



The Traumatic Stress Research Consortium (TSRC) at the Kinsey Institute, Indiana University

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Building Collective Capacity for Solidarity and Healing Among Migrant People in Colombia

By Abi Nolan



Dunna program participants

In this issue:

The TSRC researches ways in which shared social engagement can restore safety and promote recovery from trauma. Being in safe connection with ourselves and fellow human beings is a key premise of many approaches to therapy, but especially so for healing trauma. In this newsletter, we share about the ways in which an organization in Colombia is drawing on social engagement practices rooted in local cultures and traditions to facilitate healing from traumas that reach beyond the community level, and for some participants, extend back for generations.

The La Guajira Peninsula is the site of a 249 km porous border between Colombia and Venezuela. Along this line lie over 200 unauthorized crossing points, known as ‘trochas’, which Venezuelan migrants traverse to enter Colombia, risking exploitation and attack. Many Venezuelan migrants travel to the Colombian city of Riohacha, home to a unique landscape of desert and beach rich with indigenous Wayuú custom and craft. It is a city with a fiercely strong sense of identity and cultural protection, hosting some of the greatest numbers of Venezuelan refugees and one of the poorest parts of Colombia.



Across Colombia, Venezuelan refugees live among other displaced populations. In the southwest, the city of Cali sprawls in the basin of the Cauca Valley. Here, Venezuelan refugees arrive alongside other migrants forcibly dislocated from poorly resourced regions in Colombia. More granularly, Caleños themselves live in exile from neighborhoods that are brutally inhospitable as a result of gang-related hostility. Many of the displaced families living across Colombia experience destitution, surviving in unsafe informal settlements at high risk of violent crime and poor health. These factors contribute to a cycle of intergenerational distress that impacts every individual and the wider population of which they are a part.

It is in this context that Fundacion Dunna, a Bogotá based nonprofit, is delivering thoughtful

models of psychosocial support. In May 2023, as part of a research project to inform my own efforts to provide accessible, grassroots-level well-being interventions in London, I traveled to several sites in Colombia, including Riohacha and Cali, to study the impact of mind-body and restorative practices. I connected with community leaders, facilitators and the participants of Dunna’s programming to learn from their stories of change and healing.

Dunna’s programs combine restorative practices like sharing circles and active listening with ‘bottom-up’ mind-body methods like yoga, breathwork, authentic movement and play to affect positive change among the many communities that they engage with. Rooted in the traditions of indigenous populations all over the world, knowledge sharing in community has been a powerful tool for collective healing, decision-making, conflict resolution, and cultural preservation for centuries. Many of the people I met during my time in Colombia had encountered the profound impact of these potent restorative, sharing practices, particularly when coupled with somatic methods for regulating the nervous system.



After using breathwork, movement and play to foster a connection with, and to inhabit their own bodies as safe spaces, participants are invited to form a circle, to receive story, engage

in active listening and deepen their capacity for sharing in a group context. This supportive environment of self-regulation and physical safety alongside co-regulation and compassion cultivates transformation for the group. Or, as one of the former participants described, the program focuses on both ‘body and soul’, and teaches that “we need to be okay ourselves in order to help others”.



During one of my interviews with participants of a programme for displaced families, a mother recalled that she was asked to present an object that holds deep significance or represents her experience of life, to spark open story sharing. She brought along the traditionally preserved umbilical cord that she had kept as a lucky charm from the birth of her son, a culturally significant custom for her family. She said this object represented her fear of losing him and compelled her to, once safely settled in her physical body, share the story of his migration, their separation, and the difficulties that she was still working through around her relationship with him. She expressed a sense of liberation in voicing this painful story to the group she had come to trust, and that this was the first time that her experience felt acknowledged outside of a legal or clinical setting. Further still, it marked the

first time she felt safe, free from blame or intrusive ‘why?’ questions, and so, it was an opportunity for her to truly begin processing her fear without facing judgment from those around her.

