Salvadorians: Their Wounded Souls _ Historical Oppression Resilience and Resistance

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Resilience and Resistance

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Abstract: The legacy of colonization and oppression experienced by Salvadorian immigrants in their country of origin continues to influence their social and economic integration into Canadian society. Moreover, the vast majority of Salvadorians immigrated to Canada only within the last two decades to escape a brutal civil war, and had to settle without the support of an established Salvadorian community. Using the Salvadorian community in one Southwestern Ontario city as a case-study, this paper examines the challenges brought on by these factors in the development of a unified ethnic community in their new home. It also reports on how Salvadorians’ sense of agency has helped them reclaim their legacy of historical oppression, allowing them, in some cases, to develop a collective voice through the process of acculturation.

Keywords: Salvadorians, Collective Trauma, Resilience, Resistance, Refugees

This paper discusses how the legacies of socio-political and historical factors experienced by Salvadorians in their country of origin continue to influence their social and economic incorporation process into Canadian society. More specifically, it discusses how these factors influence the development of a unified ethnic community after migrating to another country in which there is not a settled Salvadorian community to support them in their settlement process. Lastly, it reports how Salvadorians’ sense of agency has assisted them in their process of re-claiming their legacy of historical oppression, hence to bounce back resiliently in order to develop their collective voice.

Historical Oppression

To understand the processes through which people of Latin American origin make meaning of their lives, we must understand their history of oppression, which includes discrimination based on race, gender, and class (Comaz-Diaz, Lykes, & Alarcon, 1998). Salvadorians have experienced intensive and extensive oppression related to historical subjugation, including colonialism and subsequent repressive military governments (Montgomery, 1995; Wiarda & MacLeish-Mott, 2003). During the Spanish Conquest, missionary forces brutally forced Catholicism on the indigenous people (Ramirez, 1977). Catholicism significantly shaped the gender relationships at the time. Women were considered less valuable than men (Galeano, 1980).

Another significant feature of the colonizing forces, which has had a lasting impact on gender relations among Salvadorians, was Catholicism. During the Spanish Conquest, missionaries brutally forced Catholicism on the indigenous people (Ramirez, 1977). Catholicism significantly shaped the gender relationships at the time. Women were considered less valuable than men (Galeano, 1980).

Though the Colonial period has long since ended, the legacy of the Spaniards remains evident today. The history of oppression has been passed down through generations of Salvadorians by means of an oral tradition, and has permeated Salvadorian cultural beliefs (Gutierrez, 1993). The result is that some of the original religious beliefs and cultural traditions of the indigenous peoples have changed, while others have been practiced in secret, as a form of resistance. The response to the trauma of colonization has also influenced values and relational patterns among family members and within communities. For example, people have learned that in order to be safe, they need to value obedience to authority figures (Carranza, 2007a). Moreover, Salvadorian cultural traditions have been affected to the extent that inequalities based on race, class, and gender remain...
firmed embedded in Salvadorian society. Women continue to be disadvantaged with respect to employment and leadership roles, and people belonging to higher socio-economic strata are considered more important, granted more respect, and are considered “somebody” within the family and the community (Menchu, 1998; Moane, 1999; Tula, 1994; Urbina, 1994).

Recent Oppression of War and Trauma

El Salvador was engaged in a long and bloody civil war from 1980 to 1992, which affected everyone living in El Salvador during this time (Martin-Baro, 1996; Uncles, 1994). During this period, the Salvadorian Army unleashed “death squads” to stop suspected communist leaders of the popular resistance movements. The church, universities, and political groups pushing for democratic reforms were subject to persecution and torture by the military (Castaneda, 1993; Castro, 1999).

The violence that accompanies civil wars does not respect social class, gender, race, or age. In El Salvador, thousands of civilians lost their lives at the hands of death squads, stray bullets, and bombs. People searched the streets daily for family members who had mysteriously disappeared. The massacre of entire villages was commonplace. According to Goulden (1991), between 1980 and 1982 almost 70,000 non-combatant civilians were assassinated by death squads or killed by military attacks on villages alleged to be sympathetic to revolutionary groups. An additional 7,000 people disappeared and more than one million fied the country. An estimated 70,000 internal refugees were displaced from their homes, and 1,000 individuals were incarcerated as political prisoners. In short, it was a time of horrendous violence and destruction.

