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Overcoming violence through a democratic and dialogical process

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Abstract

In this article, I present a way of understanding how to overcome violence through dialogue and the democratic organization of group relations. The goal is to discuss how this approach to overcoming violence in an NGO (non-governmental organization) revealed the need to be flexible, to listen to each other, and to be willing to create a new unknown path together with the students by developing the activities to overcome violence (AOV). The objective of the AOV was to change the interpersonal relationships in the organization, to make it a place of co-existence for the children and adults, and to overcome this preponderant form of relational violence. I present actual events that took place at a Brazilian NGO specifically founded to provide care for children at social risk. The project I designed at the NGO focused on the (re-)organization of teaching activities and daily life as a community practice creating a community as a space where the relationships among the participants could become more democratic. The idea was to transform the power and individualistic domination of the NGO's teachers, coordinators, or founders into shared power relationships established through democratic and dialogical processes.

The expected result was that the young attendees of the NGO would become community authors of their own life in the institution and have more personal autonomy. this process also showed us that while we could transform reality, the reality was also transforming our expectations. The very dynamics of the dialogical process require openness in the sense that one cannot predefine the goals according to one's wishes. One has to be ready to accept the new, unexpected issues that may arise through dialogues and change initial objectives. In any case, I would reckon that one cannot strictly control the dialogical process. For this reason, the means and instruments, as well as the procedures for the AOV have to be understood, created, and reinvented during the process by the participants themselves and not by a single person prior to the AOV. The results showed that an action plan and instruments could only be suggested as a guide during the events, but not as an a priori condition, independent of all those involved in the actions taken.[1]

Keywords*: Psychology; Education; Violence, Dialog, Group Process.*

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Introduction

Social relationships established through power and domination can produce violent actions by individuals in a general context and in particular situations. It is from this perspective that the report and analyses presented here describe the creation of NGO[2] for the education of children at social risk. In the context of the power and domination relationships, individuals subjected to certain conditions against their own will make continuous efforts to resist or try to dominate their opponents. Therefore, in my opinion, conflicts that emerge between different individuals could probably be seen as attempts to control or nullify each other's power or to gain independence. These conflicts may emerge as a result of individuals' drive to achieve some form of dominance over one another.

In this article, I claim that social relationships of power and domination derive from our creative capacity to produce our own life and, therefore, from our acquired skills to perform actions using historically developed tools and meanings. In this sense, a person acquires power when he or she adopts the cultural means to participate and be the agent of his or her sociocultural existence. Therefore, the power established by individuals through their sociocultural existence cannot be confused with the agency itself. The development of sociocultural existence is actually the means by which individuals can be agents as social beings because to be an agent of your own life, you need to create ways to be an individual with your own personality. Domination refers, firstly, to the idea that individuals, through the acquisition of power, are able to guide, execute, and control their relationships with objects and social subjects, i.e., they can control their relationships creatively and effectively. Secondly, the power of mastering meanings and social means to act can lead a person to guide and manipulate the existence of other people.

This article presents an analysis of the context and circumstances that developed in the above-mentioned NGO that greatly affected the relationships of power and domination among its members. This includes events of significance for the people of the NGO and describes how a new meaning arose for them out of the circumstances. The article includes an analysis of my own actions undertaken for the purpose of overcoming violence among the organization's members.

A brief history and social circumstances of the NGO

The NGO in which I worked was created by a group of citizens concerned about the high number of children living in situations of social risk. These were children of different ages, ranging from five to sixteen, boys and girls, who attended the NGO activities together. They all attended regular schools because the law mandated it, but they did not like school. These children could be seen roaming the streets, asking for money, or engaging in shoplifting, mainly in the central area of the city. The residents who worked in or frequented the city center, mainly the local merchants, began to complain to politicians and the law enforcement system. As a result, a group of the city's politically influential people created the NGO with the intention of tackling this problem.

[2] The NGO (non-governmental organization) I describe is an organization in Birigui, São Paolo State, Brazil, that cares for children and youth at social risk. It was founded in 2001 by a group of citizens interested in promoting social inclusion. I will refer to it as the "NGO," rather than using its official name, for the sake of protecting various individuals' identities. Additional explanations of this NGO are provided further in the text.

The NGO was created in 2001 as a non-profit association in the city of Birigui, State of São Paulo, in Brazil. Its aim is to promote the protection of children and adolescents considered to be living in vulnerable situations and at social risk. For this purpose, it was planned to offer participants educational, creative, and cultural experiences aimed at improving their socialization into mainstream culture. The organization also tried to encourage community participation of the children's families in its work, which entailed social activities with the families to make them aware of the importance of the children's and youth's education and development as citizens.

According to the NGO's bylaws, it would promote the "common good" without prejudices of any kind, providing services free of charge. This means that the NGO would guarantee the contracting of teachers, social workers, psychologists, and any other type of professionals to attend to the participants. These internal rules were created in advance, before the participation of the members (children and youth, teachers, and other staff).

The NGO members were called 'volunteers' because they joined voluntarily due to their belief in the importance of the work performed by the NGO. They believed that those children truly needed to be educated to uphold the morality of their society. The members, referred to as 'volunteers,' were generally from the middle, upper middle, or upper classes. They were affiliated with various religions (Catholic, Evangelical Christianity, Spiritism, etc.) and organizations (e.g., Rotary Club, Freemasonry). They were considered to be the paragons of the ideal morality and culture held by the politically influential people in the city. According to this ideal, the children they wanted to bring into the NGO were supposed to be educated. But, for all its intentions and purposes, this ideal represented a local form of honesty, loyalty, and respect, which meant that the children at risk should become fit for the job market, subject to the values of this society. The children needed to learn what was right and wrong without asking questions by being amenable and obedient. This ideology, based on an authoritarian outlook, is already discernible from the fact that the NGO 'volunteers' prepared the internal rules in advance, without any participation of the future children or teachers, dictating to the children and the teachers what was right and what was wrong for them to do. However, the creators, who called themselves 'volunteers,' did not work directly with the children.

Some of these people volunteered at another institution called the Association of Prisoner Protection and Assistance (APAC). This institution aimed to provide social assistance to the families of inmates. Several children who were referred to our NGO were also children of inmates.

In order to create this NGO to obtain funds, materials, food, and other resources, the 'volunteers' used political forces, merchants, schools, public institutions, and donations from other residents. They created a social campaign to collect materials and aid in order to fulfill their objectives. With this, the people involved in the creation and maintenance of the organization developed an idealistic sense that they have the right and responsibility to organize and set goals, action plans, and content for the children's education. Thus, the NGO's guidelines focused on preventing delinquency and drug use and on protecting children from violence in their social environments and neighborhoods where they lived.

After the NGO was created, the parents were pressured by the NGO's creators to send the children to its out-of-school programs and activities. In this way, they wanted to guarantee that the children would participate in the NGO's activities for their education. The children were expected to go to the NGO in the morning right after leaving their homes, before the school opens, and after school was over in the afternoon. The general idea behind the NGO was that, on arrival, the children would get a meal, and then they were required to participate in the educational activities until it was time to go either to school in the morning or home in the afternoon, depending on the schedule.

One of the governmental institutions that supervise how children are raised and educated in families is the Child and Adolescent Guardianship Council. This public body is designed to protect the rights of children and adolescents. They warn parents when they receive reports of violations of children's rights or the mistreatment or socially inappropriate behavior of children. In the case I describe here, this public body forced the parents to keep the children in school and send them to the NGO's out-of-school programs. Failure to fulfill this responsibility could cause families to lose government benefits and be referred to the Guardianship Council for further assessment and intervention.

