

## **Traumatic Historical Events and Adolescent Psychosocial Development: Letters from V.**

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In this chapter I present and analyze the experience of a Latin American adolescent who was separated from her parents because of her country's political circumstances. The study is based on the data provided by seventy-one letters written by this young woman, here called V. These letters span the period of nine years, while V. was between the ages of thirteen and twenty-two, covering not only her adolescence, but also the most traumatic period in her life. At age thirteen, V. was abruptly separated from her parents when they were imprisoned as political dissidents. A year later, while both her parents were still in prison, they decided to send their children to another country. There she was cared for by a family who had volunteered to be her guardians. Thus, to the trauma created by political events and her parents' imprisonment, the traumas of uprooting, migration, and adaptation to foster parents were added. After nearly a decade of separation, when she next saw her parents, V. was married and expecting her first child. Her primary outlet for the pain, grief, frustration, and uncertainty of those years was writing letters to one of her former teachers who had also emigrated. This teacher was herself a young twenty-two year old woman at the time this correspondence started.

A previous study of these letters (Espín, Stewart & Gomez, 1990) focused on the applicability of Erikson's (1963, 1968) general model of psychosocial development to this adolescent's development. That study employed a coding system for analyzing personal documents based on Erikson's stages of psychosocial development devised by Stewart, Franz and Layton (1988). A time-series analysis of the data provided by the coded letters showed that

"despite the severity of her losses and her uprooting at the beginning of adolescence, V. seems to have experienced Erikson's hypothesized normal course of psychosocial development" (Espín et al., 1990, p.358) while, simultaneously, some unique features, such as "unexpectedly high level of preoccupation with intimacy and even with generativity" (p.358) were present.

In that study, we concluded that "in future work it will be important to identify the personal and circumstantial factors that facilitate maintenance of normal personality development in the face of traumatic loss" (Espín et al., 1990, p.362). This chapter is an attempt at identifying those factors, using a qualitative approach to the data, thus allowing V.'s words to present the reader with her process as she described it. My analysis focuses on themes of coping and resilience in addition to references to Erikson's theory.

Reading these letters we witness the writer's development process as she experienced it. Her description of and reflections about her life experiences provide first hand understanding of the impact of historical/political events on her life.

As Allport (1942) argued, "In the analysis of letters, the psychological and historical methods fuse" (p.109). Reading these letters, it is difficult to disentangle the effects of historical/political events on V.'s life course from her individual psychological development. Indeed, is it impossible to understand individual psychological development without considering the specific historical circumstances in which that individual is immersed. It is also problematic to determine the interplay between the two because it is difficult to "specify the process by which historical events are manifested in the life course, [although it is evident that] psychological questions are posed by knowledge of the particular historical situation and its life course effects" (Elder, 1981, p.97). That is why research on individuals who have experienced traumatic historic/political events

can yield knowledge unlikely to be gained from more traditional samples -- knowledge about psychosocial development under conditions of concentrated and chronic adversity, knowledge about the factors that influence whether adversity will or will not be overcome, and finally, knowledge that is not only important for developmental theory but essential for the formulation of social policy. (Jessor, 1993, p.119).

V.'s individual experience, then, is invaluable. Although it cannot help us disentangle the effect of historical/political events on all individuals, it does provide a concrete case through which to describe the lived experience of one adolescent.

V.'s adult psychological make up most probably would not have been the same without the attendant cultural/political/ historical events that framed her life. As a thirteen year old, before the events that transformed the course of her life, V. was bright, vivacious, and slightly shy. Through her childhood and early adolescence she appeared to be reasonably adjusted, did well in school, and was well liked by her peers. Most probably, her ability to withstand the traumatic events of her life was related to her previous adjustment and maturity. As an adult V. has had a productive, apparently healthy life. She has been successful in both her personal and professional life. Yet the question remains: How did historical conditions interact with her biography to create her individual psychology. Moreover, is there any "biography" outside of historical events for V. or anyone else? Most people are not aware that they are immersed in a particular historical context. For most of us it is only when that context becomes traumatic or in other ways "unusual" that we start questioning its psychological effects (Espín, 1992). In this chapter, I probe the interplay between history and psychology by focusing on the experience of one individual.

