Roots Uprooted:
Autobiographical Reflections on the Psychological Experience of Migration

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> ... each of us confronts our respective inability to comprehend the experiences of others even as we recognize the absolute necessity of continuing to do so.
>
> —Linda Brodkey

Ethnic minority and women researchers frequently find themselves dissatisfied the traditional methods of research that are considered valid by other social scientists while struggling to establish their legitimacy in the academic world. The result, more often than not, is that we find ourselves involved in research projects that do not feel methodologically "right" to us in order to achieve this legitimacy. Or, alternatively, devote ourselves to what "feels right" at the risk of losing tenure battles or other academic "blessings" from our colleagues.

Shulamit Reinharz, discussing a research method that she denominates "experiential analysis" (1979, 1983), states that "the first step in articulating a new method (of research) is to understand that one's personally experienced dissatisfaction with conventional methods is not an intrapsychic, private problem but derives from structural inconsistencies and skewed assumptions underpinning the methods themselves" (1983, p.166). In her formulation, the personal experience of the researcher is not only valid but essential in the development of studies that would be contextual and relevant. For Reinharz, a relevant research project should provide "an opportunity for catharsis or self-discovery" (1983, p.176) for both researcher and subjects and a "research

product likely to provide resources or answers to pressing problems in living" (p.176). "The record of the researcher's fcclings and ideas is aIso data" (p.175) because "all knowledge is contingent on the situation under which it is formed" (p.177) and, for all researchers' "one's own race, class, religion and gender predispose us to consider some settings more interesting and important than others" (p.179).

Denzin's (1986, 1989) and Runyan's (1982) work, using life narratives for sociological and psychological research, respectively, have demonstrated the value of studying life histories and biography for the social sciences in general and psychology in particular. Through their psychobiographical and interpretive interactionist studies they have demonstrated that the data provided by life narratives produces a richness that could not be obtained through the use of other methods.

I am sure that, by now, we are all disabused of the notion that "value free" research exists at all. But we are probably very well trained to doubt the validity of our personal experiences and life as sources of data. Interestingly enough, if we were not the researchers, probably some outsider to our cultures could get some grant money to study our lives and get a few good publications out of the analysis of data based on interviews about our experiences. Why not then, take the role of that "outsider" while remaining ourselves, combine the perspectives of experiential analysis, interpretive interactionism and psychobiography, and do some experiential studies of data provided by our lives and the lives of individuals with similar experiences?

As a social scientist, and on the basis of my own personal experiences, I believe that there is much to be learned from the individual narrative. For the last few years I have been engaged in the experiential analysis of my own migration story as a research project. I believe there is a void in the literature that could be filled through the use of life narratives to understand the

psychological impact of the experience of uprootedness from a scientific (as opposed to just human interest) point of view. That is why I would like to share with the readers the results of my own experiential analysis of this process and the life narrative on which it is based. My intention is to demonstrate both the importance of studying this topic and the usefulness of this methodology for its study.

In 1984 I returned to Cuba for a two-week visit for the first time after an absence of 23 years. I left Cuba when I was 22 years old, so at the time of this visit I had lived, roughly, half of my life in Cuba and half of my life away from Cuba. This coincidence made the time and timing of the visit particularly significant. The visit provoked in me innumerable reflections on the experience of uprootedness in my life and on the significance of having lived half of my life away from my country of birth.

The purpose of this essay is to share some of those reflections and some of the experiences that led to them. The experiences I want to share refer to the uprootedness of the second half of my life as well as to the intense experiences involved in that two-week trip to Cuba. I believe that these reflections can shed light on the experiences of exile and uprootedness in the lives of others.

I do not intend to discuss Cuban politics, to take positions pro or against the Cuban revolution or even argue the soundness of my decision to leave Cuba in 1961. Obviously, my life experiences, like anybody else's, are deeply connected to a specific time, place, and historical event. However, any discussion of the specifics of this historical event (i.e., the Cuban revolution), would distract from the subject of this essay, namely, some psychological consequences of uprootedness and historical dislocation and the description of a methodology to study them.

Even though my experience of uprootedness is in one sense absolutely mine, individual and unique, it is, in another sense, generalizable to any person who has ever undergone the effects of historical dislocation. Because I am a psychologist, and I see the meaning of my experiences mostly in psychological terms, I will describe the psychological impact on me of historical dislocation in the hope of generalizing my experiences to those of other people, particularly women, who have experienced similar events. Reinharz (1979; 1983) and Runyan (1982) have amply demonstrated that the experiential analysis and psychobiographical approaches used in this paper are valid forms of inquiry for the social sciences.