As a result, most Salvadorians experienced some form of psychological trauma (Martin-Baro, 1996). According to Herman (1997) psychological trauma is “an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma the victims are rendered helpless by an overwhelming force. Traumatic events devastate the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning (p. 33).” Traumatic experiences can result in a series of personal difficulties, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which hinders the emotional development of individuals and their families (Leslie, 1993; Veer van der, 1992).

Martin-Baro (1996) argues that in the case of Salvadorians, the symptoms related to PTSD (i.e., hyper-vigilance, mistrust, and paranoid behaviours) are a realistic response to the social situation in which they lived for decades. According to Martin-Baro, the long-term result of these oppressive circumstances is the dehumanization of social relations. Salvadorians have learned to mistrust the state as an institution. They recognize that governments that are supposed to protect them actually create structures and ideologies to maintain power and control. Martin-Baro calls this a “veil of lies” (p. 120), and argues that Salvadorians responded to the “veil of lies” with collective resistance, which he labeled a “veil of mistrust.” The latter is embedded in their psyche: they tend to mistrust everyone who cannot prove they are on the “same side.”

While this form of resistance has enabled Salvadorians to protect themselves from the ideology of the state and those employed by it, the combination of the “veil of lies” and the “veil of mistrust” has led to social polarization:

War implies social polarization, the displacement of groups toward opposite extremes…A critical split is produced in the framework of coexistence leading to a radical differentiation between “them” and “us” where “they” are from the onset “the bad guys,” and we” are the “good guys.” (Martin-Baro, 1996, p. 112-113)

This social polarization expanded throughout all sectors of Salvadorian society during the civil war. At this time, individual survival demanded self-identification with a group: “Are you one of us, or are you one of them?”

In brief, long-term oppression has led Salvadorians to display behaviours related to collective trauma. For the purpose of this paper, collective trauma is defined as the result of some form of violence and oppression toward the individual with the intent to disperse the collective functioning of entire communities (e.g., colonization and civil wars). The injury of social and/or psychological trauma embedded in the memory of the collective, prevents individuals coming from the same group from joining in solidarity to resist oppressive circumstances. As a long-lasting effect of collective trauma, group members’ ability to work together and live in harmony for the benefit of the entire community may be hindered. The effects of collective trauma may present themselves in subtle ways, for example, in the mistrust among community members. It has been argued that collective trauma influences group identity and may force members of an affected community to live with shame and/or at the margins of a specific society (Carranza, 2007b).

Salvadorian Migration to Canada

Millions of Salvadorians fled to North America during the civil war (1980-1992). They came in search of a safe haven (Kusnir, 2005). Approximately 3,000 refugee-seekers came to Canada between 1982
and 1983, directly from El Salvador. A second wave, of approximately 7,000 people, arrived during the mid–1980s and included people who had first illegally settled in the United States. In more recent years, Salvadoran immigrants have arrived more gradually through Canada’s family re-unification program (Da, 2002). A total of 33,860 El Salvadorian people came to Canada between 1974 and 2001, making them a relatively small group compared with other immigrant groups to Canada (Garcia, 2006).

Salvadorian immigrants to Canada came from various regions of their home country, but most are from low socio-economic classes. They have very different political commitments; some supported the military, others were revolutionaries. Many lived for some time in a transitional country before settling in Canada, such as the US, Mexico, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, or Cuba (Carranza, 2007a).

For the most part, Salvadorians were welcomed upon arrival. Some had the support of church congregations, including Lutheran, Mennonite, United Church, and Jehovah’s Witness congregations. They were entitled to receive government assistance, such as English language classes and employment and settlement counseling. Although the overall context of their reception was supportive, the initial refugees arrived during an economic recession when few jobs were available, making it difficult for many to acquire employment (Da, 2002).