## **The Impact of History**

From V.'s letters we know that during her adolescence, when the upheaval was most intense, she was acutely aware of her historical circumstances. Her letters include regular reference to the effects of political/historical events on her everyday life and on her relationships with people. She writes frequently of the fear and anxiety created by those event, both directly and through veiled and "encoded" allusions that she trusts her correspondent to interpret. From her first letters, references to the relationship between events in her life and political upheaval are constant. As she presents, describes, and interprets those events, she reveals her unique mixture of unusual maturity and childish expression. Simultaneously, she exposes her internal anguish and concern for the well-being of the adults no longer able to provide her with protection because of their own helplessness.

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In her first letter, written before her emigration, she tells her correspondent:

I would love to be with you, but I would not judge myself to be a good person if I left my parents now when they need me the most. Also I have been very agitated these days because my grandfather was taken to a farm for vacation. It was short, but I was terrified as hell (July 15, 1961)

This story about a "farm" her grandfather is "taken to for vacation" is, in fact, a veiled description of his recent brief arrest and unexpected release. It terrifies her because with her parents already in prison, she fears for her fate if her grandparents are also imprisoned for an extended period of time.

The depth of her terror and the intensity of her anxiety come through in words that seem almost unlike a thirteen-year-old's:

We are OK, but my parents are still in the hospital and I am really desperate and cannot take it anymore. Only belief in God sustains me.(October 6, 1961)

This time "hospital" represents the prison. In this letter, as in many others, God is seen as the only source of consolation, strength and meaning to mitigate the traumatic experience. The situation was indeed terrifying for a thirteen year old living in a context where rumors were the only source of information:

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I went to see my father on Wednesday. But I am very nervous because under each section of [the small island where the men's prison is located] they have placed 25,000 pounds of dynamite. So there are 100,000 pounds under the place. You can imagine what it is for, so that makes me very nervous.(June 11, 1961)

In the first letter she writes after leaving her country she explicitly articulates her fears and the events' impact on her life. In this letter, the psychological transformation that resulted from her early losses begins to manifesting itself:

I have decided to leave my country and come to this country only because my parents were desperate for me to do so. However, it makes me feel like a coward. I feel bad not being able to do anything. My hands are tied, although I would be willing to give my life for my country and for God. That is why I feel desperate not being able to do anything about the horrible political regime in our country. I have wanted to say this to you for a long time, but I could not do it while I was there: I could have endangered my parents... I know you understand that I am serious about these words that I need so much to say to someone. I know you know that I am only a child in body, that in the last few months

there has been a radical change in me. It is not my choice, but I am not the same as I was:  
I have been forced to become a grown woman at fourteen. (August 24, 1962)

Indeed, her letters reveal unusual maturity for her age. She perceives that the traumatic events have pushed her development beyond what was expected at her age for other adolescents of her culture and social class. This letter, perhaps more than any other, illustrates her uncanny ability to analyze her experience. It also presents with clarity one of the themes that reappear constantly in the letters: The wishes of others and the will of God are at the center of her life decisions and inform the acceptance of her fate.

During nine years of letter writing, V. never met her correspondent face to face. Their eventual meeting was cathartic for V. As is common for trauma victims, reviewing the experiences after several years fosters a sense of integration and healing of the painful memories (e.g. Herman, 1992). The encounter with her correspondent facilitated this process and fostered a sense of reconciliation with the past. This process may or may not have happened without this visit, but if nothing else, the visit and long hours of conversation after so many years of letter writing facilitated the opportunity for the reviewing and integration of the painful events.