Thus, coming to the NGO's programs became compulsory for the children and youth created through the pressure of various social agents, such as the 'volunteers,' the Guardianship Council, and the children's own families. In the form of education through inculcation, they were required and expected to participate in activities to learn socially acceptable forms of behavior approved by the society of politicians, merchants, schools, public institutions, etc. For instance, "do not say bad words," "do not walk around without a shirt," "do not eat with your hands," and "do not hang out on streets offering people to watch their parked cars for some change" (the latter, a common practice in urban areas in Brazil).

However, the ideas and expectations that emerged through the discourse and guidance of the 'volunteers' and teachers, expressing their pressure on the children to become like them and acquire the same moral values, did not get realized as expected. The children, as mentioned, were placed in this new social context, where, ironically, they sadly suffered a form of violence inflicted on them by the very 'volunteers' themselves and their idealistic intentions to change the children's lives. This kind of violence can be understood through the words of Sánchez Vázquez (1977):

> Violence is manifested whenever a natural or a human object of human activity offers resistance; thus, it is characteristic of those activities the aim of which is to detain, change or overthrow a particular natural or social legality (Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 305).

The idea in this passage is that an act of violence is committed every time when a subject, motivated by his personal intentions, changes the particular form of existence of an object or another subject, considering it as an object. It is through this lens that we will consider the violence against the children and by the children in the NGO and in the external social contexts. For example, all the adults around the children, the parents, 'volunteers,' and politicians, among others, made decisions about the children's lives as if they were objects of the local society's personal, economic, or political interest. These decisions were imposed on the children regardless of their own interests or knowledge of what was happening.

In reaction against this kind of domination, the children began to behave violently on the very first day when they were forced to attend the NGO. They took over the building, broke doors and objects, climbed on the roof, threw some tiles off, and started to fight each other. Ironically, that kind of behavior only confirmed the 'volunteers'' worst stereotyping image of the children as "delinquents" or as having a natural inclination toward violence. Frightened, the 'volunteers' locked themselves in the principal's office and waited for the children to stop what they were doing.[3]

This tragic day confirmed to the 'volunteers,' politicians, merchants, and public institutions who participated in donations and maintained the NGO that those children needed to be "corrected." The

[3] This was reported to me by the employees who had been there at the time. As we will see, I volunteered at the NGO for one semester in the first year of its existence while I was studying psychology. I started as an employee psychologist in the third year after its establishment. I got some information about the NGO's early days from the staff reports.

'volunteers,' assisted by a judge, also a 'volunteer' in this NGO, wrote rules and regulations to control the children's behavior in the NGO. It was assumed that these rules would be enforced by teachers and that this would regulate and control the children's behavior. The intention was to make it possible for teachers to teach classes, provide moral education, and impart "good manners," copying the same subject and curriculum structure from the regular school.

Again, the endeavors of 'volunteers' and teachers to control or change the children's behavior resulted in failure. The children took control of the institution through physical violence and force, which were characteristic of their own world. For example, every teacher, coordinator, director, psychologist, and the social worker was assaulted or threatened by the children. The reports I heard were: "attacked by a chair," "punched in the belly," "kicked in the shin," and "spit in the face." I experienced the latter myself as well. Some children were able to threaten the teachers, saying that their father or uncle would kill them when they got out of prison. The teachers also experienced other types of threats and feared retaliation by the children's relatives, given that the NGO was located in the most dangerous neighborhood in the city.

Most of the time, the children managed to stay in charge of what they were and were not willing to do and of what they wanted things to happen in the NGO. The teachers, who were contracted on a salary, felt pressure from both sides: from the 'volunteers' because they were afraid to lose the jobs they so needed and from the threats of physical violence coming from the children and their parents. The result was that the teachers became rather disoriented and passive. They did not know what to do in this situation in order to remain in the organization for the salary they needed. The teachers were not teaching, either because the children completely ignored them or because the children fought among themselves or with the teachers using physical aggression. The children formed small groups that tried to control particular sections of the building. This became the reason the groups were in constant conflict with each other. Some of the more intimidating children, ages 9 to 15, whose parents or relatives were considered most dangerous, took control by threatening violence. The social influence and power of the children's families in the neighborhood and the NGO represented a very forceful, both real and symbolic power within the NGO.

Teachers continuously tried to take measures to gain control over fights, first asking the children to stop and then screaming at them. Sometimes, restraining the children by physical force became inevitable for them, but the children reacted back with force and physical aggression. It was difficult to control the children under the constant threat of physical injury and death that the children made to each other. To the teachers, these were not just mere figures of speech but real possibilities. As a result, the director and officials decided to remove all knives and forks and any other objects that could be turned into weapons. After that, children could only eat using spoons or hands, making it hard to cut meat and some other foods. There was only one knife in the kitchen, locked in a drawer, for the cook to use.

The following example paints a clearer picture of the intensity of this tension and violence. Often, while the principal, 'volunteers,' and teachers met to discuss important issues behind a locked door, some of the children would kick the door until they broke the lock, entering the room, grabbing papers and documents, mocking and threatening the people. Some days, a lock that was changed in the morning was broken again in the afternoon.

Many teachers and other professionals did not stay in the NGO for long. It was common for the 'volunteers,' who also taught courses or did other activities with the children, not to return after a few days of working with them. For example, in the course of just one year, 22 psychologists who started working or were hired for a trial period left the institution after a few days. Those who remained either lived in the neighborhood and already knew the children and their families, or they desperately needed to keep their jobs for lack of an alternative. In several cases, those who stayed did so by force of their life circumstances.

The ‘volunteers’ who founded the institution visited it systematically. During these visits, they tried to organize activities, imposing on the teachers and the students their own educational concepts and personal moral standards. In this way, they tried to institute a cultural model and values of their particular social milieu. Their values clearly contradicted the children’s reality, resulting in many misunderstandings and conflicts. Every time the ‘volunteers’ left for the day, these conflicts had to be resolved by the teachers, but almost never ended in success. Therefore, these visits were unproductive, and mostly they just disrupted relationships between the staff and children.

The ‘volunteers’’ moral values were questionable because the children’s actual lives were very different from theirs. For example, the ‘volunteers’ espoused the following moral principles: do not hurt others, do not lie, be honest, do not kill, etc. However, in the reality of the children’s lives, all these principles that the ‘volunteers’ believed to be an essential part of their middle-class social life were actually dangerous in the world of these children. In their reality, following these values could be life-threatening. In a setting where people attack, hurt, threaten, kill, and lie to survive, it can be dangerous to be different. The children grew up with very different, if not opposite, values: survival by all means, which includes hurting others, lying, and even killing. For example, B., a 9-year-old girl, kidnapped a cat from a middle-class neighborhood house and asked for a ransom of BRL 80.00. After negotiations with the cat’s owner, she returned the animal in exchange for BRL 60.00. Several children admired her for this, claiming that she was right to negotiate the ransom and do what she did because the cat was found on the street. It was impossible to demonstrate to her or to the other children that this way of getting money was dishonest. In the reality of this girl’s life, it was a good way to survive.

Sometimes, when the ‘volunteers’ left for the day, strong tensions would arise between the teachers and children. The power of those ‘volunteers’ and the values they promoted were an actual threat both to the children and teachers. On the one hand, the ‘volunteers’ provided the funding for the program, and the law was on their side. However, on the other hand, their cultural values, needs, and desires could only be applied by force on the children and teachers. This only added more violence to the NGO, violence that the ‘volunteers’ purported to be against. So, in this sense, the ‘volunteers’’ discourse remained a threat in the institution, even when they were not there—as a preponderant discourse of the power of the ruling class's social values.

