



Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of doctor in Psychology.

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**LETICIA RODRÍGUEZ**  
**2018 - 2019**

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# **DIALOGUES WITH YOUNG WOMEN, FAMILY HOME MOTHERS AND PROFESSIONALS ON COLLABORATIVE WORKING PROCESSES WITH ADOLESCENTS SEPARATED FROM THEIR FAMILIES**

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## **Abstract**

ENFOQUE Niñez is a Paraguayan non-governmental organisation created with the mission of providing a concrete response to protect children and adolescents who have been or are at risk of being separated from their families as the result of judicial orders. The organisation developed a method for working collaboratively with children, adolescents and their families that are referred to them. The aim of this study was twofold. First, to explore if and how collaborative work practices, as developed by ENFOQUE Niñez, can be helpful for adolescents involved. Second, to explore the lived experiences and challenges as encountered in collaborative practices by adolescents, family homes members, and professionals.

Starting from social constructionism as the philosophical and epistemological orientation, a study was performed in which the voices of three protagonist groups of actors involved in the therapeutic and social work process, were included: young women, family home mothers, and members of the professional team of ENFOQUE Niñez. Besides the researcher, which is also part of the ENFOQUE Niñez's team, 19 other persons participated in the study. The data consisted of transcribed (individual and group) dialogues, which were analysed using Constructionist Grounded Theory as a methodological framework.

The protagonists considered that the relationships developed during the collaborative work processes were helpful when characterised by participation, support, co-responsibility, relational ethics, love and trust. However, these characteristics are regularly under pressure, due to a number of challenges, which appear in the complexity of these situations. Within the meaning the working processes have had, the experience of living with a family home, team working and collaborating in a responsive and dialogical way to the uniqueness, became relevant.

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<sup>1</sup> The preference of using the expression 'family home' (instead of foster family), family home placement (instead foster care) is related to the specific work of ENFOQUE Niñez and will be explained in the Language Considerations in the Prologue.

## Prologue

Research is a personal journey exploring unanswered questions, new possibilities and untold stories. This thesis is 'the result' of the journey I have taken during the last three years. The process prior to the work that is presented in this thesis, proved to be more complex than anticipated: it forced me in a continuous inquiry, during which decisions had to be made regarding concepts, methods and language. Regularly, I had to confront myself as both researcher and human, in terms of my beliefs, fears, insecurities, and passion for my work. The following account details some of the thought processes I engaged during my journey.

## Conceptual considerations

Besides considering my multiple roles in this research process (amongst others: a researcher, a therapist of the young women involved in this research, a member of the NGO's technical team and coordinator of ENFOQUE Niñez -the organization in which the study was performed-, a mother, ...), it was also important to include a broader view on the work that is done in ENFOQUE Niñez. In order to get closer to the understanding of this topic -that has not yet been studied in Paraguay- the social, political, economic, and cultural context of the country, needed to be explained.

This first step already confronted me with some challenges of *how* to speak about the children, adolescents and families ENFOQUE Niñez is working with - usually called 'poor families', or 'vulnerable families' which have to face several socio-economic challenges. A vast body of (international) scholars refer to them as 'multi-problem families' (Linares, 1997); 'neglectful families' (Colapinto, 1995); or 'excluded families' (Thiorny, 1976, quoted in Cancrini et. al 1997). However, taking into consideration the social and political-economic situation of Paraguay, I opted to use the expression '*families living in situations of social injustice*'. This decision is also grounded on the belief that categorization of families should be avoided. Instead, the focus is put on the family's context.

The families referred to in this thesis are living in conditions of poverty and social exclusion; they are experiencing difficulties to access basic services such as housing, education, health, identity, and justice, among others. In most situations the presence of some or all these features can be observed.

Additionally, factors such as gender or domestic violence and discrimination can be present.

The work done at ENFOQUE Niñez<sup>2</sup> in trying to help families in the situations they are confronted with, starts from the basic assumption that relationships are vital and that working processes are co-constructed. While several (often) normative bodies (both national and international) make recommendations about what people living in these situations 'need' and what professionals 'should do' or 'what works', the joint construction of knowledge is prioritized in ENFOQUE Niñez's work. Hence, when I decided to do some research on the work we do, it seemed essential to me that co-construction was also a feature of the research process. Consequently, the social constructionist vision was considered as the best to capture the fundamental spirit of my approach, as it embraced the joint work, the subjective realities and lived experiences of participants in this study.

In this thesis I have tried to include the process-oriented nature of the topic, as well as the positioning of myself as an *insider* within the research setting and as a social-political actor. In a national context marked by the judicialization of social problems and institutionalization as a priority response, this doctoral research calls for professional practices that consider persons, and relationships as the most important over manuals, diagnosis and theories with an individualistic view of human problems. The thesis starts from the assumption that there is a need to develop alternative understandings that enable the professionals who work in this field, to accompany and collaborate from a humanizing and dignifying relationship, and above all, WITH the people, their desires, world views and projects, as well as their feelings and transforming experiences.

Considering the power that society and the system gives professionals in processes that involve children and adolescents separated from their families for various reasons, it is essential to visualize and assume the political impact of their interventions, and the type of relationships that they generate with the people they work for, as well as an ethics which is sensitive to context, the latter being one of the central themes addressed in this study.