Immediately after their first visit, V. reflected on the impact of these historical/political events on her life course:

I believe that today I have hated [all those events and the political leaders who have created them] the most. It is terrible to have to live away from someone who can understand us just because events beyond our control have determined our fate and where we are to live. (February 13, 1970)

She differentiated between positive and negative results of her experiences. Not everything in the forced migration and loss of country was destructive to her:

I guess that I can also thank [the political leaders I hate] for good things in my life and even my happiness. If I had met my husband in our country, he probably would have never talked to me. Not only because I had more money than him but also because I would not have lowered my social status for his sake. In fact, thanks to these horrible events I have learned that money is not worth much and neither are social position and family name. As you can see, I seem to owe [those political leaders] more than one thing in spite of everything else. (March 4, 1970)

Yet her pain cannot be forgotten that easily. As often happens often with grief, any event may trigger it again. Years after her emigration, a few months after the visit of her correspondent, V. wrote:

I am watching a film that takes place in our country about forty years ago. I am seeing familiar views of that all too familiar land. It seems impossible that such simple things after so many years can move us so much. It is as if I had left only yesterday. The pain and the memories are there all over again. (May 8, 1970)

### **V.'s Psychosocial Development**

Many theories have been proposed for the study of adolescent psychosocial development. Of these Erikson's (1963, 1968) is probably the best known and provided a valuable theoretical frame for an earlier study (Espín et al., 1990) of these letters. "Overall the patterns of V.'s [development] suggests broad support for Erikson's theory that identity preoccupations are the

focus of psychosocial development for adolescents, and that as they are resolved, and a secure identity established, they gradually give way to increasing intimacy concerns" (Espín et al, 1990, p.358). However, in V.'s case, "it is interesting that the developmental trends are much stronger for intimacy and generativity than for identity" (Espín et al, p.358). Yet overall, "despite the severity of her losses and her uprooting at the beginning of adolescence, V. ... seems to have experienced Erikson's hypothesized normal course of psychosocial development in terms of both individuation (identity) and connection with others (intimacy and generativity)" (Espín et al, 1990, p.358).

Themes of *identity* appear consistently in V.'s letters. She expresses these concerns in several ways. As with other adolescents, career concerns emerge as an expression of her search for identity.

You may think that I change my mind easily because in a recent letter I told you that I wanted to study Psychology. But it is my worse subject this year, so I have realized that God does not want me there and I have decided for journalism...Something in writing has a powerful attraction for me. I think writing about things that are important is something that fulfills me (March 25, 1965).

Her career concerns intermingle with considerations about how best to be of service to God and others. In the same letter, she says:

Let's see if I can find in a newspaper the most effective place to work for Christ...To help others see the injustice in which some people live is also something that does not let me remain silent. And I think a newspaper is the best means to help others see things (March 25, 1965).



She also expressed concerns about her identity through statements about herself, often portrayed in a negative light. References to her personal deficiencies serve as running commentary throughout the letters:

I am so stupid! The truth is that I deserve everything that is happening to me (February 5, 1963);

I am intolerable, nothing comes out right because of my own fault. I am boring, silly, and stupid and you must be tired of this ridiculous friend (June 10, 1966).

Only once in a while does a positive comment slip through but not without being immediately followed by some of the usual negative comments about herself:

At this point I am beginning to believe (please don't think I am vain) that I am pretty, even though I continue to be shy and easily embarrassed. (December 5, 1965)

It is possible that some of this self-criticism may have been a normal part of adolescent identity testing, an initially awkward and exaggerated effort at gaining a sense of perspective on aspects of her own character. At the same time, V.'s comments appear to have been part of a maneuver to achieve mastery over a chaotic, painful, and confusing situation by attributing all difficulties to personal deficiencies that could be more or less easily overcome. As conflicts and difficulties arose, it was easier for V. to blame herself and her deficiencies rather than blame others or confront the reality that she was immersed in a situation completely beyond her control.

In spite of these negative self-appraisals, she was sensitive to nuances of feelings, to her own internal states, and to others. Statements about who she is and who she is in relation to others appear more frequently in the letters than any other theme, revealing her adolescent overriding concern with identity, and to a lesser degree, intimacy. At times her "self-analysis" helps her avoid acknowledging further losses. For example, when her correspondent leaves their country, she wrote:

You know I am stupid...like when I didn't want to go to the airport to say good-bye to you, just because I was embarrassed. I don't know how to express my feelings, I never do.

