland (1989, 1996, 2005), an American self-psychologist, very helpful.

Self psychologists, to review briefly, believe that certain patterns of interaction, mirroring (eye to eye contact and its effects), empathy (who feels most empathy for whom and why) and idealization (of one family member over another, for example) are among the most important dynamics that exist between parent and child and are profoundly important for the child, in developing a sense of self (Kohut, 2009). Terrible shame can occur when ideals are not met (Morrison, 1989).

Twenty years ago, self psychologist Alan Roland compared self development in North American families to self development in Asian families (1989, 1996, 2005). In North American families, he said, the child grows up with what he called an “I-self.” This is because the focus of the family is on the child, the child’s well-being. This matters above all. Thus how well the child does in school, in athletics, etc., having been so important to the family, becomes important to the child him/herself. Only his/her success makes a difference, rather than family success.

In contrast, the child in Asian families, is not the primary focus, according to Roland. It is the reputation of the family that counts. What the child accomplishes is perceived as the family’s accomplishment. In addition, built- in reciprocal expectations, deference to elders, loyalty, and obedient receptivity, exist within the family (Roland, 1996, p. 463). The wish to please, to fit in to expectations, to be well “mirrored,” by other family members goes on all the time. When such positive “mirroring” is absent, great emotional pain (shame/humiliation) can result. In Asian cultures, according to Roland, it is the well-being of the family that counts and family humiliation that is feared. The individual child

always contributes to this family “we-self” in one way or another. Regard for positive mirroring from the family continues well into adult life.

In considering families from Central America, I have used Roland’s model to understand the ways in which a child develops a sense of him or herself. In families from Central America, it seems, it is the positive gaze of the idealized husband/father, to which the mother defers. It is his good regard, therefore, that the children seek and around which they construct a sense of themselves. It is also the father’s well-being, his status in the community, that everyone tries to support. The family is thus a father-centric one and it is an idealized “*father-loved-self*” that is the goal of development for the child. Without his positive “mirroring,” the child thinks, (s)he will have no place either at home or in the outside world. Indeed, the idealized image of the father is so crucial, that, when he is, in actuality, cruel, mean, alcoholic, the family agrees, without words, to deny this, at least to the world outside. To do otherwise would be too humiliating for family members to bear.

Case Examples

Here let me present two cases which I hope will exemplify my perspective. I want to compare Rosa and Nicolle, both of whom I met in the prison in Texas described above. Both of the women I will describe were educated, one thru 3 years of university, the other thru two degrees, a baccalaureate and a master degree. I begin with the latter, Nicolle.

Nicolle, intelligent and appealing, had married “late” (at thirty), because singleness was unacceptable to her family. She was the youngest of her father’s five children and his favorite. Although a popular person, only one man had ever wanted to marry her. Although at first she had disliked this man, she had convinced herself otherwise because her father liked him. He was the son of someone respectable, with whom her father had served in the military.

Nicolle’s father himself had been an upstanding, successful business man, as well as high ranking in the military. But at home, he had badly mistreated her older siblings and yelled regularly at their mother, insisting that without him, she would never have had a life. Their mother meanwhile (a very religious woman) had raised her two daughters to

believe it was the wife's duty to serve her spouse, no matter what. But, perhaps as a reflection of changing times, this mother had also insisted that her husband pay for his daughters to go to school.

Although Nicolle had been well educated, she followed her mother's agenda when it came to marriage. She travelled with the man her father had chosen for her to the U.S. and married him there, whereupon her husband, far less intelligent and less educated than she, had reduced her to working as a domestic, took all the money she earned, isolated her from others and began to beat and sexually misuse her on a regular basis. This caused her great shame, but she did not ask for help, even from the priest in her local town, a man she liked.

Later, when they returned to their home country, Nicolle learned that her older sister had divorced her husband. As a result, this sister was barely welcomed by their father in his home. Nicolle meanwhile hid the bruises her own husband created beneath her clothes. He also manipulated her in order to secure loans from her father. Much of the money he garnered this way he spent on alcohol, while she worked hard in order to support their family, which at this point included a daughter. To tell anyone would have been too humiliating, she said, first to her and then to her father, a man who presented himself as the patriarch of a large, loving and collaborative family.

It was only when her father finally died that Nicolle had been able to liberate herself. Once he was dead, she could no longer humiliate him, nor did she need his good opinion of her. She was free to divorce. Her husband's abuse, meanwhile, had become so severe that she believed he was going to kill her. Thus gradually, with her mother's help, she got up the courage to leave home and come again to the United States, bringing her daughter with her. Once in the U.S., she applied for political asylum from the prison site in which they were placed.

In this vignette it seems that it was attachment to her father, fear of losing his love and respect, as well as fear of humiliating him, that kept Nicolle from putting her own well-being first. Without the positive regard of her father, her sense of herself would have been devastatingly diminished.