Salvadorians Negotiating their Social Incorporation in Canada: A Case Study

The specific social-geographical context of this paper is a medium-sized city in Southwestern Ontario. This is one of the fastest growing communities in Ontario, with a population of approximately 500,000, of which approximately 92,775 individuals are foreign–born (Region of Waterloo, 2004). This region has the fifth largest per capita immigrant population. Historically, immigrants came here mostly from European Countries: the United Kingdom, Portugal, Germany, and Poland. Newer arrivals are from Yugoslavia, China, Bosnia and Herzegovina, India, Romania, and South and Central America. Refugees comprise 18.3% of the city’s population, almost 7% higher than the national average (Region of Waterloo, 2004).

In spite of the fact that this city is multi-ethnic, it does not have the degree of diversity found in larger urban centres. The Spanish-speaking community is relatively small compared with Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, where a large number of immigrants and refugees from Latin America have settled. In a small city, there may be less acceptance of racial/ethnic diversity and less understanding of refugee experiences. The vast majority of city residents are of white European background; their very different migration paths may mean that Salvadorians, in addition to being relatively isolated, meet with little understanding of their trauma and losses.

Religious groups conducting missionary work in El Salvador, among them, the Lutherans and Mennonites sponsored many Salvadorians arriving in Southwestern Ontario. Members of these groups were aware of the armed conflict, and their first-hand knowledge led to active sponsorship of refugees. Other religious groups joined in (e.g., Baptists); some rallied settlement and financial support for arriving refugees (Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, Evangelicals). Amnesty International sponsored small minorities of refugees; political prisoners and alleged “communists” were among these. Other came as army deserters. Some came as refugee claimants and others as government-assisted sponsored refugees (Carranza, 2007a).

Salvadorian families brought with them the psychological wounds suffered as a result of the civil war and its concomitant violence (Martin-Baro, 1996; Paniagua, Crespin, Guardado, & Mauricio, 2005). There was no established Salvadorian community to welcome or support the first wave of refugees. They had to face the challenge of living with another language, another culture, and another climate without the help of a community of co-ethnics. They quickly sought jobs, and those who were able to join the work force often worked for low wages. Their Salvadorian credentials and experience were not valued in Canada and as a result many faced sharp downward mobility (Da, 2002). They also sacrificed advancing their professional careers in order to support family members who had immigrated and those left behind (Carranza, 2007a).

In the following section I draw upon my work with the Salvadorian Association as well as my own observations as an educator, community organizer, advocate, and family therapist. My work with this community has taken place over a period of approximately twelve years. Therefore, it highlights, not only Salvadorians struggles, but also their patterns of resilience and resistance as they forged a unified community in what was not always a welcoming environment.

Challenges

Leaders within the Salvadorian community have made several attempts to bring the community together through an official grassroots organization, The Salvadorian Association. Their goal has been to improve the quality of life of community members in order to support full participation in Canadian society. Though the Association has been established, to date, their attempts to unify the community have
largely failed. Quite simply, they face too many challenges, many of which appear to stem from the collective trauma and history of oppression that the community has experienced.

**Political Polarization**

The political divisions among Salvadorians living in this specific settlement site have posed significant barriers to community organization. These divisions generally split the community into three groups: proponents of the left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberacion National (FMNL); supporters of the present Salvadorian government, considered right-wing; and those with no political affiliation. Supporters of the left-wing movement are officially organized and host events that support the resistance movement and honour those who have fallen in the civil war. Proponents of the present Salvadorian government refuse to participate in any social and/or cultural events that may lend any kind of support to the left wing in El Salvador. Salvadorians who do not want to associate with any group involved in politics tend not to participate in any social and/or cultural gathering.

These divisions echo the legacy of mistrust developed in El Salvador and cause community members to reproduce the same “us or them” mentality in their new home. For example, at a community gathering to raise funds to support the FMNL, a woman said:

> It is hard to trust people here. You don’t know who is who [referring to political affiliation]…I mean when I go to community meetings I have to watch what I say because I don’t know what group they belong to like the left or the right. I have to be with my back against the wall watching over my shoulder all the time…I do not really like going to community meetings but I have to go sometimes just to see what is going on.