Politicians, businessmen, schools, and public institutions criticized the performance of the NGO staff. There was constant talk that this NGO did not work well. The founding ‘volunteers’ were afraid of such negative judgment. As a result of this negative criticism, some of the donors began to cut their monthly contributions, and the NGO began to struggle to maintain itself. The employees and founding ‘volunteers’ held fundraising events.

The NGO was already going through difficult times when another episode happened, making the negative public assessment even worse. A female coordinator, who was trying to interrupt a fight between two adolescents, was wounded in the arm by a piece of wood they used as a weapon. She developed a severe infection that spread to other parts of her body and subsequently died. Approximately two years after its beginning, the NGO was facing potential closure. It was during this time that the general director invited me to work there and to attempt to salvage the situation.

The general director extended the invitation to me specifically because I have previously volunteered at the NGO for one semester. At the time, I was in the last year of psychology studies, and some of my fellow students who lived in the city wanted to help out at the NGO. However, the bad things they had heard made them afraid. They invited me to help and protect them. They were, on average, twenty years old while I was forty-four. We came together to work at the NGO as a group of seven psychology

students. However, a week later, I was the only one who remained. I stayed on as an intern there for six months. After I completed my degree in psychology, the general director invited me back. She pleaded with me: “If you do not help change the situation, the organization will close.” So I was contracted to solve the problem of violence and to create conditions for the children’s sociocultural development.

As the NGO’s psychologist, I positioned myself as part of the community. Gradually, I began to guide the teachers and other employees until I took on the role designated to me by the General director as the General coordinator of activities. This position allowed me to analyze the internal relationships in the NGO, propose changes, analyze results, and recalibrate the activities for the changes we expected.

Studying the origins and genesis of violence in the NGO and the suggested ways to overcome this violence required systematic observations and analysis of the group relationships. It also required suggestions on how to reorganize the activities to gradually achieve inclusion of the students in the process and sharing of decision-making power among all participants according to their activities. This was a cyclical process that took place similar to what is described by Matusov and Marjanovic-Shane (2015):

> Besides teacher epistemological authority, we see some other legitimate authorities in Democratic Dialogic Education (DDE). The first one is teacher pedagogical authority. It is a legitimate role of the teacher to design a pedagogical regime—learning activities for possible important learning experiences—for the students’ DDE. This imposed initial pedagogical design is usually based on the teacher’s past pedagogical experiences, past students’ inputs, the teacher’s anticipation of the new particular students in the particular time and place, the teacher’s own participation in the ongoing public historical pedagogical discourse, and the teacher’s educational philosophy and innovations. Also, the school institutions, local communities, historical and cultural traditions, and the larger society (via laws and regulations) often shape this pedagogical design introduced by the teacher. Again, this teacher's pedagogical authority should die and be resurrected in Democratic Dialogic Education. It should die as the students start taking responsibility for designing their own learning journey—i.e., the active exercising of their own self-generating authorial agency—that may involve rejection or modification of the teacher’s pedagogical design.” (Matusov and Marjanovic-Shane 2015, p. 199)

In my understanding, the movement I generated had the same essence of determining some ways to carry out activities grounded in theory, which I considered important for the children’s development, and, later on, also for the teachers and other staff. Nevertheless, the model imposed through my authority as a psychologist and coordinator needed to die, as explained by Matusov and Marjanovic-Shane (2015) above. In fact, it needed to be discussed, argued, rejected, and recalibrated through a dialogical process with the community’s participation. When the power to discuss, argue and suggest new kinds of relationships was shared among all the participants, my authority died, only to be reborn in them. With that, we could observe the process of growth of personal authority and agency of different community members in a complex cycle of affirmation, rejection, and recreation of relationships, where the ways to overcome violence could become the central theme.

The method was, therefore, establishing itself as a community process of everyone assuming responsibility for thinking of the changes needed to overcome violence and create a living space that would enable everyone’s development through a dialogical process. This was true not only for the children but for the teachers and staff of the NGO too. Thus, we could call this process a method of community development of social relationships.

What follows is an analysis of the plan I developed with the aim of overcoming this complicated situation within the NGO. As a psychologist, I organized my plan based on the cultural-historical psychology

of Lev S. Vygotsky and Alexis R. Leontiev, the theory of social psychology proposed by Sílvia T. Maurer Lane and Ignácio Martin-Baró, and the community psychology ideas of Maritza Montero. These theories composed the theoretical background on which I based my activities. Initially, the main idea was to organize activities that could generate some common goals for the people involved. The contradictions[4] resulting from the implementation of my ideas to control and determine goals for others, in the way I had internalized the theories, will become apparent further in this article.

A brief overview of the power/domination structure with systematic violence

To provide a clear understanding of the internal violence of the NGO, it is important to set the stage with an overview of the complicated and multilayered structure, shaped by public power, the interests of certain politicians and members of elite families, as well as the children's parents, 'volunteers,' and social systems—all intended to control the children and their out-of-school education and socialization. I argue that the way these groups acted shaped a structure that was one of the systematic causes of violence that erupted within the NGO. I call it a "structure" because I observed a systematic recurrence of the same type of social power and domination relationships that resulted in violence within the NGO.

The creation of the NGO, therefore, was shaped by groups that acted out of their own interests, regardless of the children's concrete lives, needs, and interests. In effect, the NGO founders were authoritarian groups. Theirs was a movement based on actions of the public authorities, guided by a judge, aimed at responding to the complaints received from business owners about poor children loitering in the town's commercial center. Some of the politicians joined the project alongside members of the high socioeconomic class, which reflected the way economically powerful families are able to get political advantages.

This movement was characterized by the use of force by public authorities and political powers to dictate socio-educative actions rooted in legal and economic power. For example, they could allocate financial resources towards forcing the parents and their children, by legal means, to apply to be part of the project. In fact, the NGO was granted the right to use a building that belonged to a company experiencing legal trouble by a court order. The politicians and elite families arranged fundraising activities for the project. That meant that the group who founded the NGO had the power and control of the sociopolitical and economic forces that served their interests, especially since these economic and political forces adhered to the idea of moral education based on their culture's values.

Such actions were driven by the 'volunteers'' interest in imposing their own educational values and behavioral standards on the children, as the only right ones, for preserving the society in which they lived. The 'volunteers' used legal power to control the parents and children who participated in the NGO's project. This use of force meant imposing restrictions on those with little or no economic and political power. In the face of such force, the parents and their children were completely powerless and had to endure and obey this situation.

Some children's parents submitted themselves to this situation because they needed the food and education provided to their children. They expected this to raise their children's social conditions. Other parents made their children participate just to avoid the visits and pressure from the police. Similarly, the

[4] Contradiction is understood here not as a formalist negation, but as a unit of movement in any relation in which its components are denied and affirmed at the same time as they are interdependently constituted. It reveals identity and otherness in unity and, therefore, the new that takes place in the movement between opposites and that changes their forms of existence. (Marino Filho, 2014, p. 07)

teachers submitted themselves to this public power for guaranteed employment. However, the teachers experienced additional pressures from some parents, to which they yielded power in fear of retaliation.

This circular and convoluted structure and system of violence in the NGO worked as follows: the representatives of public, political, and economic power were a threat to the teachers, parents, and children. In turn, parents who were involved in criminal activities posed a physical threat to the lives of the teachers. The Statute of the Child and the Adolescent (ECA) threatened poverty-stricken parents and families. The teachers threatened children to report them to their parents, who could punish them physically, or to use the Child and Adolescent Guardianship Council, which could take legal action against their parents. The children threatened each other and the teachers with verbal and physical violence.

