Chapter 7

Embroidery, Resilience, and Discovery: Embroidery as Healing in the Guajira Peninsula

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how embroidery as a visual mapping tool can address situations of historical trauma and increase community resilience through a process of conscientisation and grassroots organizing. The author will draw from her fieldwork with a group of indigenous Wayuu women in the Guajira Peninsula in northern Colombia, a region that has been significantly affected by climate change and decades of armed conflict. The women created embroidered maps of their daily lives, analyzed these maps for common themes and challenges, identified the root causes of the oppression they experience daily, and discussed action steps to address these power disparities. The author suggests that embroidery is a powerful healing tool for engaging indigenous women in a dignified manner by illuminating their narratives of resilience in order to address historical trauma.

INTRODUCTION

Embroidery is an effective tool that can be used to help indigenous women around the world reflect critically on their daily lives, and discover the inherent resilience they possess that allows them to navigate historical and ongoing trauma from a grassroots level. The author will draw from her fieldwork with a group of Wayuu indigenous women in northern Colombia who suffer multiple traumas as a result of poverty, climate change, large-scale development projects, and a decades-long civil war. This uncertain future is a subtle and ongoing form of trauma that challenges community autonomy, produces feelings of isolation and helplessness, and threatens their traditional way of life. Despite all of this, the Wayuu women remain resilient in the face of complicated macro pressures present in their territory.
Embroidery, Resilience, and Discovery

In the following chapter, the author will explain how an embroidery mapping project was used to create a safe space for the participants to address their historical trauma by constructing a collective story through art. As they shared their embroidered maps with each other and analyzed them for common themes and challenges, the women entered into a time of critical reflection regarding the conspiring systems and structures that impact their unique way of life. This awareness-raising process forged new relationships among the women, and increased their sense of solidarity. Ultimately, they unearthed a reservoir of resilience to take action and address ongoing community needs using their local strengths and resources.

HISTORICAL TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE

Historical Trauma Among Indigenous Communities

Although indigenous people groups make up six percent of the world’s population, they are disproportionately affected by historical trauma as compared to their non-indigenous peers (Lauderdale, 2008, p. 1840). Historical trauma (HT) refers to a cumulative and collective “emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences” like colonization, massacres, genocide, displacement, and dispossession (Kirmayar, Gone, & Moses, 2014, p. 311). Mass trauma, on the other hand, is the result of a frightening, life-threatening event experienced by many people at one time. (Boyd Webb, p. 4). While HT includes some sort of mass trauma, mass trauma does not necessarily result in HT.

Research shows that the effects of historically situated traumas can accumulate over time and across generations. This means that family members who did not experience the original trauma may still suffer symptoms of that trauma generations later. A study by Sotero (as cited in Beltrán & Begun, 2014) reveals that indigenous communities often teach their offspring “to share in the ancestral pain of their people and may have strong feelings of unresolved grief, persecution, and distrust”. These memories are exacerbated by contemporary suffering that continues to plague indigenous groups such as the exploitation of their lands for natural resource extraction, displacement, forced relocation, poverty, structural inequality, and racial discrimination (Beltrán & Begun, 2014).

The Colombian Context

The general violent conditions resulting from Colombia’s ongoing 60-year internal armed conflict and its spillover into neighboring countries, especially at the borders, have had a direct and disproportionate impact on the lives of indigenous peoples. Exacerbated by drug cartels, armed groups, and multinational companies pursuing the rich natural resources in their territories, this serious humanitarian situation has resulted in displacement, extreme marginalization, and environmental degradation in indigenous communities.

According to Tovar-Restrepo and Irazábal (2013), 28 percent of indigenous peoples in Colombia live in conditions of extreme poverty (p. 46). This reality is intensified by a decades-long civil war that has been internationally recognized as one of the “most severe internal conflicts in terms of displacements and killings” (Tovar-Restrepo & Irazábal, 2013, p. 45). Because indigenous communities have refused to take part in the conflict, they have found themselves at odds with all armed groups. In their attempt