A Salvadorian community leader expressed similar sentiments:

> It is so hard for Salvadorian people to come together for a common cause. We’re still fearful like if we were back home [El Salvador]…We’re so few here and we’re all dispersed along many religious and past political affiliations…It seems that we cannot let go of our past… It keeps haunting us.

Although the danger has passed, the veil of mistrust and social polarization resurfaces when Salvadorians socialize with co-ethnics. Their perception of being unsafe in the company of other Salvadorians prevents them from coming together collectively.

**Loyalty to Sponsoring Religious Congregations: Fragmented Communities**

Similar to political divisions, religious affiliation also poses a challenge to the unification of the Salvadorian community in Canada. Most Salvadorian immigrants were raised as Catholics (Menjivar, 1999), but many joined their sponsoring church out of a feeling of gratitude as the following comment makes clear:

> I was raised Catholic, you know. My mother, my grandmother…my family has been Catholic for many generations…I am not now…well I am…It’s complicated… They [Catholics] became involved in politics back home [El Salvador] and I don’t like that. I went to church to pray not to plot against the government. I go to the Mennonite church now. I like it there. They are very nice people. They helped me and my family a lot when we first came here. It was so hard then. They helped us without even knowing us. We were complete strangers and they did not care. They still helped us. I am very thankful. So we joined their church, but I still feel Catholic… See that’s why I say it is complicated… I try to stay away from Catholics. I mean I don’t socialize outside my congregation.

Another woman commented:

> I am Mormon now, but I was raised Catholic. My entire family is still Catholic. I go to the Mormon congregation, but I am still Catholic at home…I mean I have my saints in my bedroom in case someone from the congregation comes to visit me. I’ll get in trouble if they see that…but I am so thankful to them…I can’t socialize with other Salvadorians. My community is my church and the people that go there…There are other Salvadorians there too but they like me do not go to any social activity organized by the Salvadorian Association.

Although joining a supportive church group may have contributed positively to Salvadorian socialization in a Canadian context, the separation from co-ethnics has had a negative impact on an already fragmented ethnic group. More specifically, Salvadorians have joined a wide range of church groups, and it appears that the diversity of religious affiliations within a very small ethnic group has hindered the development of a cohesive Salvadorian community in this specific region.

**Classism, Racism, and Sexism**

Expressions of racism towards those with darker skin and with indigenous features among the Salvadorian
community are prevalent in this Salvadorian community. Classism is another marked feature of Salvadorians in the case city. They tend to hold those belonging to higher economic strata in higher regard. For example, nomination and election to the Board of Directors for the local Salvadorian Association is often based on skin colour and social class, even if the people elected do not have the skills to perform the expected tasks. Consequently, there is a constant delay of needed work, such as planning, training, and writing of proposals that would benefit the Salvadorian community.

Salvadorians come from a traditional patriarchal society in which women are considered inferior to men. Nevertheless, most Salvadorian women successfully organize such events as prayer groups and family functions. One might argue that these skills are needed within a grassroots organization. However, women are not nominated for election to the Salvadorian Association’s Board of Directors. The women present at meetings tend to remain quiet and to clean up after the men. When single or divorced women come to their meetings and ask questions, the men tend to ignore them. These women generally do not come back, even if they are interested in participating in the group’s decision-making process.

To conclude, Salvadorians have carried across borders their legacy of colonization and trauma related to recent war. This comes up in subtle ways through their classist, sexist and prejudice behaviours and the political polarization that resulted from psychological warfare. This is compounded with the fragmentation of their ethnic community due to their loyalty to their sponsoring congregation. All these factors significantly hindered the development of their collective voice and by in large their social incorporation in this specific site.

In spite of the many challenges Salvadorians have faced, I observed much resilience among community members and noted that many have developed strong resistance to oppressive circumstances. In some cases, the Salvadorian Association has been able to leverage this resistance as a unifying force within the community.