Although various conclusions may be made based on these facts, I argue that the threats were the most important tool by which the groups tried to control each other. This threat-based system prevented open dialogue and democratic processes from being set in place in order to organize a shared life within the NGO. This was at the center of the problem that I was able to analyze based on my direct observations as the party to the situations and having to deal with these situations.

In the face of these circumstances, no matter how hard the teachers tried to start a dialogue with the different groups inside and outside the NGO, their efforts failed. The threats did not disappear. Moreover, it was also me who was a threat to all of them, and many times I realized that they actually felt I was a threat. However, I needed to use the power I was given in order to effectively bring about a transformation of the relationships at this NGO, as well as to create and guide individual and group activities.

Power is a force to move, transform, execute, orientate, and control the activity. Therefore, every living being needs the power to maintain their life towards a specific action from their species. For humankind, signs, tools, and instruments have a force as means to communicate skills and knowledge to produce their particular actions of cultural activity. In this sense, individual power rises from acquiring these cultural means.

Besides the natural forces, cultural means compound the system that we can call psychological that organizes and controls our behavior toward reality. For this reason, such a system is a power every individual needs to acquire to be a culturally accepted agent in their life. As Vygotsky (1987) analyzes Bleuler research's data on imagination,

> Speech frees the child from the immediate impression of an object. It gives the child the power to represent and think about an object that he has not seen. Speech gives the child the power to free himself from the force of immediate impressions and go beyond their limits. The child can express in words something that does not coincide with the precise arrangement of objects or representations. This provides him with the power to move with extraordinary freedom in the sphere of impressions, designating them with words (Vygotsky, (1987, p. 346).

For this reason, the action plan that I initially devised was focused on the system of power/domination as the center of the democratic process and dialogue as the center of the transformative process. Power and domination are conditions of existence. Every human being must have the power to guide, execute, and control the means of his or her existence in society, i.e., their own psychological system. This system is what constitutes the human being's power. When subjected to certain social conditions, he or she adopts the means, instruments, and ways of being of his or her culture.

Power is a kind of force that exists within all things. Force is something that moves existence. For instance, a stick of wood resists being bent. This kind of force somehow moves its interaction with different things. When one takes a stick of wood to use it as a cultural tool to move a rock, he understands its power and force as a handle, and he acquires a psychological means to guide him through these types of actions. It means that he appropriated the power of the symbolic existence of the stick itself. In this sense, that wood stick became a cultural tool and changed one's behavior. Now, one knows the material power in the stick and turns it into a power to guide, control, and execute one's own actions with it. No matter whether one changes his behavior through cultural tools or signs, its embodied power still exists. Therefore, I argue that cultural tools and signs have a power that each one needs to appropriate as psychological power that arises from the activity with it.

Activity to overcome violence: the plan of action

The concept of an Activity to Overcome Violence (AOV) was a general concept for all of the activities. This concept coordinated actions oriented at their target. Therefore, every particular activity that was organized was oriented toward overcoming violence in the NGO. To achieve its goals, it was necessary that an AOV creates relationships characterized by community structure and has an objective to develop a sense of community among the members. We strived to develop feelings of interdependence and trust to build a place to live together. The principles for creating this sense of interdependence will be discussed below through the concepts of *participation*, *opportunity to communicate*, and *enlightened understanding of the objectives of coexistence*. These concepts were the general principles for organizing all of the group activities as AOVs.

An AOV could be created by any group of individuals within the NGO once they acquired a sense of interdependence and adopted the above-mentioned principles that gave rise to this sense. I started my work from those principles. While transferring my individual power to all of the participants, the AOVs I created began to integrate the individuals as members who shared the power. Now, they could reproduce the same attitude I had toward transformative relationships in the activities that were within their domain. Therefore, the AOVs were not predetermined. The new ones could be created in the process of transformation of the relationships.

Furthermore, it is important to point out that my ideas about these aspects of the AOV were undergoing a change as the work progressed and the NGO members participated. They started to include values based on their own view of the world and of the kinds of relationships they wanted to build. In this sense, I was compelled by virtue of the real circumstances to adapt my position and vision of the world as well. Otherwise, I would be excluded from the community or take up an authoritarian position of domination.

The new and inclusive set of goals could be reached mainly through democratic relationships and dialogical processes. These two types of relationships were chosen because the first one contains the shared power and the second the shared voice, needs, and interests that need to coexist without being subjugated or organized in a hierarchy within the community. Therefore, power and voice constitute the foundation of individuals' participation and their self-assertion as a person in any group or community. When power is taken away through domination and voices silenced through submission tension and suffering are generated. This creates a state of violence and results in violent reactions. For this reason, AOV's very content needed to lead to a sense of interdependence. What follows is an explanation of this structure of activities.

An action-based approach to changing relationships in the NGO

The most obvious problem, from my point of view, was the struggle for power among different groups. These were the groups inside and outside of the NGO: the 'volunteers,' politicians, a variety of donors, the children's parents, and the children themselves. Each group tried to gain control of the wheel in order to steer the institution's course in its own direction and demonstrate the effectiveness of its own power. Due to these groups' reluctance and inability to listen to each other, democratic dialogue between them was impossible.

The problem was to find a way to change this power struggle. But how? Through moral preaching? Could the teachers potentially diversify their pedagogical approaches? Would it be reasonable to apply common-sense practices, for instance, set limits for the children? No. Ultimately, none of these attempts worked.

We conceptualized the basis of the democratic relationships as follows:

a) participation of all community members as recognized agents of the collective activities;

b) opportunity for all community members to communicate interests, desires, and needs;

c) enlightened understanding by each member of the goals of coexistence, knowledge, and control of the plans to take care of their life in the institution.

These were the guiding principles for organizing and structuring our AOVs. Through these principles, the organization of activities promoted a democratization process among the NGO members.

For this reason, it seems to me that the concept of the *democratization process* is more important than the concept of democracy. I argue that the democratization process leads subjects to build their own local ideas and meanings that organize their coexistence. Therefore, they can deal with the meaning of democratic relationships that make sense in accordance with their own needs.

Such a process is a dynamic unit of the concepts mentioned above and is briefly explained in the following:

a. Participation

Participation means that a subject commits to cooperating in the community's collective activities. The individuals become agents of actions and operations guided toward the common ends jointly with the other subjects' actions.

Alexis N. Leontiev (2009), in examining "the fundamental structure of the individual's activity in the conditions of a collective labour," explains, from my point of view, that participation is a prerequisite for the emergence of democratic relationships among people, that is, the cooperation in a collective production of life. He says as follows:

> This activity is also now no longer reflected in man's head in its subjective oneness with the object but as the subject's objective, practical relation with it. In the conditions being considered, this is always, of course, a collective subject and the relations of the individual participants in the work are consequently originally reflected by the individuals only to the extent that their relations coincide with those of the group as a whole (Leontiev 2009, p. 190).

b. Opportunity to communicate

Opportunity to communicate is a condition for the subjects' participation in collective activity and achievement of their personal needs that depend on other members. Individuals may be capable of achieving their own needs without limiting themselves. However, democratic participation in collective activities enables them not only to respect the interests of others by limiting their own actions but also to ask others to respect their own personal interests by limiting their actions.

I argue that the act of respect entails searching for the history of the subject's needs, comprehending such history through the current conditions, and paying attention to them in making one's own decisions. This is an objective condition for something like a dialogue process to arise among the participants. In this joint participation, they need to argue, show their feelings and interests, and discuss with their body, soul, and entire life.

