

Stolen Babies in Spain: Mediated Stories for Recovery Mothers' Activism through Online Campaigns

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Abstract

Research into Stolen Babies in Spain has tended to study the cases through a legal/historical perspective. Given that the topic of Stolen Babies has only recently appeared in the media, there are no previous analyzes of the advocacy of Stolen Babies' mothers on YouTube and in the media. This document aims to provide an overview of a Media Psychology approach towards the results obtained through the media campaign "Te Estamos Buscando" (We Are Looking for You) known as TEB and the disruption in the Spanish and international media.

Key words: Stolen Babies–Spain – Trauma– Recovery – YouTube – Dictatorship – Identified Victim – Ubuntu

1. Stolen Babies, A Media Perspective

Research into Stolen Babies in Spain has tended to study the cases through a legal/historical perspective. Given that the topic of Stolen Babies has only recently appeared in the media, there are no previous analyzes of the advocacy of Stolen Babies' mothers on YouTube and in the media.

This document aims to provide an overview of a Media Psychology approach towards the results obtained through the media campaign "Te Estamos Buscando" (We Are Looking for You) known as TEB (Escudero, 2017; 2018) and the disruption in the Spanish and international media. This media action, about a traumatic event and the resilient process of the families, survivors of Stolen Babies, was the first as a result of group dynamics and interviews. We argue that an approach based on media psychology and the experience of group dynamics can generate two types of positive results in the surviving families and their audience, in mainstream media and the international press. First, groups of survivors who are heard/observed by society and published by the media, feel recognized (they are not afraid or embarrassed to share their experiences, they are empowered); second, the survivors, in recounting their experiences, collaborate through the TEB campaign in a guarantee of non-repetition, and hence this action has positive effects on the recovery process and also for society. On the other hand, the results within the audience would first be related to the fact that the campaign allows individuals to acknowledge what happened through the stories of the survivors (their contemporaries, who advocate for human rights) and empathize with them; second, the individuals become involved with the people and/or organizations, as no one can ensure that these events do not reoccur.

The theft of babies in Spain (1940-1999) was systematic (medical doctors, nurses, Catholic priests and nuns) and based on the concept of eugenics by Doctor Antonio Vallejo Nágera used, during the period under Franco, as an argument for the appropriation of descent. After the dictatorship, in 1975, these practices were motivated economically. For five decades, some 300,000 babies were stolen. In this sense, the media campaign TEB, based on the Identifiable Victim Effect theory, and group dynamics introduce a topic (rooted in politics, history, eugenics) into Spanish society: the Stolen Babies during the dictatorship and after, and the families' current search. One of the main goals of the campaign was first to inform about the cases and then to reunite the families with a powerful message based on Ubuntu philosophy: "I Am Looking for You, We Are Looking for You". TEB became the first campaign launched in Spain humanizing the cases and telling the stories in the first-person as part of a recovery action.

2. Mothers' advocacy on YouTube

Literature on alternative media and social movements has long documented the different strategies activists have employed on a wide range of media platforms for the purposes of promoting awareness around social justice issues (Bimber, Flanagan & Stohl; Dowing, 2001, 2008, 2010; Mattoni & Treré, 2014). As Des Freedman points out, despite contemporary trends concerning mediatization and the centrality of information to contemporary power relations, there is still a strong perception that social movement theory has not yet grasped the scale and significance of the role of media and communications in processes of social change (2017, p. 121).

The Stolen Babies media campaign, presented on YouTube and shared on other platforms, demonstrates the activists' decision and need to change the structure and content of their messages in order to produce empathy in the public and put pressure on journalists: they talk about past events, the dictatorship and the effects of a lack of historical memory in the present. The dictator Franco and his policy on women's health and morality was part of the campaign. The Stolen Babies organizations decided to upload their campaign to YouTube in order to persuade new generations, and to potentially reach their children, the Stolen Babies. Louisa Ha, in her analysis of YouTube as a Global Online Video Portal and an Alternative to TV, indicated how YouTube is part of the online video diet of users, especially millennials, who are our future and don't use traditional media anymore, relying on online content (2018, pp.4).

Freedman (2017), in his theorization about the social movement theory and the media, has suggested that activists have long been committed to creating their own channels of communication via radical media and distributed technologies, in order to promote their own viewpoints and to mobilize people in search of social justice (pp.120).