As for her mother, once her husband was dead, this mother – who had previously insisted that women need to sacrifice themselves for their man, – helped her daughter

gather the resources she needed to leave her husband. Thus, once the father was dead, something seemed to have changed inside the mother as well.

Rosa is my second example. In Rosa's story, we see the hold that machismo has quite differently.

Rosa, a pretty, articulate, young woman, sought me out in the prison because she said she had a "problem." She seemed very good humored indeed, given that she and her nine years old son had just recently completed a journey which she described, in passing, as «hard: it was very cold; we had little to eat; we slept in caves.» We met, she and I, in an undecorated prison office, crowded because it contained a huge metal desk, five chairs, and three stacks of large, unopened boxes.

Rosa, I learned, came originally from the countryside. Her parents were dead. Her only sibling, a sister, had been living in town with her. Rose, however, was the only one in her family who had sought higher education, which she paid for herself, using some of the proceeds from her job.

But her "problem," she said, concerned her relationship with her nine-year old son. His father, with whom Rosa had lived, although they had not married, had beaten her and her boy too, less severely, week after week while they were still at home. When finally, she, her son and her sister had daringly moved to an apartment of their own, the boy's father had broken in. He had thrown their new furniture into the street, claiming he owned it, claiming he owned her as well. The epitome of humiliation for her, she acknowledged, occurred when he had shown up at her job on his motorcycle and dragged her into the street. There he had beaten her publicly, leaving her lying wounded on the pavement as he rode off. Her co-workers had then taken her to the hospital where recovery proceeded slowly. This event convinced her to leave. She knew, she said, that her partner was crazy and nothing she could do could save him.

Once she had decided to flee, her son seemed glad to be going. He would be safe, finally, from his brutal father. But at the same time, perhaps to hold onto an image of an idealized father and diminish their separation, perhaps to right the wrongs his father had done to him, he began to play the role of the humiliator himself. He began using the age-old mechanisms of shame and humiliation (devastating tools, notoriously used in the denigration of women) to control and manipulate his mother just as his father had done.

When she refused to give him the things he wanted, he threatened to tell the other women incarcerated with them about her victimization at the hands of his father. At age nine he already knew just how powerful humiliation can be when used by a male of any age to control a woman, at least in the culture from which he came.

Her “problem,” she said, was how to handle this. So far, whenever her son had used this shaming device, she had not given in. Instead, she had told him that she was proud of what she had done. His father was wrong to have abused them, she had told him. She had brought them to America to save them both.

But, she wondered, was this the right thing to say? She wasn’t sure. Would it be better for him, whom she had deprived of the father he loved, and of his home, to be able to experience some machismo at least, (she used that word) to feel a little like his father, to feel the power of humiliating her? Should she, in fact, be giving in to his demands, she wondered... or not?

So here is Rosa, with no father of her own holding her back, who had fled an abusing partner to save herself and her child. And still she wondered if she had the right to deny her son the machistic tradition to which he was heir because of his father, the power to humiliate her! In response, I did my best to quiet her concerns on the subject, at least temporarily.

«Yes!» I answered; «Yes, you are doing the right thing! You were enormously brave; you saved him and yourself. You are right to tell him how proud you are of what you’ve done, proud that you stood up for yourself and for him! Maybe someday,» I added, by this time out of breath, «he will understand.»

She wept in response. «Thank you» she said. «Some of the women here see it differently. They think I should give in, so he can think well of his father, despite what his father did to us. I am glad we met». At this point her son, who had been attending the prison’s school, burst into the room, glared at me, and ran over to stand in front of his mother, perhaps to protect her. She stood up to leave and hugged me goodbye. They left together, holding hands.

Here we have seen just how much the customs of machismo still had a hold on Rosa. Although her beliefs seemed to have changed, in order to hold on to these changes she needed time, space, perhaps some witnessing (Laub, 2014) and support. Without a place

to reflect on her situation, to consider the trauma in her past and the choices presented by the route she had taken, the pressure to revert to her previous submissive position was intense. It was perhaps the only way she had to “see” clearly what she had endured. Given this, I hope Rosa will be able to find the on-going space, time, witnessing, support that she needs.

Conclusions

I have tried here to accomplish a number of tasks. I wanted to explain how human rights, yours and mine, and those of asylum seekers are protected by laws, and how those laws are being disregarded all over the world. I wanted to describe the present refugee crisis that we, in the United States are in the midst of, how we are “catching,” women on the run from terrible violence and abuse, in Central America and also Mexico. Finally, I wanted to try to better understand how it is that the specifically Latino version of female abuse, summarized by the word, machismo, continues to hold women and children in its grasp. To do this I have nodded in the direction of psychoanalytic self-psychology. This, in conjunction with the lack of space to reflect on family abuse, often seems to lead to its repetition in the next generation.

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