On this very subject, Bakhtin (1999) said:

> To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue, a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in the discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium (Bakhtin 1999, p. 293).

c. Enlightened understanding of the goals of coexistence

An enlightened understanding of the goals of coexistence is the basis for acquiring and improving consciousness of one's own place in the group. Becoming aware of the common objectives is a condition that can lead the members of the community to build the notion of interdependence among themselves as the foundation of their community.

> Community arises from real relationships in which people realize their interdependence. The concept of community represents group unity in practices and intellectual activity, meanings and spaces, in which the group members see reasons for their socialization. It is a life, in which they find possibilities for personal development and can accomplish their personal objectives based on the trust and confidence in their co-existence with others (Marino Filho 2012, p. 10).

At that time, certain questions had to be asked when considering the problem of transforming the relationships of power and domination between the people of the NGO into democratic and dialogical relationships to form a community among them. First, is it possible for democracy to emerge in a group in which the difference of power among its members has an undue influence on each individual's personal experiences? Is the creation of a new, personal sense of community life possible? Could democracy be a system for changing the power dynamics, i.e., diminishing the domain of the influence some individuals have over others? In my view, answering this last question was crucial for producing democratic changes.

Based on my own experience in this institution, I would argue that democratic actions depend on the ability to teach others how to use and share power. It also means diminishing the power of a single individual or a majority of individuals over the others and increasing the power of all members of the community as a whole. Dialogue with one another, through shared power, was the key of the AOVs to fundamentally change this NGO.

When I started working in the NGO, the general director gave me full authority to make decisions and change relationships. Having this authority gave me power over the 'volunteers,' the politicians, the outsiders involved in maintaining this institution, and even the power over the founders, as well as the judge who participated in the establishment of the initial internal rules. At the same time, I had the power to control teachers' activities, choose which supplies to buy, and organize the employees' tasks, among other activities. I did this for some time. But I needed to make changes to this distribution of power if I were to change the manifestations of violence by some and the submission by others.

Firstly, I started to regulate the visits of the 'volunteers,' i.e., people who tried to impose their worldview on the NGO, usually disturbing the relationships between teachers and children. Secondly, I began working with the children on a collective transformation of the rules that had been written by the judge, teachers, and 'volunteers' so that they could become co-owners of these rules. Later, I began to transfer the power of decision-making about the employees' activities to the employees themselves.

The nature of my discourse, while keeping track of activities and the democratization process, turned from authoritarian to authoritative and then eventually to dialogical. I had to use an authoritarian language so that, later on, I could share my power with others, ultimately achieving a dialogical process. This was a dynamic situation where my role was slowly becoming that of a psychologist instead of an authoritarian leader (which I was at the start of my work there).

Breaking down the domination structure

Based on the authority given to me by the general director and the confidence that I could make any changes I saw fit in the NGO, I created rules by which I could regulate and limit the visits of politicians, high-society women, and the judge: they were not to work with the children without my prior permission and giving me an advance notice. Their immediate reaction was to threaten us with the withdrawal of funding and their help. Nevertheless, I explained to them that I needed to do this because their contradictory ideas and rules were interfering with the NGO's system. From this moment, I started to have a different kind of conversation with them, disrupting their authority, until, after a few months, dialogue became possible between us.

Some of them, primarily the women who started the NGO, began to understand our—my and my team's—motives and our requirements. They arranged fundraising events for monetary, food and teaching material donations (computers, for example). They started to visit the NGO with a different goal: in order to understand the new organization and how it was operating. They talked to me about my plans and wanted to know what the staff thought of the changes. They became able to talk to the staff respectfully.

Nonetheless, they never changed their ideology and position of power. They tolerated me because the general director backed me, but they were merely restraining their power. Further in this article, it will become clear how this power emerged again and its consequences for the NGO and for myself.

The domination structure had to be broken down, in my view, because the ideological influence of the politicians and representatives of high society inside the NGO needed to be diminished. With their discourse, they only reiterated that their power and domination triggered violent behavior in the NGO.

On the other hand, the reason why my dialogue with the politicians and the elite could not change their ideology and why they restrained their power and interest in dominating the NGO is described well by Lukács (2010, p. 288), when he states that "[…] every social class ideologue tends to interpret the social condition that seems to him to be the solution of all problems as the 'end of history". I contend that the

changes in the NGO were a threat to these people's ideology because they saw a possibility of a new history being shaped. Although they helped us, they never fully gave up the idea of controlling the NGO.

Second, the relationships of domination among the children also had to be broken down. An example of the internal process by which domination among the children was broken down involves B., the nine-year-old "cat kidnapper." It had to do with changes in the internal procedure (AOV). This process, detailed below, was at the center of the changes in the domination structure.

At the age of four, B. had been sexually abused by her father. Her mother used to hit her and her brother on their toes with a wooden stick to punish them when they did not obey. Her brother told me several times that he would kill his mother once he turned eighteen. These were just some of the realities of their situation at the time. In this setting, B. became an extremely violent child. She hit other younger or older children and was not afraid that the stronger boys might hurt her. Usually, she made the other children do what she wanted by using threats and authority.

One day, as I watched the children play, I saw B. forcing two other girls to play a game with her. There was a third girl who asked to play with them. B. rejected her, saying that she could not play. The first two girls asked B. to accept the third one, but she refused and ordered them to start playing with her immediately.

When I noticed this situation, I told the girls that there was no rule in place that would allow B. to force them to play with her. They all looked at me in surprise, including B. Then, the two girls and the third girl who was rejected from participating ran away to play somewhere else. I watched B. as she paced back and forth, not knowing what to do in this situation. After about three minutes, she ran up to where the girls were playing and asked to join them. They accepted her and played all together. This was a clear indication to me that the new procedure belonged to the children, arising out of the AOV to deconstruct the power and domination relationships. Now, it became a power shared by all of them, and somehow it made them all equal.

It is essential to notice that the new procedure, namely, the rules created for the community by themselves, became a tool—a primary means to think through a new community structure. The AOV of rewriting the community rules and the final product, i.e., the document they produced, gave them an instrument of shared power and, thus, the community's capacity to control their actions.

The relationships of the teachers, children, and staff began to take a new shape, gradually transforming their life and work in this space. They were being guided by the new constitution that regulated everyone's behavior and they could also suggest changes to this document, whether they were children or adults, teachers or guards or cleaning staff, and so on and so forth. The possibility of dialogue and debate regarding the value of the relationships between them changed the quality of their relationships. If previously the disputes were dictated by individually held values, they now needed to have a reference to a values sanctioned by everyone. This had the characteristics of a democracy based on dialogue. We could observe even a physical relaxation among all the NGO participants, with less tension and nervousness. For example, D., the accountant responsible for finances, had previously been very tense and afraid of making a mistake in the accounting records, and she had constantly suffered from nervous skin irritation. After having assumed the responsibility for her accounting activities without any kind of supervision on my part and making her own decisions about how to distribute the money for the NGO's needs, her mood started to improve, she smiled more, and her irritation symptoms began to subside.

In another example, the guard, who had endlessly complained about his situation of inaction, passivity and lack of participation in making team decisions due to being a simple guard, stopped complaining and was seen whistling and in cheerful spirits after being included in the team as a teacher and contributing his opinions on education and on what to do in the NGO.

These were signs of a general shift that was taking place in the organization through the AOVs, as a system that began to actually exist.