3. Socio historical factors

Francisco Franco made drastic changes to the way the Spanish population could live, think and act from 1939 until 1975. Franco won the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and went on to establish a dictatorship. Since the end of the Spanish Civil War, its victims lived under repression; the Republicans (known as the Reds) lived in terror during Francoism. Extra-judicial executions took place after the Civil War was over, making the Republicans very wary of exposing themselves by denouncing human rights abuses (Valverde, 2012).

During the dictatorship, women were ordered to preserve their chastity and re-conquer the household. Women's chastity was to be considered the most valuable of all feminine virtues, and those women violating in any way these public morals were to be considered a danger to the social order (Morcillo Gómez, 2015, p.193). Throughout Franco's dictatorship, women were considered subordinate to men, to medical doctors, to church representatives. Women not in line with the dictatorship were persecuted, imprisoned and murdered - like many men- but they also had to face sexual violence, electric shocks and the theft of their children (Bueno-Morales & González-Besteiro, 2018).

Women's marginalization was justified by Nágera in "Social Medicine and Mental Hygiene" (1943, in Campos & González de Pablo, 2016; p.122) and later in "The Wisdom of the Home. Before you get married" (1946). In the former, Nágera explained why the race needed to be cleansed and improved by following his instructions, and in the latter he provided moral advice as well as justifications: "The precepts of eugenics can prevent morbid offspring"(Morcillo Gómez, 2015; p.139).

The Catholic Church was the right hand of Francoism: women were obliged to stop working once they got married, and only after 1961 were they allowed to continue working, with their husband's permission. In addition, they also needed marital permission for certain business transactions (Barrenechea Lopez; 2018, p.34).

Franco, Vallejo Nágera and the Catholic Church worked together to define a lifestyle that was good and accepted. It was this that paved the way for psychological brainwashing; having people believe that Republicans and people that were not Catholic deserved to be cast aside and even experimented on, so that the "red gene" and other opposition could be eradicated from the community and hence not infect the Spanish population.

In 1940, the robbery of children became legal; the government's policy was based on separating babies and children from "red gene" families. From then on, the practice of stealing babies only became easier and more straightforward. Records show that 9,000 children of political enemies were taken in 1943, and another 12,000 were taken in 1944 (Fotheringham, 2011).

It is estimated that the number of people affected by the Stolen Babies practice amounts to 180,000 (Marlasca, 2014). The Stolen Babies period can be divided into two: first, the period of the 1960's (political motivation and eugenics, the children were separated from their Republican mothers in prison settings in an attempt to eradicate any trace of the "red gene" in opposition to Franco). The second period dates from the end of the 1960's until 1999. After the transition to democracy in 1978, the number of Stolen Babies decreased but the practice continued. As Aguilar specifies, the stealing of babies continued in private and public hospitals for some time after democracy and this is related to the fact that many people working for Franco's regime continued working in public offices during democracy (2013 in Barrenechea-Lopez, 2017; p.29). But the modification of the adoption law in 1987 provided greater control and documentation of births and adoptions(Bueno-Morales & González-Besteiro, 2018; p.157).

Considering the number of families affected by the theft of babies and the number of years in which these systematic robberies occurred, we may confirm that we are dealing with a severe traumatic event as suggested by Herman:

“There is a simple, direct relationship between the severity of the trauma and its psychological impact, whether that impact is measured in terms of the number of people affected or the intensity and duration of harm” (1992; p.57).

3.1 A systematic practice to be shared via a campaign

According to victims’ testimonies and literature, the stealing of babies in hospitals during and after Franco was not committed by State agents. The individuals involved were: doctors, midwives, anesthetists, nuns. They were able to perform acts that infringed on basic human values and rights by following a systematic policy.

In Stolen Babies cases, the term systematic has been understood as either an organized plan in furtherance of a common policy, which follows a regular pattern and results in a continuous commission of acts, or as “patterns of crimes” such that the crimes constitute a “non-accidental repetition of similar criminal conduct on a regular basis” (Katanga and NgudjoloChii, in Barrenechea-López, 2017; p.48).

