The Permanence of Pain in Social Trauma  
Ruth Lijtmaer  
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TRANSIENCE AND PERMANENCE

When people suffer as a result of natural disasters such as storms, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes, survivors ultimately tend to accept the event as part of their fate or as the will of God. Even after man-made accidental disasters, such as Chernobyl, survivors may blame a small number of individuals of governmental organizations for their carelessness, but fundamentally there are no "others" who have deliberately sought to hurt the victims (Volkan, 2002. p. 9).

When people suffer as a result of neo-liberal economic policies\(^1\) that created enormous disparities between the rich and the poor; this situation of gross class inequality, together with neoconservative foreign policy (Layton, 2008) creates a traumatogenic environment (Hollander & Gutwill, 2006).

The trauma about which I will speak, is social trauma produced by political repression and torture. These situations are the result of an intentional, malignant act or acts designed by persons, organizations or states in order to cause damage to the individual and to produce a state of fear and helplessness with long-standing destabilization.

\(^1\) The meaning of the word "liberal" when used in economics is different than its use in politics. Neo-liberalism is a strongly capitalist form of economic liberalism that supports the removal of barriers to privatization, free trade, open markets, deregulation and opposes government programs and spending. Though not common parlance in the United States, its negative connotations of helping the rich grow richer and the poor grow poorer are visible worldwide.
Social trauma is implemented within a context of suppression and oppression, often against a backdrop of state-organized terror and/or political violence aimed at specific groups such as ethnic communities, political movements or social groups. The aim is to produce fear on a mass basis and destroy social links.

In this kind of trauma, society as a whole, or as represented by the government, either colludes in or actually supports the victimization (e.g., war, genocide, and state supported torture). This type of trauma has both a moral and an interpersonal dimension and, therefore, it has implications for the conclusions that the individual draws about the nature of people, and influences the victim's subsequent interpersonal relationships and social self.

When a human being deliberately inflicts pain upon another, the resulting symptomatology in the victim, as well as coping strategies and outcome, are inextricably linked to the interpersonal and moral aspects of the traumatic violation. This is especially the case in those instances where the victimization is supported by the larger social structure. In such cases, the interpersonal violation becomes generalized to the larger social context, impinging on the victim's basic self-other representation. Consequently, whenever the community and its institutions neglect to act as a container for individuals and groups, this generates trauma, which can be compared with the baby's experience of a failure in mothering. Such failures in the social system are reflected in failing the individual to contain, nurture, care for, and protect them, as in the case of the lack of assistance and compassion towards the victims of poverty, disease, natural catastrophe, social turmoil, economic crisis, violence, or war.

When there is a blatant attack, on the part of those in authority upon minorities, or even on the bulk of the population, as in the case of social repression, war, racism,
genocide, or persecution, there exists a perversion of the social system. This perversion not only fails to uphold current social values and laws, but actually breaks them, as in the case of corruption and deceit on the part of such authorities.

In all of these, the familiar defenses of disavowal, dissociation, and denial are employed at individual and collective levels to deal with the failures to treat other human beings just as other human beings. Such denial inhibits the ability to name the truth or acknowledge the violence that is being perpetuated, and undermines the taking of responsibility for social and political discourse. Most importantly, such defenses perpetuate the failure of those in power to recognize the other’s difference, plight and pain.

It is difficult to explain why each such country is determined to solve its internal problems by waging war, however, such explanations do not even begin to address the question as to why the soldiers and, in some cases, the general population, act with such cruelty toward the people that were conquered, or why most of the citizens, those who did not directly participate in the reported atrocities, prefer to look the other way and choose not to interfere. This is clearly seen in the case of concentration camps, where empathic responses were absent from sadistic killings, not only absent from the Nazis, but from fellow citizens and Allies as well.

Similar behaviors can be seen in countries where political repression was at its peak. Hollander (2006) described the role of the bystander during the “Dirty War” in Argentina. She has stated, “Employing defenses of denial and disavowal, served to protect the people from having to bear witness to the price paid by the civilian society for the violent maintenance of their society’s economic and political inequities” (p. 155). This statement shows that when people’s vital needs are not responded to by others,
individuals lose the expectation that their needs will be met. Faith in the possibility of a positive outcome through communication dies.