Transformation of meanings into means for dialogue and creation of a sense of community

My intention was that the NGO members understand that they live together in that organization and have the power to transform it into a home, a community. This aim was supported by my theoretical knowledge and the ethical values grounded in the social psychology of S.T.M. Lane (1994) and I. Martín-Baró (1989) and the community psychology of M. Montero (2004). This perspective led me to gradually transfer my powers to the children and employees so that they could define the rules, goals, and schedules, among other things. To realize this AOV, which gradually included all the NGO members in a movement to share the decision-making power, I organized group discussions: a group for teachers and staff and two groups of children: the young ones and the adolescents.

Organized as an AOV to promote a dialogic process, we jointly scheduled the days and times for our meetings. I talked to them beforehand, giving suggestions and listening to their ideas for the meetings, and the meetings started only once they agreed on the time and the goals. This group process allowed me to release my authoritarian role, and I started to position myself in a different capacity than before in the NGO. The circumstances forced me to recognize that their needs and expectance to be agents of their own decisions must guide my actions toward the changes I thought before. For this reason, I needed to give up my authoritarian power and give them the means, for instance, to discuss the meaning of concepts we use to think or for their authorial responsibility for the changes they needed to build a new constitution for their relationships.

The meetings with the children to discuss and decide on the rules continued, based on their own decisions. Afterward, we extended this practice to the teachers and staff too. We took the official rules that already existed and read and analyzed them to understand what they meant. We debated about the need for the rules and the importance of their existence in the NGO. The children and I went through the rules one by one and debated what rules they felt were unfair or partial because they regulated their behavior but not that of the teachers and staff. We found that the existing rules were aimed only at controlling the children.

The children and I decided to eliminate those rules that did not make sense to them or were not based in their reality. We also decided to write new rules the children felt were needed. The result was a new set of rules that best expressed their interests, such as: “Professor J. cannot step on our feet” (talking about a teacher who was 1.75 m tall and weighed 90 kg, who used to step on the feet of younger children to control their behavior); “Teachers cannot yell at us”; “Teachers cannot force us to study the same content we already studied at school”; or “Children can choose the activities they want to do.” In this process, the children gained the confidence to utter and formulate the rules based on their own lives.

Most importantly, the revisions and modifications of the rules were handwritten on paper by the children themselves. We filed the document in the principal’s office as an official document. Now, the employees and staff had to read the document and respond to the children with their considerations and opinions about the new rules.

The teachers were surprised by this reversal of power between them and the children. They learned that they had to give in, too, and adjust to each other's needs. They learned that fairness is about striking a balance between needs and possibilities—the needs of each one and the possibilities of satisfying them without giving anyone preferential treatment. For example, R., the janitor, argued about the logic of the order in which the rooms were being cleaned and managed to change the teachers' schedule to improve this order—something hitherto unthinkable in the hierarchy of organizations such as this one.

One positive consequence of this process of transforming the rules and making them official documents is that the children acquired a different kind of power. Now, managing their behavior and actions became a matter of pride for them since they were following a document that symbolized their sphere of influence. Not infrequently, I saw the children instructing newcomers to the organization about what they were or were not allowed to do according to the rules.

Behavior transformation through the ownership of the rules was quite crucial in switching their relationships to a dialogic process. New behavior needs new meanings and psychological orientation through some breakdown of the current system, as we can understand in the explanation of Ilyenkov (1982) about a new phenomenon. He said:

> In reality it always happens that a phenomenon which later becomes universal originally emerges as an individual, particular, specific phenomenon, as an exception from the rule. It cannot actually emerge in any other way. Otherwise history would have a rather mysterious form.
>
> Thus, any new improvement of labour, every new mode of man's action in production, before becoming generally accepted and recognised, first emerge as a certain deviation from previously accepted and codified norms. Having emerged as an individual exception from the rule in the labour of one or several men, the new form is then taken over by others, becoming in time a new universal norm. If the new norm did not originally appear in this exact manner, it would never become a really universal form, but would exist merely in fantasy, in wishful thinking. (Ilyenkov 1982, p. 83-84)

Besides becoming the authors of the new rules, the children started to ask for things they were interested in, discuss issues with one another, and connect their lives inside and outside the NGO in a more rational way. They started to share emotions and affection for one another in small groups with teachers, the staff, and myself. The amount of physical violence decreased, and some of the teachers were able to organize classes effectively.

One example of the profound transformations in the social relationships within the institution was C., the guard. His activity, restricted by the policies of a security company, was limited only to guarding the gate against possible intruders and monitoring for any unauthorized exit of the children. Sometimes, when the children were in danger of getting hurt in fights, he helped the teachers restrain the children by physical force. He did this, but not without fear of being punished by the security company that employed him because it was outside the scope of what he was allowed to do on his job. This caused him to live under constant stress. The teacher's requests and his employer's policies put him in an ethically contradictory situation: he wanted to protect the children but doing this put his job in jeopardy.

At one point, I found out that he was an excellent comic book designer, and I asked his commander to let him teach the children how to create comic books. I spent a month convincing the commander of the importance of these lessons. He made an exception for C., allowing him to participate in the project for the benefit of the children's education.

A generous and well-meaning person, C. carefully organized the drawing lessons. First, we organized a campaign to raise funds to buy materials and paint the walls of the room where they would be working. With the help of the children, he painted the walls and decorated them with comic book characters. He separated the children by age and taught them how to draw. During the lessons, he talked to the children in a manner of a caring parent. This made him a respected teacher, and he did not have to use physical force anymore. Now, everything could be resolved through dialogue.

In this setting, subjective needs arise out of the contradictions between the situational context and personal knowledge and emotional conditions. For example, C., the guard, created a context for the drawing lessons with my help. In this context, he used language, verbal expressions, tools, and actions that the children did not initially understand. This circumstance created the need for the children to understand the teacher. In turn, if the teacher teaches the children carefully, the knowledge they acquire could make them valuable participants in that activity. In my view, one becomes a valuable participant when one can realize one's skills with the domain tools and meanings to accomplish the targets of one's tasks and check and evaluate the correspondence of the product with the objectives of the activity in which they participate. Therefore, one can feel integrated into a group of people. This kind of conscious integration is the source of motivation, meaning-making, and psychological sense. It is the root of the affective and emotional system based on which children's personalities can develop.

The values, being signs of a positive or negative quality of the relationships, are constituted by the individual participants in social activities that are vital for them. It means that the individuals take relations and interact with their world to satisfy needs that include their existence as social agents and personalities. Therefore, when the product or effects of relationships correspond to personal needs, it has a positive value. It is positive because its qualities confirm, i.e., uphold the existence of individuals' lives. For instance, C., the guard turned teacher, could experience value changes in his relationships throughout his classes. The children started to respect him, to listen to his advice. As a teacher, he could feel prized by the staff because of the changes in the children's behavior. Therefore, the activity takes a positive value for him as a member of the NGO. It was perceptible how carefully he set classes and proudly told us about children's progress in drawing skills.

By organizing activities based on the aforementioned general structure, I expected the participants to become aware of the meanings and social functions of the objects, actions, and psychological senses needed for building our shared life. Moreover, by structuring AOV activities in this way, I knew that I would be generating a process of meaning-making guided by affective, emotional, and cognitive senses for all the staff too. When a group accomplishes something together, based on shared knowledge, and achieves the desired goals, trust can arise among its members. Trust-based relationships contribute to creating a sense of community in the group's consciousness, thereby helping it overcome violence.