In addition, the families’ testimonies from Andalusia, Catalonia, the Basque Country and even the two British mothers’ cases -their babies stolen during the time they lived in Spain- confirm the existence of a clear pattern: drugs were administered without the women’s consent during labor and even after labor; the lack of information about the babies’ illness or death; the falsification of documents about the babies’ deaths or illnesses; the falsification of documents in which adoptive families became the biological parents. Bueno-Morales & González-Besteiro developed the *modus operandi*:

The couple interested in “adopting” a baby used to go visit the parish priest or chaplain of the church to which they belonged. The priest acted within the network giving support to the family in regard to their discretion, morality, solvency and reliability. In this way the petition was transferred to a nun who acted as a nurse or social worker of some clinic, maternity or a house for single mothers. After waiting between 7 months and a year, the couple was contacted to go to one of these places and pick up the baby. The baby used to be registered as a biological child (2018; p. 130).

In Spain, women’s decision-making and dignity was denigrated when they had their babies taken away from them under the pretext that they were too sick or dead. After being told, in most cases the mother was isolated from the family and other mothers. The babies were separated from their mothers without the latter’s consent. On some occasions, the doctors or nurses would tell the mothers about their dead babies when they were still under the effects of anesthesia or simply tell their husbands.

3.2 Political and legal aspects

The Amnesty Law known as Law 46/1977, 15 October was passed after Franco’s death (1975). Using this law, Spanish justice refuses to investigate the crimes committed during the dictatorship, in addition to using the principle of non-retroactivity (de Greiff, 2014).

However, the most recent complaints have been of the theft of babies both during and after the Franco regime, representing the recognition of a systematic practice, exposed by Bueno-Morales & González-Besteiro:

The systematic theft of children, investigated by the National High Court for the period 1940-1954, in addition to the other reports of stolen babies that have been added during democracy, constitute crimes against humanity classified in Article 607 bis of the Spanish Penal Code and in international law, because it is a systematic and organized attack against the civilian population (2018; pp.132-133).

4. Theory

4.1 Trauma and media

The effect of exposure to a traumatic event on the health of Stolen Babies’ survivors from Spain has not received considerable attention in the literature. Much of the research, carried out in diverse sociocultural contexts, shows that sociopolitical events of a traumatic nature affect the physical health and quality of life of affected individuals and groups by altering their grieving processes or inducing negative emotions.

Iribarren, Prolo, Neagos, Chiappelli define post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD as: the psychiatric disorder that can result from the experience or witnessing of traumatic or life-threatening events, such as terrorist attacks, violent crime and abuse, military combat, natural disasters, serious accidents or violent personal assaults (2005, p.503).

As can be seen in other studies on PTSD, the stress that results from these types of traumatic events, precipitates a spectrum of psycho-emotional outcomes such as the altering of belief systems and the modification of relationships with others and with oneself (Martín Baró, 1990; Lira 1991; Kordon 1995; Beristain 1999; Pederson, 2002; Pérez Sales, 2006, 2012). In addition, many of these impacts are not only related to the traumatic event but also to the context of persecution and impunity in which the survivors have lived (Cabrera, Beristain, Jiménez, Páez, 2006, Arnosó Martínez, Pérez Sales, 2012).

In terms of impunity, and in line with this argument, the Guatemalan historical memory report "Never Again" lends importance to the definition of impunity: understood as the absence or insufficiency of investigation, trial and punishment of those responsible for human rights violations, adding new political and psychosocial implications in the social fabric to those produced by the traumatic event (ODHAG, 1998).

4.2 Group dynamics

"These people, this group has become my family. They understand me when I cry and I'm speechless", says Carmen Carrasco from SOS Bebés Robados Catalunya. "The group dynamics changed my life. I have been able to put words to sensations that I had been carrying inside my body for more than 30 years", says Ana PaézGarro, another survivor from the Catalan organization. What is expressed by these mothers corresponds to the statements made by Herman regarding the group:

The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity (1992; p.214).

In addition, Harvey argues that "Because traumatized people feel so alienated by their experience, survivor groups have a special place in the recovery process. Such groups afford a degree of support and understanding that is simply not available in the survivor's ordinary social environment" (1991, in Herman, 1992; p.215).

While the approach to emotions can be very broad, through TEB we have focused on individual and group emotions that emerged during group dynamics (GD), and how the group became a safe space, a space of trust. In that sense, we started from the premise that despite the pain and the impact of violence, diverse experiences demonstrate the ability of the human being to face traumatic experiences and even learn from experience (Vera, Carbelo & Vecina, 2006). As part of the GD experiences, the resilience training included two relevant aspects presented in a varied body of research (Bonanno, Wortman et al, 2002; Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001; Poseck, B. V., Baquero-Carbelo, B., Vecina Jiménez, M.L., 2006): resisting the event and rebuilding oneself from it. The resistance observed in the Stolen Babies organizations gives rise to mechanisms that provide a social meaning to individual intrusive memories of collective traumatic events. Both authors have argued that this process transforms individual suffering into social testimony and also into a political weapon, all of which seems to serve to diminish symptomatology (Beker & Lira, 1989; Arnos Martínez & Perez Sales, 2012).