**Reclaiming their History of Oppression**

As a way of bringing Salvadorians together regardless of race, class, and political and religious affiliations, the Salvadorian Association’s Board of Directors has begun to celebrate several specific events. They choose events that have significance for many; for example, El Salvador’s Independence Day on September 15, and the anniversary of the death of their martyr, Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero (assassinated on March 23, 1980). Celebratory feasts including traditional dishes such as pupusas, tamales, elotes locos, and panes con pavo are important features of these events. Families bring their children to hear stories about *la vida Salvadoreña* (Salvadorian life) and to play traditional games, such as piñatas.

The life and death of Romero is often celebrated with a religious service conducted in English and Spanish and carried out by several religious leaders, including Lutheran, Mennonite, and Baptist ministers, and a Catholic priest. In the audience and in a reserved area are other religious leaders, including representatives from the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons.

In such memorial services, young Salvadorians born abroad or in Canada have an opportunity to reenact the life and death of their leader. A Salvadorian youth commented:

> I think it is important that we remember our hero. He was a great man who fought for human rights: for his people. He took a stand against the Salvadorian and the American government. It cost him his life…He was a great man…I think it is important that we Salvadorians don’t forget our history of oppression…This is what has made us who we are now. We need to be proud.

A Salvadorian man added:

> It is hard to see this [play]. It makes me remember so many things. The murder of so many people that I knew. I mean some many of my friends died. They took pleasure in killing innocent people I think. It is hard to see but I bring my wife [of a different race] and my children so she knows part of the history where I come from and my children start to learn their history too.

One of the organizers stated:

> Our goal is to celebrate together the life and death of our martyrs. We need to tomar conciencia [to be conscious] of our history because *El pueblo que olvida su historia, está condenado a morir* [people that forget their history are destined to die].

Reclaiming their history and celebrating their traditions brings Salvadorian people together. Such events hold the promise of unifying Salvadorians regardless of political or religious stance, race, class, age, and gender.

**Ethnic Pride**

As the above comments make clear, the result of such efforts to reclaim history is an increased sense...
of ethnic pride. Not all efforts are public, however. In the privacy of their homes, mothers actively teach ethnic pride to their children. One mother of an adolescent daughter I spoke with stated:

I think it is important that my children know their roots—like our history of oppression. They need to know this because we are new here [Canada]. We are first generation Salvadorian immigrants. Therefore, people will always see us with *la tortilla en la frente* [a tortilla on our forehead]. We are a mixed race; indigenous and Spaniards. Some of us look more indigenous than others but we’re all the same. *Todos hemos sido un pueblo oprimido* [We have all been oppressed as people]. There is not shame in that but pride…Pride because we have bounced back. We’re done so throughout our history of resistance…It is important that my kids know so they see us and themselves in a different light. We might be down now, as a group I mean, but we’re new here. We’re still finding our way.

The mother of an adult daughter commented:

We’re not many here, but I think that it is important that my children maintain their mother tongue Spanish. It is important that they learn our cuentos [tales] and our leyendas [legends] like the *sihuana a*, *el zipitío*, *el cadejo*, *la carreta chillona*. I tell them stories about la vida Salvadoriana and how things are different here.

An adult daughter added:

We come in all colours—I mean some of us look very indigenous. Others look more European with blue eyes and blond hair. We’re so diverse. Our culture is so rich. We have taught the Anglos a thing or two…Look at so many people wanting to learn to dance our music. I never took a dance lesson in my life. It comes naturally to me. I guess most of us are born with a sense of rhythm…I came here when I was little. I speak English very well. I have a career. Canada is my home now, but I will always be Salvadorian until the time I die. I am reminded of that when I go out on the streets…There are a lot of racist people here, but there are also a lot of good people. Racism used to hurt me when I did not know who I was and where I come from. I know that I come from a group of people that were strong…like the Mayans and the Aztecs. Their strength runs through my sangre Latina [Latina blood].

Salvadorians in this region actively nourish their ethnic pride. Women tend do so more in the privacy of their home: Men more so in the public arena, celebrating important cultural markers. Ethnic pride brings Salvadorians together; it also seems to buffer the effects of the racism and prejudice they encounter in Canada (Carranza, 2007a, 2007c).