The staff and I arranged a variety of AOV activities where the children were involved in designing and determining the goals, timelines, and everything needed to carry out these activities. As a result, about two years later, we felt confident enough in the new trust-based relationships that we could give the children knives and forks during mealtimes. The tables were now set with plates, cutlery, and napkins. Some children began to help wash the dishes and clean up the lunchroom, and help each other with the homework, for example. All of the relationships started to change once the power to create and choose the rules for the activities was distributed more equitably.

The fights subsided, although they did not disappear completely because the children continued to experience violence and tension in other environments, such as their family or at school. However, they were finally able to see the NGO as a place where they could talk and freely express their needs and

desires. Even with the tensions they brought to the NGO, everyone learned the power of dialogue through new experiences and a better distribution of power. Finally, it was possible for the organization to go several days without physical violence.

Sharing power to create dialogical and democratic relationships

Once I transferred my power to the others so they could organize their activities themselves, a dialogical process emerged, and democratic decisions took shape. These events became more and more evident.

For example, R., an illiterate black woman who was the janitor and a cook at the NGO, did not have the confidence to participate in discussions between teachers and staff during meetings. I tried to transfer the responsibility for planning her tasks to her – making the budget and buying the groceries she needed. I also explained that this meant she could be held accountable for these tasks. However, she explained that being illiterate, she did not know how to write a budget or search for grocery prices on the internet. I asked one of the adolescents to teach her. Once she learned how to turn on the computer, set prices, choose materials, and the other skills needed to accomplish her tasks, she started to feel empowered—and rightly so, since she was mastering her activities without any supervision on my part. In meetings, she started to gain the confidence to participate in discussions and to provide arguments in support of her decisions. This confidence to participate in the community developed to the point that one day, she pointed her finger at me and said: “I want to set up an urgent meeting because I do not agree with some of the things you are doing.” She was referring to the method of action I used to get people to overcome problems. Namely, I brought the contradictions between them to the surface and made evident the issues that needed to be solved and that people usually tried to sweep under the rug. In her eyes, I was the “troublemaker,” and she criticized me for it. Her confidence to accuse me—the person who could have fired her,—was a strong indication to me that the transformations in the power relationships were taking hold.

This group process can be understood in view of the fact that the group is a total of its components and “this totality of the group implies certain connections among the individuals, a relationship of interdependence that determines the character of the structure and makes people its members” (Martin-Baró 1989, p. 205-206). However, from these connections emerges something more on the inside of the group that represents more than the total of its members, something that sets them in a continuous movement of unity and separation, that is, the contradictions among members, their individual needs, and personal objectives. This is why we need to consider the idea that subjective experiences and ideological representations could lead to contradictions “[…] in the level of action and group interaction, in which domination performance tends to create a contradiction and deny the domination itself […]” (Lane 1994, p. 86). For this reason, domination processes can be changed by uncovering the contradictions that people try to conceal. The contradictions can only exist when there are relationships between parts that some members try to disguise for convenience or private interest.

The changes began to happen when these splinter groups transformed into unified groups. In splinter groups, people have personal interests that may coincide, but actions to satisfy them could occur without regard to the other participants' needs. Communication and discourse have mostly a selfish perspective and value. In this case, people's actions are collective, but not as a community action shared with others. Given the individual activities, people operate close to each other but rarely together, and any attempts to cooperate usually result in conflicts.

The association between subjects in their shared life develops into a self-transformation movement from which new needs and particular interests emerge, motivated by the uncontrollable diversity of relationships that affects all those involved, albeit they are not aware of them. On the other hand, there is

also a dialogical process that represents the possibility of overcoming the contradictions created by that diversity, not perceived by each subject.

In this sense, I would argue that there was a unity of the processes of the transformation of objectivity of their life as a group and a dialogical process by means of which a subjective interconnection could occur for them as well. Therefore, we can understand this dynamic process as a communication process, that is, a movement of the interpenetration of the diversity of thoughts, feelings, and interests of the individuals that created a community existence, the unity of diversity among them that resulted in a new way of being for all.

We can, therefore, affirm that the self-transformation movement, by means of contradictions between the diversity of ways to exist and the dialogical process of becoming aware, coexist in the community's unity. In this sense, there is a social movement in the meanings and senses that is multifaceted and differs from that which can be understood by any individual subject alone. Therefore, the dialogical process is a necessary condition for the awareness and the understanding that "I, together with others," shape the community's reality.

It is in this sense that we consider the contradictions in the dialectical process that also occur beyond the boundaries of the particular existence of an individual, which are inevitable, unstable, and permanent. On the other hand, the dialogical process makes the "I/other" relationship break down these boundaries in search of the unity of diversity in one's consciousness. In the processes of humanization, the dialogical is, in the same measure, inevitable, unstable, and permanent. Understanding that there is unity between dialectical and dialogical (Dafermos, 2018) was crucial for my actions to transform the consciousness of the NGO's people. This was true especially when we reorganized relationships through activities and reshaped the communication based on these relationships.

For example, when C., the guard, organized his activities together with the children, there were various discussions about the rules for the drawing activities. How would the members of this group participate? What would be the hours? How would the materials and tools be stored? What would they create? Various conflicts of interest and personal values emerged among them that could only be resolved through a dialogical process and group and individual self-transformation generated by this very diversity of interests and individual values.

Self-transformation of groups and individuals, created by the diversity of interests, never coincided, that is, never was the same for everyone, although everyone and the group itself transformed continuously. This is my understanding of the dialectical process as an unstable and permanent process of self-transformation of the group and individuals. Something new for them and created by them as a way to coexist in the community can arise in this way and develop as a way of their own humanization, impossible to be predicted and determined by just one person.

The actions aimed at changing the dialogue must create new needs for the children, teachers, and staff to find meaning and develop their psychological system in order to live as a community. Some examples of this are: to understand the meaning of words and instruments to guide their actions; to become aware of needs, objectives, actions and operations of the group activities; to work for the group goals, and for that reason, to be motivated to work together; to learn how to use tools and instruments to carry out the actions. These examples may seem like a common approach to teaching that already exists, but the purpose of these actions is what actually makes a difference. If one wants to create a sense of community, he/she needs a dialogue free of domination, in general. He/she needs to share the power of knowledge and listen to the other members of the group. The purpose of each activity needs to be discussed among

the members before, during, and after the activity. In community teaching, the teacher is responsible for giving students the power to make their argument beyond the teacher's individual interest.

This kind of group structure enabled the organization to create motivation beyond the motives of any particular activity itself—the motivation to improve the group's interdependence aimed at fostering a sense of community. Furthermore, it produced a logical and emotional communication system for our actions in community life, led us to listen to each other in order to change the purpose of our life together, and created new values for our life.

Values result from affection, individual and social experiences, and life itself. Affective and social values constitute meanings in the creation process of signals. Personal values organize our emotional orientation through our relationships. Since context and conditions can change, values of social and personal practices never stabilize in one's personality. Subjects change their social and personal values depending on the circumstances, changes in the environment, and their needs and desires. These circumstances produce a social and psychological play of values, which plays a part in meaning creation in the process of meaning-making. A *play of values* arises in a system of relationships when its components' movement changes their values for the system and each correlated member. For this reason, improving community feelings, we need to set a play of values of the interdependence of the individuals to build a place to live together. Therefore, it is essential to change personal values.

Here, we could consider the eleven-year-old M., who was extremely violent. Every day he beat someone younger or even older than him. Also, he was the one to decide whether someone could participate in an activity or not. He was strong and did not listen to anyone. His father, a prison inmate, was considered a dangerous person. M. used his father's reputation to threaten others, saying that his father would kill people when he got out of jail. Everyone was afraid, and no one doubted it. In the early days of the NGO, he and the other children used to destroy doors, walls, and furniture when fighting or revolting against their situation in the organization. They had absolutely no problem doing this.