5. Media campaign design

TEB was the first campaign designed and launched in Spain to empower the Stolen Babies' survivors through group dynamics, resilient communication and Ubuntu practices. The group dynamics actions were held in Barcelona with 15 families from SOS Stolen Babies Catalonia. The focus on the survivors corresponds to Herman's observation: "The study of psychological trauma must constantly contend with this tendency to discredit the victim or to render her invisible" (1992, p.8). The TEB campaign gives the survivors a voice: they speak in front of the camera, tell their stories and describe who they are looking for (based on the Identified Victim theory, Ubuntu practices and resilient communication). Even if these cases were covered in mass media in Spain from a political, historical and social perspective, through TEB we put forward a different way to treat the survivors and focus on possible actions in the present. As Ross suggests, "The media can further counteract the powerfully magnetic pull of the trauma vortex by consciously tipping or evening out the scale toward the coverage of positive and uplifting events" (2003; p.107).

In order to gain more spaces, the campaign had to advise, inform, advocate, and reinforce rather than simply exhorting, because only the individual can grasp the various aspects of their social context (Paisley, 1998; Rice and Atkin, 2009; p.439).

5.1 Ubuntu practice

The TEB campaign message "I am looking for you, We are looking for you" is inspired by the Ubuntu philosophy and its objective is to promote the survivors' reparation, in Herman's words: "The restoration of social bonds begins with the discovery that one is not alone" (1992; p.98).

Concentrating exclusively on the facets of Ubuntu, Battle (2000) defines Ubuntu as a concept that has particular resonance with those concerned with building civil society, enhancing community relations and promoting social cohesion. In the TEB campaign, Ubuntu philosophy is manifest in the relation between the individual and the "we"; the "we" represents the group ability to accomplish things that may only be done with others.

These groups are networks marked by an “affirmation and acceptance” of others, and represented in the TEB campaign as “I am looking for you, We are looking for you”. These relationships and networks are organic and voluntary rather than “associative instrumentalism” (Battle, 2000; p.2).

5.2 Identified Victim Effect

Inspired by the theory and effects of the identifiable victim, at the end of the TEB campaign, the families’ cases are portrayed. “I am Isabel, your mother. You were born on April 29th, 1983, Maternitat de Barcelona. I’m Looking For You, We are Looking For You. ”

Studies carried out by Jenni & Loewenstein (1997) argue that identifiable victims seem to produce a greater empathic response, accompanied by greater willingness to make personal sacrifices to provide aid. The authors observed that:

“situations with identifiable victims are often characterized by all the major factors that convey vividness: the stories are very emotional (victims featured in the media are often particularly sympathetic, helpless, or blameless), we see visual images of the victim in newspapers and on television, and we see the events unfold in real-time—without the emotional distance provided by a historical perspective” (1997; p.237). In this regard, the UN Rapporteur de Greiff, argued:

“Victim’s participation implies the recognition of victims as rights holders, which is tremendously empowering for them and others in the experience of being afforded the respect of formal State institutions. This contributes to victims gaining a space in the public sphere” (2014; p.19).

5.3 TEB components

All communication campaigns and their components involve a wide array of ethical issues, from underlying assumptions (such as individual or social causes) to actual intervention choices, although they are usually implicit and embedded within campaign decision-making processes (Guttman, 2003, Rice & Atkin, 2009, p.439). In the TEB campaign, identifying and resolving these ethical issues has both moral aspects (trauma recognition and restoration) and practical benefits (the organizations received more attention, recognition and respect).

Atkin (2001) argued that campaigns may seek to develop a product line or continuum of intended outcomes, so that audiences with different levels of receptivity or resistance can find a comfortable location within the campaign mix (p. 440).

One of the theories we included in the TEB campaign was based on Social Learning (Bandura, 1977b; Flora, 2001, Rice and Atkin, 2009): Individuals are likely to exhibit behavior similar to that of role models who are credible, who explicitly model intended behaviors, and who receive appropriate negative or positive reinforcements.