(July 7, 1961)

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Oftentimes, her "self-analysis" comforts her in the face of loss, as when she left her country:

I am perfectly ok and I haven't even cried. I don't even know myself; I am surprised because I have never been strong...I feel completely mature and I am not just saying this to say something...I have had to become a grown woman at 14. (August 25, 1962)

V.'s concerns with *intimacy* are expressed in her letters in reference to boyfriends, classmates and other friends. Her first mention of a boyfriend has a young adolescent's characteristic naïvete:

What's happening is that I am in love even if I am too young for that. But I guess this is something that cannot be avoided or resisted.(January 5, 1963)

Three years later, in letters where she mentions her future husband, she shows increased maturity in her understanding of the meaning of love and commitment. She has become a young woman making significant life decisions on the basis of relationships:

I have made the decision to get married a few months after I finish high school. He is good and intelligent. But I am scared. I am scared of confronting life, but this is the decision. I already bought the graduation shoes that will be my wedding shoes too. (June 10, 1966)

Throughout the letters, V. expresses intimacy concerns vividly in the context of her relationship with her correspondent. Their friendship, through correspondence, provides a very important source of strength and emotional support for V.:

If you only knew how much I would like to be with you, because I love you and miss you more than you can believe it. I never really considered you as a teacher but as a friend even if I never said it because I was embarrassed to say so. (July 15, 1961)

*Generativity* issues are also present in her early letters as she reveals her concern for her parents. Later, this theme reemerges when she talks about her children. Through their years of correspondence, she also expressed care for her correspondent and for others mentioned in the letters:

You are living alone in that place and that makes me upset. It is not fair that you have to be alone. I would give anything to be there with you for a while. I don't know if I am conceited but I think that you would be happy to have me bugging you for a couple of months. (February 26, 1965)

Throughout the letters V.'s constant concern for others, and her minimizing of her own feelings, fits a very typical "female pattern." Miller (1986) and Gilligan (1982) among others have described this pattern. They identified it as one of women's strengths, but clearly this pattern also has significant drawbacks for women (e.g., Kaschak, 1992).

### **Coping with Loss**

For persons like V., as for other's in traumatic and catastrophic social situations, a variety of protective mechanisms prevent the individual from realizing the gravity of the occasion (Allport, 1942; Rodríguez-Nogués, 1983). They may show little or no reaction for weeks, even years, (Herman, 1992; Parkes, 1972; Rodríguez-Nogués, 1983) if the bereavement occurs at a

time when they are confronted with important tasks. The same pattern is present when there is a need for maintaining the morale of others.

Research suggests this can be a positive form of adjustment to a traumatic situation.

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Rodríguez-Nogués (1983) studied Cuban girls who emigrated to the United States as unaccompanied minors. She found they usually denied their actual losses and concomitant psychological pain at the time of the events. This tended to create a delayed grief reaction and posttraumatic effects but also facilitated their functioning at the time of the events. Similarly, as events transformed the course of V.'s life, she suffered a few minor psychosomatic reactions. Yet, on the whole she seems to have coped with the situation without further complications.

Clearly, V. experienced an acute sense of loss in early adolescence when her parents were imprisoned and she left them and her country. When confronted with loss, children, adolescents or adults may progress through psychosocial stages by developing new bonds to special individuals. This is one of the most effective strategies for coping with the loss of significant relationships and familiar places and the threats to identity imposed by migration (Espín, 1987). V.'s early capacity for intimacy, served her well. It provided her with skills to establish new bonds. Demonstrably, her relationship with her teacher/correspondent/ long-term friend, flourished. This bond is particularly noteworthy because maintaining friendship through letters is not a highly valued skill in the modern world. The relationship V. established with the nuns and classmates at school also contributed to her emotional survival. It is interesting to note that, with the exception of her future husband, it appears that all her significant relationships were with women.