After this preamble, let me describe briefly the experiences of historical dislocation and uprootedness as I have felt them in my life and as they became intensely obvious to me as a consequence of my visit to Cuba in 1984.

I was barely 20 years old when Fidel Castro came to power in January l9S9. By then, I had already experienced a number of events that had created in me the sense of instability that usually precedes actual uprootedness. For example, Batista's first take over and his dismissal of my father from the Armed Forces, and that of all others who were not his sympathizers just two years after my birth; Batista's defeat in the presidential elections of 1944; his second take over in 1952, after the suicide of one of Cuba's most honest political leaders; the terror and tensions of the Batista years and, finally, the entrance in Havana of Castro's Rebel Army in January 1959, a joyful event also characterized by suddenness and intense emotions The Bay of Pigs invacion in 1961 culminated for me a series of unexpected changes and surprising turning points. Through alI those years, historical events had transformed the course of my life. Althought I had previously been aware of the dangerousness of other historical events, such as the Second World War, Roosevelt’s death, the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, these events were

happening far away and their impact on my life was not the same as that of the political eventa happening in Cuba.

I—like other Cubans of my generation, like thousands of young people in Europe before and during World War II, like thousands of young people yesterday and today in Central America, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, throughout the world—had learned to live immersed in a situation of constant danger, without being consciously aware of that fact. I first recognized that I had been living in daily subliminal terror while watching a film in a theater in Madrid, Spain, when I left Cuba for a brief period in 1958. I was suddenly overcome by the realization that I could enjoy the movie without needing to keep a part of me on the alert, worrying about the possibility that a bomb might go off, that the police might raid the theater or that something similarly dangerous might occur. Mind you, in my years in Cuba I was never hurt by a bomb, nor was I ever arrested. Yet bombs had killed and maimed many young people, some of my adolescent friends had been executed or imprisoned and I *knew* it could happen to me too. The most amazing aspect of this experience was the realization that I had learned to always be alert *without even knowing* that I had learned it.

Elie Wiesel has written that once you have been in a situation of constant danger, you never feel fully safe again (Wiesel, 1984-5). His description, although referring to the incomparable horror of the Holocaust, fits my experience. Rahe and Holmes (1967; 1972), who have done research on the effects of stressful events on illness and health, tell us that events such as getting a new job, moving to a new place or losing a partner, create stress that can lead to the development of physical illness. Needless to say, the stress created by living under the fear of bombs, government persecution or other similar life-endangering situations is probably greater and capable of producing even more dramatic effects. Studies of learned helplessness

demonstrate that when individuals find themselves trapped in situations they cannot control, they tend to become seriously depressed (Seligman, 1975). Since I have never been seriously ill or particularly depressed about these issues, and neither have been most of the people I know who grew up under similar conditions, it seems that there are inner resources that sustain people in these extreme situations of which we psychologists do not know much about. Studies involving children and adults who have been exposed to situations of which we psychologists do not know much about. Studies involving children and adults who have been exposed to situations incredibly more dangerous than anything I have ever experienced shed some light on how psychological survival, development and growth are achieved in spite of the negative effects produced by violent events created by disruptive political situations and historical dislocation (See, for example: Coles, 1986; Dimsdale, 1980; Loomis, 1962; Reinharz, 1971; Williams & Westermeyer, 1986).

The most immediate feeling experienced after leaving such a situation of constant danger is relief, together with sadness and grief for those left behind. Confusion and frustration about all the new places and people and customs encountered soon add further burdens. But then, slowly, the unfamiliar starts becoming familiar, daily events start blurring the intense feelings of the first few weeks and years, and life settles into a new routine. Years go by and life goes on.

I lived in several countries after leaving Cuba, earned several higher education degrees, got married and divorced, developed important relationships and friendships along with a sense of better self-understanding, worked hard and enjoyed life. Cuba was not constantly in my mind. For the most part, I remembered the events of my 22 years in Cuba as intrapsychic events and memories of *my* individual life. Here and there I was confronted with my uprootedness, but it was not a constant or acute pain.