TEB also integrates media and interpersonal communications, and in that sense the campaign conducts and involves activities at and by the community level (Bracht, 2001). The social engagement observed through TEB corresponds to Dearing’s statement: “Social change occurs because of complementary and reinforcing information circulating through social and organized systems that constitute a community...[by means of] multiple positively related interventions at multiple levels of impact with a given geographic area” (2001, p.305; Rice and Atkin, 2009, p. 455).

In this sense, Herman (1992) makes a valid point related to the victims’ stories and public reactions: “Sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world (...) The response of the community has a powerful influence on the ultimate resolution of the trauma. Restoration of the breach between the traumatized person and the community depends, first, upon public acknowledgment of the traumatic event and, second, upon some form of community action” (p.70).

6. Conclusions

The evaluation of the TEB campaign’s impact implies taking into account the qualitative aspects that were expected, to which have been added those that emerged during and following its presentation. In this sense, as Valente specifies: “Evaluation is the systematic application of research procedures to understand the conceptualization, design, implementation, and utility of interventions” (2001; Rice & Atkin, 2009, p.457).

To analyze the TEB’s effects, we have taken into consideration six campaign factors as designed by Flay and Cook (1989), and adapted to this specific experience:

1) The audience. 90% of the audience was from Spanish or Latin American countries. The TEB received 1,614 views on Vimeo -Spanish version- and 173 views on the English version. The campaign was published and covered in six countries: Spain, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Russia, Venezuela. The TEB campaign was published in 32 media (press and online).

2) Implementation of the planned campaign components. As planned, the SOS Bebés Robados survivors organized a public presentation, a press conference hosted by the survivors and the media campaign director. After the official presentation, the organization sent press releases (in Spanish, Catalan and Basque) about the presentation including the campaign link and pictures.

3) TEB's effectiveness. The TEB campaign achieved and influenced the Stolen Babies treatment in the media: many Stolen Babies survivors taking part in the campaign were invited to talk about the group dynamics, their experiences and the campaign experience. Communication between journalists and survivors took on a different tone and perspective. After TEB, they were not treated or presented as victims, but as survivors. As Paisley pointed out, also crucial to the success of campaigns is the ability to become an important and enduring part of the public agenda, and to obtain first-party entitlement for significant stakeholders (Paisley, 2001; Rice and Atkin, 2009, p.438).

4) Impacts on larger aggregations. Since the campaign was launched in May 2017, around 100 families contacted the SOS Stolen Babies organization by email to ask for advice and to join their meetings in Barcelona. The Mayor of Barcelona received the survivors, pledged support and proposed to host the second edition of TEB. In September 2017 the International Platform TEB was created by the survivors, using the campaign name in order to reinforce their actions in Spain and abroad. This platform is active in Granada, Catalonia, Basque Country, Valencia, Navarra and London. In addition, images, campaign slogans and the campaign logo were used as a part of the book "Stolen Babies in Andalusia" (Buenos Morales & González-Besteiro); and images from the campaign appear in the German documentary produced by ARTE "Franco's Legacy" (Bremer, 2017). The disruption resulting from this case can be considered to have played a part in instigating negotiations with politicians from Spain and Europe. According to Castells (2011) true power brokers utilize mediated communication to negotiate, affirm and legitimize their dominant position in society. The media represents the vehicles through which power is enacted.

5) Cost/ Effectiveness. This concerns the aims of the project, its presence in the media and easy analyses for the organizations. As Louisa Ha indicated, YouTube metrics matter much more to the creators than the non-creator ordinary audience (2018, p.172).

6) Causal processes. The impact and effects of the campaign also promoted the necessity for an historical memory dialogue in Spain, which is in accordance with the European Parliament Commission working on the Spanish Stolen Babies cases. Writers, celebrities and politicians also contacted the organizations in order to take part in the second edition. And following the campaign, various professionals and college students contacted the organization: 10 undergraduate research students, 3 academic researchers and correspondents from Italy, Poland, Netherlands, Turkey and Australia.

The TEB campaign has demonstrated within Spanish society and abroad, that it is possible to work on a topic that appears complex, painful and historical. TEB also promoted a way to mitigate the damage from the past, and a way to work with the survivors' reintegration, participation and empowerment. Although TEB has reached all its goals, we observe the need to expand the analysis of this campaign as well as the progress of the survivors.

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