**Developing Critical Consciousness and “Solvencia Moral” [Moral Sovereignty]**

In 2005, with financial assistance from the local United Way and a local foundation, the Salvadorian Association’s Board of Directors was able to attend a number of workshops on leadership training, finances, marketing, and fund raising. As the training progressed, there were several setbacks because of board members’ classist, racist, and sexist attitudes. A trainer challenged them reflect on how the vestiges of colonization affected their daily social interactions and decision-making processes. After some deliberation, they accepted the challenge. The outcome was the resignation of all board members shortly thereafter. They called for a general assembly to inform the community about their decision. New members were nominated and elected. The new members included women, people with indigenous features and of diverse economic strata. A resigning board member said the following:

It was embarrassing for me and others to learn that we fought against this kind of oppression in El Salvador and here we were doing the same thing to others… It was painful but we all got together and decided that nobody on the board had solvencia moral [lack of moral sovereignty] to continue doing the job. So we decided to step down. It was the only decent thing to do. We’ll be around the new elects to support them.

Some members of the former BOD also talked about their ethnocentrism and how this had gotten in the way of their work. The community decided to launch a new organization that would act as an umbrella organization for all small Spanish-speaking groups. They held a public general assembly to name and elect their representatives. People of different Latin American countries were elected, including Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela, and Panama. The former members of the Salvadorian Association’s Board of Directors provided support for the initial development of this new grassroots organization. They shared their resources, and established support network with funding agencies and local government officials.

However, there were more setbacks, and intergroup conflict soon manifested itself. It appeared that the difficulties were rooted in the historical
fragmentation of Latin American countries. For example, the new members of the Salvadorian Association’s board members reported that board members of the new umbrella organization, who were of South American heritage, were displaying prejudicial and discriminatory behaviour. They said that they were excluding Salvadorians in meetings and decision-making. After several confrontations and interventions, the Salvadorian Association decided to part ways with the umbrella organization.

The Salvadorian Association has started to work in collaboration with members of other Central American countries on an informal level. In this collaboration, Salvadorian board members have taken leadership roles, inviting other Central Americans to participate. This shift in organizational development appears to be less confrontational, arguably because people of Central American heritage have more in common regarding their history of colonization and oppression. They also share a collective experience of marginalization by South American countries.

Conclusion

Salvadorians in Canada face marginalization from other Latin American groups and from native-born Canadians. A small grant from the United Way allowed members of the board of the Salvadorian Association to build a capacity for self-reflection and critical thinking. Perhaps if more funding were available for ethnic groups from developing countries, and with similar historical legacies, their incorporation into the settlement country and their sense of belonging would be enhanced.

The Salvadorian community is in the process of finding a collective voice within its new social context. Community members are negotiating their identity as a new ethnic group in Canadian society. This is occurring while community members are negotiating their own individual and familial acculturation process in what they perceive to be a, sometimes, hostile environment created by anti-immigrant sentiment.

Refugees bring to their settlement countries their historical legacies. These are the source of both, challenges and resilience. Future research and interventions with Salvadorians need to be based on an understanding of their history of oppression, resilience and resistance to oppressive circumstances. Their socio-political location as an ethnic group within the Americas also needs to be taken into account.

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**About the Author**

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Mirna E. Carranza, B.S.W. (University of El Salvador), M.T.S. (Wilfrid Laurier University) and Ph. D. (c) (University of Guelph). Family Relations & Human Development. She was recently appointed as a full-time faculty at the School of Social Work, McMaster University. As a community organizer and developer she has initiated many projects aiming to enhance the inclusion of immigrants and refugees in their settlement communities. Her research program includes the acculturation process of immigrants & refugees as family units moving through time. She has recently completed a study that examined the acculturation process of Salvadorian mothers and their daughters. She has conducted community projects such as the settlement experiences of survivors of torture and their struggles with mental health providers. Her international research projects include: ALGES (Association of Disable people who served in the Salvadorian civil war). The focus of this study is to enhance our understanding about the impact of the civil war in family relations.
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