Perhaps I was lucky; if I lived away from Cuba, at least I was living in other Latin American countries. The sense of being "different" was not as vivid there as it later became in the United States. But in spite of similarities in language, customs and values, I always had a sense of not fully belonging. There was the sound of popular folk music that was familiar to everyone but me. And there was my memory of another popular folk music that only I knew. There was the unfamiliar taste of food that was a daily staple for the others. And there were tastes that I longed for which were unknown or inaccessible in that particular country. Even though we were all conversing in Spanish, there were words and expressions that seemed unusual and even offensive to me. And there were expressions I used which did not have any meaning for my closest friends.

So I learned to speak my Spanish with a Costa Rican accent while my Cuban one receded and I learned to enjoy Costa Rican food and to love Costa Rican music. My friends, co-workers, and classmates forgot to include me in their 1ist of foreigners. And yet, once in a while, the subject of my nationality would come up when someone was angry with me or when I could not remember events in Costa Rican history. To this day, those years in Costa Rica are very close to my heart, my Costa Rican friends continue to be central in my life. But they know, as I know, that I am not really Costa Rican.

There were things I shared with them, however, that I cannot share now with my close friends in the United States. No matter how fluent I am in English, my innermost feelings *are* in Spanish, and my poetry is in Spanish. This deepest part of myself remains hidden from people who are extremely important to me, no matter how hard we all try. I can translate, but translated feelings like translated poetry are just not the same. If there was a difference between my friends and I in Costa Rica, there is an even greater difference between my friends and I in the United

States. It is amazing how much hamburgers and Coke versus black beans and coffee remind an uprooted person of that difference!

Indeed, the loss experienced by an uprooted person encompasses not only the big and obvious losses of country, a way of life, and family. The pain of uprootedness is also activated in subtle forms by the everyday absence of familar smells, familiar foods, familiar routines for doing the small tasks of daily life. It is the lack of what has been termed "the average expectable environment" (Hartmann, 1964) which can become a constant reminder of what is not there anymore. It is the loss of this "average expectable environment" that can be most disorienting and most disruptive of the person's previously established identity. In some cases, this disruption of the "average expectable environment" and its impact on the individual's identity (Garza-Guerrero, 1974) can be at the core of profound psychological disturbance. Although the lack of my "average expectable environment" was not destructive for me in this way, I have experienced its loss, more or less keenly, throughout the second part of my life. My return to Cuba in 1984 brought into focus what this loss had entailed for me.

After twenty-three years away from there, I realized that I needed to go to Cuba. As if I did not trust my own decision to go, I planned for my trip hastily. But, the more I had to wait for my permit from the Cuban government, the more I knew I needed to go. I was not sure how it would feel to be there, but I knew that I had to do it and I knew that I had to do it alone. Without friends. Without people who had never been to Cuba before. Without people who had also been born in Cuba and thus had their own feelings ahout heing there. This was my own emotional journey

My journey back to Cuba did not start with the actual trip. For weeks before it I had sudden flashbacks of familiar scenes, places, events that I had forgotten or at least not

remembered for the last 23 years. During the year after the trip I also had flashbacks of the events and places of my trip and of my previous life in Cuba. These flashbacks were so vivid and powerful that they absorbed me and distracted me from the activity of the moment. They made me think of the flashbacks, of almost hallucinatory quality, that are sometimes experienced by people suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or involved in mourning and bereavement (Parkes, 1972). In fact, it seems that I have been involved in a grieving process, no matter how unaware of it I may have been, and it is possible that I will continue to be involved in it for the rest of my life whenever these feelings are reactivated.

After a 45-minute flight from Miami, I arrived in Havana around 5:00 a.m. The transition was quick and dramatically abrupt. You have to understand that for me there had been not 90 miles between Cuba and the United States, but almost a quarter of a century and a dense wall of memory. The lights of Havana brought tears to my eyes. They had been so close and so out of my touch for so many years ...! By 7:00 a.m. I had checked in at the hotel, taken a shower, had breakfast and cried, because for the first time in 23 years I had had Cuban sugar in my morning coffee. The moment I stepped out of the hotel I knew exactly where I was, what corners to turn, what buildings would be waiting for me on the next block, and which one of the buses going by would take me to which place in the city. In a few hours I had walked through my old neighborhoods, I had gone by my school, I had walked familiar streets and had come back to the hotel without ever having the slightest confusion about where I was or getting lost.