Loss and grief affect one's image of oneself (Parkes, 1972) V.'s letters well illustrate. Yet, her attribution of all negative events to herself, despite the pain and self-negation involved,

paradoxically provided her with a sense of control over the situation. Attributing negative events to herself was preferable to a total sense of helplessness in the face of uncontrollable events. Thus in the letters she actively denies her suffering or copes with her losses by attributing her painful feelings and experiences to personal deficiencies or to the privilege of having been especially chosen by God. She never faults the reality of the situation or others' wrongdoing.

Her interactions with her foster mother vividly illustrate how she coped with the loss of her mother's love:

I am really intolerable today and I am about to cry because something simple happened. I asked my "aunt" to fix some clothes for me because they were hand outs from others and very old fashioned and she told me I was too proud. I might be wrong to take her rejection too much at heart but you know I am too sensitive and easily hurt. Please don't feel sorry for me. What happens is that I am only 15 years old and even if my situation is not so bad, sometimes I explode. (January 18, 1963)

A few months later she wrote in a similar vein:

I don't talk about feeling bad because everything is only in my nervous system. Besides, I am embarrassed to ask them for help. For example, last night I was throwing up in the bathroom, my "aunt" came to the door and when she found out that it was me and not her daughter, she just left. I felt bad. It is horrible to miss your mother's love. But, on the other hand, perhaps my aunt did not think it was important. And you know that I am extremely sentimental and extremely proud. Don't think that it is I am depressed, it is just how I am. (May 3, 1965)

Significantly, V.'s pejorative self-descriptions and negative self evaluations contradict her actual accomplishments and positive relationships with others. For example, her school grades are always high, her classmates elect her "queen" of the class, the nuns in her school are fond of her and treat her with great kindness, and she has several boyfriends through adolescence. She also belongs to a theater group and is accepted and loved by friends. Other positive events occur in her life. However, she consistently uses negative self statements, apparently to deny the intensity of her pain and losses. Alternatively, her denial of her true feelings may fuel her negative self-perception. Even when she is unable to deny the felt impact of her experiences she still tries to explain those feelings away:

I don't know what is happening to me but I feel empty regardless of what I do. I know that I have a normal life, but I am just tired of this. (August 9, 1966)

V. has yet another positive interpretation for her pain. She identifies it as God's will, even God's special choosing of her. Her intense belief in God is the only relief from a pain that cannot be explained in everyday terms by an adolescent. Her spirituality seems to afford her another nurturing and wise "parent" in God, through whom she feels "chosen" and uniquely loved.

I know that God doesn't want me to be a coward, but I have terrible moments and today is one of them. (March 29, 1964)

Many months later she reasons similarly:

These problems are killing me but without problems I would not consider myself happy, because if God is sending me this it must be because he trusts that I am going to respond in a good way. (November 19, 1965)

Yet another way she expresses her difficulties is through recounting some of her peers' experiences. She refers to a girl mentioned by her correspondent whose mother has recently died. Her empathy is all the more striking as she does not know this girl:

You don't know how much she must be suffering even though she may not have told you.

(May 3, 1965)

Likely, V. is talking about herself and letting her correspondent know that she has not fully revealed the hardest parts of her experience.

In another instance, V. refers to a friend who may marry to escape a painful home situation. V insists that she will never fall into this trap, no matter how difficult her own situation with her foster parents might become. She describes in great detail what this girl's feelings and doubts must be and expounds on why it is wrong for this girl to marry despite the chance of resolution for immediate tensions. In fact, V.'s long description of this girl's situation is a clear description of her own temptation to marry her boyfriend too soon in order to escape her foster home.

### **The Resolution Phase**

Despite rationalizations to the contrary, V., married a few months after finishing high school. Although this early marriage may have foreclosed some possibilities, it certainly was an adaptive solution to her problems at that point in time. Indeed, it allowed her to start a new life with someone who loved her after all those years of feeling unloved and barely tolerated by her foster parents. Almost a year later, when she was ready to give birth to her first child, her parents were released from prison and joined her in exile.

As previously mentioned, her correspondent visited her for the first time several years later. This two-week visit served to reaffirm their long-distance friendship and to reintegrate memories of V.'s traumatic adolescent years. At the same time, the additional separation after this visit prompted an intense reactivation of V.'s feelings of loss.