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<sup>2</sup> In the remainder of this work I will use the first-person singular "I" to refer to my inner dialogues, experiences, questions, ideas or when I am describing my specific role in the work of the organization. When I use the first-person plural "we" my intention is to bring forward ideas of the Organization ENFOQUE Niñez (including the philosophical stance, methodological or agreed practices, goals, concepts, etc)

## Language considerations

Language is a crucial aspect in social constructionism. From a social constructionist perspective, language is more than just a way of connecting people. People 'exist' in language. Consequently, the focus is not on the individual person but rather on the social interaction, in which language is generated, sustained, and abandoned (Gergen & Gergen, 1991). The social constructionist approach thus emphasizes the ability to create realities through language stimulating a process of continuous creation (Cojocaru & others, 2012, Anderson, 1999, Gergen, 2006). However, writing this dissertation in English has been a challenging endeavour for me: considering that my native language is Spanish and all the conversations for this study thus were held in Spanish, all material needed to be translated. This was especially hard because of some cultural connotations and local contexts.

Being aware of the terms commonly used worldwide in the field (and in international publications), a sensitive choice of some terms used in this thesis was made. Closeness to the Spanish language and local context was preferred above internationally used English terms. That is the reason why we preferred to use the expression '*adolescents separated from their families*' instead of others like 'adolescents deprived from parental care' or 'adolescents living without familiar environmental care' that also provides a set of meanings regarding the kind of work derived from those terms.

In relation to the term '*family homes*', my thesis supervisors and I have had several discussions whether this is the best English expression to use. Commonly used terms to refer to a formal and family-type alternative care program are 'foster care' and 'foster mother/father'. Additionally, the term 'foster carer' is advised to be used instead of '(foster) mother' or '(foster) father'. Carer is considered to be preferred, because it conserves 'parent' to refer uniquely to the biological parents - unless the child prefers something different -. The term 'carer' is also promoted because of gender sensitivity issues. However, the other side of the coin is that the term 'carer' coincides with the hierarchical view that we are talking about a relation in which one person is in need of being cared for and another one is giving care. This vision is much closer to medical or assistencialist approaches, which does not fit well with the spirit and the kind of work is intended by ENFOQUE Niñez. As such, we follow the argumentation of Håkansson (2009) who discusses that for these families "the main task is not to 'foster' the client, but to share their life and experiences" (Håkansson, 2009, preface). Consequently, we preferred to use the expression 'family homes' as the closest translation of the Spanish 'Familias Acogedoras',

an expression that is used within the new regulatory frameworks in Paraguay as well. Here it is worth mentioning that even in Paraguay and other Spanish-speaking countries there have been some debates about what would be the best way of referring to this practice, resulting in consensus about the widespread use of 'Acogimiento Familiar'. The word 'Acogimiento' could be translated literally as 'to welcome' someone.

## Overview

This thesis is presented as a monograph of which all chapters are closely related to each other. In **Chapter 1**, the introductory chapter, the reader will find a short story in relation to my journey to start this research process, my background and training and some questions as a psychologist and therapist within the specific work to be studied. Further, the national context in which this study was performed, is described. I will present some general data as well as data regarding childhood and adolescence. Additionally, I explain how the protection system in Paraguay works and what the traditional responses to situations in which children are separated from their families are. I share some reflections on the perspective from which these interventions and practices are carried out. Subsequently, the work of the non-governmental organization ENFOQUE Niñez, in which this study was performed, is presented. A short history of this organisation and a description of its goals and working areas is given. The type of social and therapeutic approach it develops, in the context of collaborative and dialogical practices, human rights and family home placement.

In **Chapter 2: Philosophical Orientation**, the reader is offered the philosophical and epistemological stance of Social Constructionism as a framework from which this study was developed. Also, the theoretical frame of Collaborative and Dialogic Practices, which offers the basics for the therapeutic work as developed in ENFOQUE Niñez, is explained.

**Chapter 3, Methods**, contains information on the research objectives and research questions. The procedure used for this study, building on the ideas of dialogic social research, is described. I discuss my position as a researcher as well as the position of my conversational partners. All participants invited in the study (19 in total) are presented by means of a short personal presentation. Finally, the procedure for analysis used in this study, namely the constructionist grounded theory, is explained.

The analytical process led to three categories of themes: Challenges, Relational

Aspects and Meanings of the work. These themes are elaborated in detail in **Chapter 4**, which in turn includes three subsections. Section 1 (Challenges identified in the social and therapeutic work) includes social context issues, the protection system, relationships among the main actors as well as complexity at different levels and their dilemmas. In section 2 Relational Aspects are described and deepened as fundamental elements in the undergone experience. In addition to the importance of the *type* of relationships described, the place and relevance of living in a family home as such (including the relational aspects of that experience) proved to be fundamental for all of the young women and family home mothers in this study. This experience showed how to be included in a familiar, community and 'ordinary' context; in the meantime, it represented a 'therapeutic' value, transcending the techniques, methods and theoretical / psychotherapeutic viewpoints of 'professional interventions'. Finally, section 3 (meanings of the work) includes the themes that correspond to what this joint experience represented for each of the participants, describing what they found most significant.

Last, in **Chapter 5**, Reflections..., the reader will find some of my reflections on the Themes generated in the conversations. My learnings and new questions, that are useful to continue the conversations are presented. Some reflections related to the research process, my own experiences, challenges and learnings throughout this process, as well as some thoughts on future research conclude this chapter.



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