Cuba had been like a forbidden paradise for half of my life. Suddenly, this forbidden paradise was all around me. For years Cuba had been a dark and painful memory. Suddenly, it was present, and clear, and the sky was blue, and everything was as it always was and as it was always supposed to be. And everyone spoke with a Cuban accent! This deep sense of familiarity,

of everything being right, of all things being as they are supposed to be was something I had never experienced since 1961.

The experience of total familiarity was, of course, facilitated by the fact that there has been minimal construction in most Cuban cities during the last 30 years. But, aside from the familiarity of the physical environment, there was something more to my experience than just the same buildings and the same bus routes' prohahly hest illustrated by my intense reaction to Cuban sugar and the Cuban accent. Strangers almost always assumed that I was not a visitor, only on a few occasions did some of my clothes give me away. I was even told at one of the dollar stores in Santiago that they could not sell me the t-shirt I wanted to buy; didn't I know that these stores were only for foreign visitors?

But the joy in this sense of belonging was made painful by the realization that it will never again be part of my life on a continuous basis. I believe that, in the deepest sense, this is what uprootedness is all about; that you do not fully fit or feel comfortable in your new environment and that most of the time you do not even know that you don't. It takes an experience like my going back to Cuba to realize that what you have mistaken for comfort does not compare with what the feeling of belonging really means.

On my first morning in Havana I went to the school I attended from first grade to senior year in high school. The main door to the school was closed, but the door of what had been the chapel was open. The statues of the Virgin Mary, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Saint Joseph and the Crucifix were not there. Neither were the pews or the confessional boxes. The floor was covered with mattresses, the room was full of gymnastics equipment and a small group of girls about 5 to 8 years old were graciously exercising to the rhythm set by music and a teacher's voice. I had visions of myself and other little girls receiving our First Communion in that same space, and I

could not stop thinking about what my life would have looked like if I had done gymnastics rather than Communion in that place. And I wondered what the lives of these little girls would look like in the future.

As part of my emotional pilgrimage, I also wanted to visit the homes where I had lived. In spite of all the previous experiences, nothing had prepared me for what I would encounter in the apartment where we lived before leaving Cuba. I went there for the first time on the evening of my second day in Havana. As I walked to the door, a shadow on the side attracted my attention. It was too dark to see, but I knew what it was. I touched it and my fingers confirmed what I had realized in a fraction of a second: my father's nameplate was still affixed to the column at the entrance. Nobody was home that evening, so I returned the next day. And there, in the daylight, was my father's name on a bronze plate. It had not been removed after 23 years! This time a young man opened the door, and I told him the purpose of my visit and asked for his permission to come in. If the sight of my father's name on that bronze plate had sent chills through my spine. the insides of that apartment provided me with an even stranger experience. All of the furniture was the furniture that we had left, the same furniture that had been part of the first 22 years of my life. In fact, the man who opened the door had been taking a nap on my parents' bed, the bed on which I was conceived!

I am sure some of you own pieces of old family furniture. I am sure some of you have gone back to old family houses. But I do not know if you have ever experienced the impact of a physical space where nothing has been moved in a quarter of a century, since you were last there, yet where other people and their lives are now occupants.

A daughter of the poet Carl Sandburg had shared a cab with me from the Havana airport to the hotel. When I had told her that this was my first visit to Cuba in 23 years, she had told me

that the house of her childhood, now a museum of her father's life, was both a familiar and strange place for her. At that moment, I had not fully understood her. Two days later, standing in the middle of the apartment that had been my home for several years, I knew what she had meant.

In addition to what I have described, my trip to Cuba made me realize that my memories had a geography. That what I remembered had actually happened in a definite physical space that continues to exist in reality and not only in my memory. That Cuba, in fact, exists beyond what I think or feel or remember about her. This realization, which may seem all too obvious, was the more powerful because before my return I never knew that I felt as if Cuba did not have a real existence beyond my memory.

My trip evoked other strong feelings, as well. It may not come as a surprise to know that in spite of the intense and powerful sense of belonging that I experienced in Cuba, I was always alert and vigilant. Among everything that Cuba triggers in me, the need for being vigilant and alert is always included.