Upon their reunion, V. experienced a clear and direct acknowledgement of what the initial separation had meant for her. She realized the significance the correspondence had in sustaining her through her adolescence and traumatic losses and separation from her parents. In other words, it became evident that the validation of her pain provided by this friendship had been an essential and sustaining factor during V.'s adolescence.

One of the most disconcerting effects of your visit is that I have realized how influential you have been in my life without even knowing it. I realize now that I started changing my ways of being with people the moment you started to be concerned about my things. I think that has been decisive in my life. Do you realize what that means? I have reached the conclusion that a lot of what is good in me I owe to you. (February 21, 1970)

Clearly, writing these letters and receiving support and comfort through them was a saving grace in V.'s development. Yet her own capacity for deep interaction at a very early age made this relationship possible, for just as clearly, the sustaining power of this relationship cannot only be attributed to the efforts of her correspondent.

### **Implications of this Case Study**

The established theories of psychological development presume an environment characterized by political stability, in which "environment" is equated with parental behavior.



These theories do not take into consideration the eventuality of disruptive sociohistorical events and their impact on “normal” development. Obviously, dealing with the common tasks of psychological development while dealing with traumatic sociopolitical events complicates these tasks for children and adolescents. As Erikson (1964) argued, “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 the developing individual] lose those roots that must be planted firmly in meaningful life cycles.” (p.96)

Violent or abrupt political events produce traumatic experiences that psychologically affect the lives of children and adolescents who undergo them. Ironically, the focus on the physical safety of both children and adults may divert attention from considerations about their psychological well-being. Usually, psychological services or research studies tailored to these populations focus on victims or survivors who manifest serious emotional maladjustment. Survivors who are reasonably adjusted, like those who remain relatively psychologically unscathed, seldom attract the attention of psychologists and are frequently left to their own devices.

The friendship between V. and her correspondent may have buffered the impact of her losses and may have protected V. from the additional trauma that could have been created by surrounding her experience with silence. The historical events relevant to V.'s life took place years ago, but similar events are still happening all over the world. The notion that friendship with a trusted adult can be valuable in enhancing psychological survival has implications for the lives of children and adolescents whose development is severely challenged by the sociopolitical world they inhabit.

This chapter has presented the case of one individual who found her own path through a series of traumatic events precipitated by historical/political conditions. In constructing that path, her correspondence with another woman a few years older, a former teacher turned lifelong friend, acted as an anchoring force. This ongoing conversation, together with V.'s previous psychological health and spiritual groundedness, provided her with the strength to cope with the traumatic events of her adolescence.

It is apparent that for V., as for other individuals under her circumstances, the encounter between individual and society involved a transformation in subjectivity. Her understanding of who she is has been forever marked by those traumatic events. However, it is almost impossible to disentangle what the pure effect of those events may have been. The person that could have been without those events never came to be. Paradoxically, because we are dealing with the absence of any evident pathology or posttraumatic stress disorder, it is hard to determine what the consequences of the traumatic events were for V. But we do know that "the self is the sum of an individual's changing internal conversations, the forecastings, the recollections and the wishes, the voices that make up our intrapsychic life" (Gagnon, 1992, p.239) and "self-understanding is always shaped by culture. The tales we tell each other about who we are and might yet become are individual variations on the narrative templates our culture deems intelligible" (Ochberg, 1992, p.214) and on the limitations that historical events force upon us. V.'s narrative of the events of her life as transmitted through her adolescent letters is but one individual's conversation with herself through her conversation with a trusted friend. Because she was a gifted and unusually mature adolescent, she was able to make sense of her experiences in her own way and avail herself of the friendship and support provided by this correspondence.

V.'s normal life and adjustment in adulthood conceal a difficult route and reveal her strength. Other less fortunate children and adolescents subjected to similar traumatic events may respond differently or resort to other strategies to cope with trauma. But although only a single individual's story, V.'s story as presented through her correspondence is a tribute to human strength and resilience.

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