At some point, M.'s father got out of prison, and two months later, he was shot dead. The morning after his murder, when I arrived at the NGO, M. came to tell me what had happened. He saw his father dead in the street, in front of a bar. His father was shot six times in the face, and one of his eyes fell out. Immediately after telling me these gruesome details about his father's death, M. said without any emotion, just as he talked to me any other day: "Hey, I am going to play soccer now. See you!"

I invited M. to work with me on the rules he and the other children were responsible for. He liked doing this because the power he felt from such participation was different from that of the power of physical force. The use of this new power generated admiration and respect from others, although the constitution also regulated his own actions and behavior when he argued with other children and teachers. The teachers praised him as he made sure the others followed the rules.

This was a clear example of power changing someone's actions. Instead of hitting the others, his physical violence was transformed into another type of power, for instance, punishing younger children for breaking the rules by forbidding them to use the computer for some time. In this sense, physical violence was overcome, although another form of violence continued to exist. Nevertheless, it was clear to me that this path of gradual inclusion in assuming responsibility for new rules and the community recognition of the value of his actions could lead to different uses of his power, ultimately replacing violent acts with educational and potentially dialogical ones.

Two years later, the NGO had to move to another building because, for various reasons, it became impossible to stay where we were. I invited M. to help me transport the furniture. During the move, when he realized how much the building was vandalized and destroyed by the children's actions, he looked at me and said with tears in his eyes: "Look at what we did to the building." He then fell silent. It was clear to me that the place he occupied in the NGO, our discussions about the rules, about what kind of place we were creating, and the fact that we shared power, all together transformed his values, affections, and emotions. That moment, for me, and I believe for him also, was a sincere dialogue through the experiences that changed our lives. We did not need words anymore, only looks and facial and motor expressions during this silent but disquieting dialogue that went on for some time. I want to point out that dialogue as a communication process exists beyond the words, in our body, lips, eyes, and movements, as mentioned in Bakhtin's quotation before.

M. may not have had the words to express his emotions, but that did not prevent us from engaging in dialogue. To me, this was a strong indication of the transformational power of the AOV approach implemented in the NGO.

To recap, my actions in these Activities to Overcome Violence were guided by the ideas of changing personal meaning-making and the formation of personal values and a sense of community in the real context of the NGO. I used these ideas to make sure that the actions of the teachers and staff signified the values chosen by the children as the best for their community. We learned that determining values for the other's life could probably lead to failure in an educational activity. It is, in fact, an undemocratic process.

In sum, these examples and the analysis show why and how to create circumstances that place people in a different situation, give them different forms of power, and change the quality of their actions and behaviors. Perhaps most exciting is that we found a way to change the relationships such that the autonomous power of the community members could be used to organize the shared life and space. Autocracy and domination were replaced by our creative ways of democratic managing relationships. This novelty was the expression of the possibility of self-creation when it comes to the standards of social behavior and values for a shared life. This was evident whenever the members of the organization told an outsider, "this is how it works here…," meaning that they were different, and that they had their way of organizing relationships.

After I shared my power, others took over control in areas I dominated before, and my role in the organization was no longer clear to them. They saw me as someone who had no tasks or responsibilities, despite the fact that I continued to interfere and raise contradictions for them to decide what to do. Due to this, I turned from a "troublemaker" to a "lazy bum" in their eyes. I heard this said by the employees themselves. Nevertheless, I felt good! In my view, this was actually part of my path as a psychologist: through my actions, to gradually become unnecessary for people as they learn to solve their problems on their own.

A sudden end

Unfortunately, the year we moved into the new building in a different neighborhood, the general director was replaced, I was fired, and the municipal agencies cut the funds for the children's transportation to the new neighborhood, far from where they lived. Our children could not return to the home they began to build, and they went back to the streets. This was the start of a new chapter for the NGO, with children from "well-structured families" from the new neighborhood. This made the NGO a fairer social investment in the eyes of politicians and residents because these children did not need to be corrected or transformed, only taught, since they were already well-adjusted to the culture and values of the class that dominated them.

Considerations

The AOVs reported in this article show our struggle to organize a shared life in an educational organization. The context of the difficulties in this undemocratic environment was characterized by the relationships of power and domination that generated miscommunication, conflicts and violent actions. This hierarchical configuration of power is not very different from other social institutions in our society, but the violence appeared there acutely in all its manifestations.

The main difficulty in carrying out practical actions was the fact that at the beginning, I had only a theoretical idea, a working hypothesis about what should be done to overcome this configuration of relations and decrease violence in the NGO. I was forced to modify the ideas and work on plans for the AOV by virtue of the context and concrete circumstances in which the people co-existed. However, the changes often happened without me always having a clear idea about what had to change. Different internal and external factors, which escaped my awareness, always produced something new that could not be answered theoretically in the moment. For example, in the beginning, I was convinced that having conceptual mastery of the general activity structure as I understood it from studying the works of A. N. Leontiev or the meaning-making process proposed by L. S. Vygotsky, I could guide, suggest and produce meanings and values that I understood to be better for changing the relationships among the NGO members. However, I was wrong about this, about the conceptual mastery and the fact that these ideas would be sufficient for the necessary changes. Throughout the whole process, and even after including other concepts such as the dialogical process, for example, the concrete reality of that particular community continued to pose new challenges for me and presented me with the need to re-develop and transcend my understanding of reality, mediated by theoretical concepts, but based on the reality itself. This proved to me that reality is always broader than the theories about it, and to understand and modify the theory, we need to keep coming back to reality.

The methodological problem lies in the fact that it was I, as the coordinator of the AOV, who made all the decisions about the objectives of the actions, thus possibly losing the essential part of the project, the people themselves. When the coordinator makes theoretical considerations and, therefore, occupies a higher place than the others, he/she disrupts the possible development of the community. In this sense, I also held a position of power, and to some extent, my actions were violent since I had *a priori* plans for the types of relationships that others should engage in, so that my vision of the world could materialize, regardless of their wishes.

What followed were my attempts to organize the relationships based exclusively on the theoretical framework, which was partially valid but insufficient to overcome the different forms of violence. This problem with the suggestions I made based on the theories emerged during the activities when the effects I expected did not occur in the way I imagined they would. This was also true of the times when I could not explain the events by theory. A methodological problem for achieving the goals arose. It is this question that the AOV challenges us to address and which I consider most important.

Based on my experience as the coordinator of this AOV project, I find that a plan of action needs to be proposed from this perspective of working with groups to serve as a guide to be followed in changing circumstances. However, that guide is insufficient for making *a priori* assumptions as to constancy, accuracy, or certainty of any of the actual activities and their effects. To work with a dialectical and dialogical process is not to inhabit a world of security, certainty, and stability. In such situations, knowledge guides us only provisionally because the consciousness of the subjects of the AOV, shared through experiences, produces changing values. In my experience, the transformation happens because values emanate from personally constituted and changeable conditions. Thus, consciousness arises through the transformation

of one's own identity and otherness since people do not only get to know themselves but also get to re-know each other.

The unity of diversity in the group could not be understood through identity or stable patterns because it was constantly in the process of being created. Therefore, I had to learn to coordinate, abdicate a part of my power, and place myself in the movement of the multi-determination of the democratic dialogue. In this movement, the group can create new forms of existence that cannot be determined by just one person—myself or anyone else.

Finally, I argue that attitudes of force are inevitable in the educational process. However, in a community group, they do not take the form of violent acts. In a community, people mediate force through respect and democratic dialogue.

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