Beyond this powerfully intense experience of familiarity and strangeness, my trip put me in touch with childhood friends and made me reflect about the differences in our lives, about the choices to stay or leave that have dramatically influenced our life projects. None of us has any way of knowing what our lives would have looked like without the historical dislocations that have marked them. The only known fact is that powerful historical events have transformed the life course of those of us who left and those of us who stayed in Cuba. Those who stayed, if not uprooted, have also been under the effects of dramatic historical transformations. It is impossible to know if our decisions have resulted in a better life project for any of us, although we each hope and believe to have made the best decision. Bandura's (1982) discussion on the importance of chance encounters for the course of human development addresses the impact that chance may

have as a determinant of life paths. For some people, chance encounters and other life events are additionally influenced by historical and political events far beyond their control. It is true that all human beings experience life transitions, but for people who have been subjected to historical dislocations life crossroads feel, intrapsychically, as more drastic and dramatic.

It seems rather obvious that the impact of sociocultural and historical change on psychological development should be incorporated in any discussion of human development (Elder, 1981). As Bandura (1982) asserts "a comprehensive developmental theory must specify factors that set and alter particular life courses if it is to provide an adequate explanation of human behavior" (p.747). This is particularly important if we want to understand the experiences of individuals whose lives have been dramatically influenced by traumatic historical and political events because "the danger of any period of large-scale uprooting and transmigration is that exterior crises will, in too many individuals and generations, upset the hierarchy of developmental crises and their built-in correctives; and [make us] lose those roots that must be planted firmly in meaningful life cycles" (Erikson, 1964, p. 96). It seems that the use of a methodology that includes life history narratives and an experiential analysis of those experiences could provide social scientists with a tool to understand what the experience of historical dislocation and uprootedness entails for psychological development. Considering that these experiences are part of so many lives in the world in which we live, the importance of such endeavor for the social sciences seems quite obvious.

In my case, what I learned once again from this trip is that who I am is inextricably intertwined with the experience of uprootedness. And what this uprootedness entails, particularly after this return trip, is an awareness that there is another place where I feel at home in profound ways that I did not even know or remember. That place, however, is not fully home anymore.

And this reality is, precisely, the most powerful reminder of my uprootedness. My daily routine is not the daily routine of people in Cuba; their way of life is not my way of life; their perceptions of reality sometimes clash dramatically with mine; I have learned new things about myself—and what is important for me—that do not fit in Cuban life anymore Fven if I wanted to adapt in order to be there, I do not know if they have any use for someone like me. I would love to have the possibility of being back in Cuba for a long period of time, but I know that Cuba could never be my permanent home again. Believe it or not, I missed mv daily life here while I was in Cuba.

Let me also say that I do not believe I have "a corner on uprootedness." In fact, I do not believe that my experience has been particularly difficult. During the past 30 years I have been lucky enough to secure reasonably good jobs, I have developed meaningful friendships that I deeply treasure, I have learned new things about myself and the world that I might not have learned had I stayed in Cuba, and I have evolved valuable adaptive skills as a result of coping with so many changes. It is precisely because my adaptation has been relatively successful and yet so painful at times that I am convinced of the profound psychological impact that uprootedness can have. If I, who have been able to survive and make sense of my experiences in a productive way, have felt and experienced what I have just described, it is reasonable to assume that the pain and confusion experienced by other women less fortunate than I will be more extreme and difficult to survive.

The obvious next step for me as a researcher is to collect life narratives from other people who have undergone similar experiences, particularly from individuals who may have returned to their countries of birth after many years of absence, and compare those experiences. I believe there is invaluable data to be gathered through this process and powerful generalizations to be

made that would further our understanding of human development in general and of the impact of the experience of uprootedness in psychological development in particular.

I have found that sharing my own experiences produces a cathartic and self-exploratory effect in the audience as well as helps clinicians empathize with patients who have undergone similar experiences. I have also had several conversations with women who have returned to their countries of origin after long periods of time. Their experiences parallel mine to a remarkable degree. It seems evident to me that the details of my own narrative, as well as other life narratives may provide invaluable information to understand the experiences of other immigrants and possibly be useful in structuring programs of psychological assistance and mutual support.

I hope I have succeeded in demonstrating that there is value in the data provided by our own lives and that these data can be a point of departure for valuable analyses of other lives. By incorporating our own experiential perspectives to the research enterprise, ethnic minority researchers can thus innovate not only the focus of social science research but also the methodological approaches with which to study its content. This approach, both in content and process, constitutes a creative endeavor necessary to include new points of view in our disciplines rather than just adapting an established paradigm that, both in content and process, does not fully include the lives of our communities.

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