Accordingly, I propose that an essential feature of the trauma suffered by a survivor of genocide and political repression is the victim's feeling of an inability to affect the environment interpersonally so as to elicit a sense of mutuality and justice. The victim feels that there is “no longer anyone on whom to count,” as the link between self and other has been effaced by the failure of empathy.

The traumatized person, in order to “survive” and live on among the riches of life around him/her, has to take flight into a certain kind of deadness, an existential state where the woundedness is muted, mortality and dependency are dissociated, and the complexity and pains of being part of the web of human existence are repudiated. What is killed off in the severely traumatized is imagination, empathy, curiosity, desire, and kindness.

Institutionalized torture destroys the fabric of the social network of which we humans form an integral part, and it undermines and subverts the human soul. Humiliation is the human condition to which the victim of torture is reduced. Humiliation and resentment propel individuals to action. However, this action is bound to perpetuate cycles of revenge and violence, and apologies may be deemed insufficient to undo the inflicted damage. The result is an endless series of eye-for-an-eye scenarios.

Weschler (in Drummond 2002, p. 112) observed that “The outcries that arise from the torture chambers are twofold: The body is crying for the soul and the ego is crying for others, but in both cases they remain unanswered.” Torture's cause is clearly identifiable: it is our fellow beings who transform us into frightened, caged animals, and it
is their will, filled with triumphant arrogance, that leads us to this interminable suffering. It is like saying: “You will have to die or suffer interminable torture, because you are of a different race, sexual orientation, religion or political creed. You, and everything which is yours, which you were and which you believed, will become dust.”

The suffering that results from this affirmation of prevailing power, its irrefutable logic and the madness of its unquestionable certainty, produces anguish that is specific, incomparable and indescribable – an anguish that will stay with the majority of the survivors for the rest of their lives and will last for generations. Keilson (1992, in Cordal, 2005) and others state that the consequences of trauma persist even long after wars, dictatorial regimes or political repression have ended. After massive trauma, some trans generational transmission of its images does occur, becoming intertwined with the core identity and self-representation of each member of subsequent generations in the groups for which the trauma is a historical legacy (Volkan, 2002).

For victims to speak of torture and its consequences, the trauma, is to use their testimony and humanity to denounce what has happened to them. The only way that one can understand someone who has been tortured and through which one can gain any insight into that person is by daring to look at the oppressive regime that destroyed him/her. It is not enough for victim’s wounds to be healed; it is necessary to restore them to the human order and to the status of their fellow human beings. The phrase which immortalizes Primo Levi (1959) in his book If this is a Man relates to an incident where, after being denied an icicle to relieve his thirst, a prisoner imploringly asks an SS officer in broken German, “Why?” The officer's reply, in the voice of total authority, was: “Here there is no ‘why.’” The lack of any reason or explanation for torture and the infinite and inescapable bodily pain, combined with arbitrariness and cruelty, configure the traumatic nucleus of a horrifying experience (Vinar, 2005, p. 318).
In countries where the Governments had been under the control of a military dictatorship, political opposition was severely restrained and political dissenters were treated as dangerous, subversive criminals. They were persecuted, imprisoned and condemned without any legal rights to defense, and when in captivity, they were submitted to unending sessions of physical and mental torture. In the case of the “disappeared” people in Brazil, Chile and Argentina (in the 1970's and 80's) the survivors, those who were detained but did not “disappear,” gave themselves permission to validate the damage they suffered and to feel that, despite the fact that they were survivors, they had a right to recognition, justice and reparation.

Consequently, if the expectations of reparation, recognition and social validation of the damage suffered by those subjected to such trauma are frustrated by society’s silence and by the lack of justice, such victims would suffer another traumatic sequence of yet greater intensity that would lead to deeper feelings of impotence, helplessness and marginalization from society. Conroy (2000) interviewed participants in the committing of institutionalized torture, mainly from South America and Africa. He found a fairly common pattern of severe training, which included harsh treatment, humiliation, and ideological indoctrination, resulting in a sense of camaraderie among the future torturers, a blind faith in the judgment of their superiors and a belief that their work, even if distasteful, was an important part of ensuring national security. They looked upon their inflicting pain and terror as simply a job to be done. They usually regarded their victims as threats to their country’s safety and as part of a conspiracy that sought to disrupt the social order. Often they initiated the interrogation without knowing the victim’s name or of what crime he/she had been accused. The men and women who committed these acts were found to be no worse or better than the average individual. After their careers in so-

People who suffer this kind of trauma tend to repeat, compulsively, aspects of the traumatized experience in thoughts about current events, interpersonal experiences, and suffer nightmares and other psychological phenomena associated with PTSD (Volkan, 2002). It can be a sound, smell, or a sight that reminds the victim of the trauma suffered.