The power of sharing story was further illustrated by one of the participants who expressed that her journey of healing began at the moment that she began to speak in the circle. She described never having imagined that she’d allow herself to be emotionally open because she was raised to ‘stay strong’ and ‘never cry’. She said it was the first time she felt truly listened to. She felt her experiences were validated and not minimized or questioned by those listening which allowed her to express and let go of her anger. Another woman shared that, for the first time, she was able to speak about her pivotal traumatic experience without pain and shame. She described feeling liberated from the hold it had on her, not only in that moment but from that moment forward. Having heard their stories firsthand, it is clear that the opportunity to express oneself without fear of scrutiny or judgment creates a space for catharsis, relief, and a sense of connection. These experiences can quell the loneliness often associated with holding vivid memories in the body.



Significant objects shared by participants

The women I met in Colombia expressed that their perception of themselves and their story shifted as they moved towards healthy embodiment and saw themselves through the eyes of others in this safe, judgment free space. They



discovered that they can simultaneously be physically still but safe and strong, they can be emotionally expressive and open but maintain power and agency, all of which enabled them to relate to themselves and others more peacefully and with kindness. For many of these women, this new relational experience held the power to transform life at home with their family too. A mother I spent time with reported that she'd begun using the self-regulation breathwork that she learned with Dunna to manage her anger during conflict with her children. Another expressed to me that she feels more conscious now and that she takes care of herself so that she can be emotionally healthy, open, and available for her children when they need her. She told me that she is very proud of the person she is raising; her daughter is growing up to be conscious and to have love for herself too.

Widening circles of well-being

These kinds of programs situate psychosocial health at the center of widening circles of peaceful coexistence within families, communities, and society. The impact is macro and multi-dimensional, it's a healing that begins in the nervous system of each body. This change, in turn, has the potential to shape healthier familial dynamics and disrupt cycles of disempowerment and

fear. Though systemic, intergenerational injustices like poverty, instability, and violence persist, the people I met in Colombia are resisting the waves of their impact by building a collective capacity for solidarity and healing. The stories I heard confirmed for me that, for those managing the symptoms of displacement and associated trauma, there is a healing potency in being seen and heard as part of trauma-informed mind-body interventions. Further, the freedom to finally occupy physical space with ease and in a state of social engagement can culminate in a reclaiming of relating well to motherhood, to material circumstances and the communities of which they are a part. It was a joy to witness this groundswell of resilience and my hope is that human-centered models like those pioneered by Fundación Dunna continue to grow, evolve and find recognition worldwide so that more people can find their way to safety, freedom and self determination.



About the Author

Abi Nolan founded a London-based impact enterprise that delivers well-being interventions to grassroots and nonprofit partners. A recipient of the Churchill Fellowship, she was supported to travel to Colombia and connect with Fundacion Dunna in May 2023. Intent on learning through oral history, Abi gathered firsthand accounts of women that have participated in Dunna's programming in Cali and Riohacha.

You can read more at: <https://study.supply.yoga/findings-field-notes>



Abi Nolan



Bogota-based Dunna (<https://www.dunna.org>) has designed and delivered pioneering social innovation models for mental health for over 13 years. Their unique protocol of mind-body methods and restorative practices supports the psychosocial health of communities affected by violence and generational trauma throughout Colombia. Dunna's programs are designed to meet the unique needs of diverse groups; from participants of the government's social reincorporation initiative to young people affected by incarceration and survivors of gender-based violence.

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About the Consortium

The TSRC is an international group of clinicians and researchers studying the science of safety and connection. We are committed to furthering our understanding of the personal trajectories of trauma survivors, including mental and physical health, social wellbeing, resilience, and personal meaning.

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Ways to get involved with the consortium

Invite your clients to share their experiences:

We continue to welcome new participants for our worldwide client survey. For more information or to share the survey with your clients, please email trauma@indiana.edu

Help grow our membership:

Invite your colleagues to join the TSRC network. Register at trauma@indiana.edu

Thank You to Our Donors

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