Two other points are important to consider here. The first is that, when connectedness to people feels too dangerous, inanimate objects may take their place. A child in a train on the way to a concentration camp cried for the bed he had left behind. At that moment, he/she was unable to recognize or to mourn the broken connection with lost loved ones. Throughout the adult life attachment to things becomes important. Let’s look at the case of an 18 year-old young woman, who, at the age of 5, was given a pink teddy bear by her grandmother. When she migrated to the United States from the Dominican Republic 4 years ago, the teddy bear was the only personal object that she brought with her. She had repaired the bear’s torn pawn and watched its color fade. When sad, she talked to it as if it was a real person while thinking of her grandmother’s love.

The second point is that many survivors are preoccupied with their bodies; suggesting that the body may represent something concrete onto which the longing for human form, structure, and contact may be displaced. Memorabilia and physical objects become important to the extent that they allow connecting with the person’s history. The traumatic state operates like a black hole in the person's mind because, in it, and in the absence of need-satisfying interactions, there is no basis for symbolic, goal-directed behavior and interaction. Instead, in the traumatic state, there is “an absence of structure
and representable experience in a region of the self," and thus an associated absence of a real traumatic event that can either be adequately represented or comprehended (Cohen, 1985, p. 178, in Laub & Auerhahn, 1989).

In this way, unfortunately, the traumatic event remains unintegrated and unattached in the survivor's psychic life, despite its apparent assimilation through endless recounting and mythmaking, and, because of this isolation, it can eclipse all else. Following Laub (2013), "...at the core of the very traumatic experience is the obliteration of the internalized, empathic communicative dyad. Just as the executioner does not heed the pleas for life and relentlessly proceeds with execution, the internal 'Thou', the addressee with whom inner dialogue takes place, a prerequisite to symbolization and internal world representation, ceases to exist" (p. 184).

Conclusion

The power of psychoanalysis to effect social change is, of course, limited. But it is my sense that the kind of subjectivity that psychoanalysts want to foster cannot emerge from a psychoanalysis that splits the psychic from the social, one that does not take cultural power differentials and oppressive social norms into account (Layton, 2008). Only when trauma is symbolized, when there is a witness, or when one is able to be one's own witness, there is an opportunity to recover and resume life.

I believe that witnessing, as a social process, comes about in relation to the combination of suffering and the evil that is brought about by evil policies. By witnessing, one can become a moral representative and an agent of collective memory. Part of this entails personal risk. An eyewitness who remains personally safe and sheltered is not a moral witness. The risk may be the result of belonging to the category of people toward
whom the evil deed were or is directed, or it may be inherent in the effort to document and report. Witnessing a social reality means participating in an ongoing process of bearing witnessing. As Richards (2012) reminds us: "To bear witness to the Holocaust [and for the purposes of this paper, to bear witness to all traumata] is to look both ways. We not only must acknowledge heartbreaking destruction and loss but must celebrate the enduring power of life...destruction and creation-witnessing includes both" (p. 267).

As clinicians working with patients who have experienced trauma, we need to be cognizant of the toxic impact of shame, humiliation, and victimization, and to have great reservoirs of patience and compassion as our patients mourn the past and slowly recover. Ethical non-neutrality should include the imperative to bear witness to the details of our patients’ stories and to the traumas acknowledged and unacknowledged by them. This means attesting to the wrongdoings against them as well as to their suffering. And additionally, witnessing to the permanence of pain, which stays with the victim and with their descendants in obvious and even subtle ways all their lives.

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**References**


If you would like to contact Ruth Lijtmaer, her email is: ruth.lijtmaer@verizon.net