

**IAGP -ANALYTIC GROUP SECTION ORGANIZE SARAJEVO- WORKSHOP 9-11**

**MAY 2014**

**HOTEL HOLLYWOOD - SARAJEVO, BOSNIA AND HERCEGOVINA**

**TITLE: TRAUMA AND GROUP IDENTITY**

**Conductors of small groups in the English language are:**

Ms. Gerda Winter

Ms. Regine Scholz

Mr. Richard Beck

**Conductors of small groups in the Bosnian language are**

Ms. Ljiljana Moro Ms.

Ljiljana Milivojevic

**Conductor of Large Group in the English language is**

Mr. Uvan Urlic

**1 DAY**

**8.30-9.00 OPENING WORKSHOP**

**9.00-9.30-LECTURE - Ms. Regina Scholz**

**(Dusseldorf)**

**9.30-9,45- DISCUSSION**

9,45-10,00- COFFEE BREAK

**10.00-11.15-LARGE GROUP 1.**

11,15-11.30-BREAK

**11.30-13.00-SMALL GROUP 1.**

13.00- 14,30 LUNCH

**14,30-16,00 -SMALL GROUP 2.**

16.00-16.15 –BREAK

**16.15 -16,45-LECTURE- Mr. Richard Beack ( USA)**

**16,45-17,00- DISCUSSION**

17.00-17,30 – COFFEE BREAK

**17,30-18,45 -LARGE GROUP 2.**

**2 DAY**

**9.00-10.30-SMALL GROUP 3.**

10.30 -10.45 -BREAK

**10.45 -11,15-LECTURE- Ms. Gerda Winter (Copenhagen)**

**11,15-11,30-DISCUSSION**

11,30-11,45- BREAK

**11,45-13,15-SMALL GROUP 4.**

13,15-14,30-LUNCH

**14,30-15,00-LECTURE- Mr. Ivan Urlic (Split)**

**15,00-15,15- DISCUSSION**

15,15-15,30-BREAK

**15,30-17,00-SMALL GROUP 5.**

17,00-17,30– COFFEE BREAK

**17,30-19,15-LARGE GROUP 3.**

**3. DAY**

**8,30- 10,00-SMALL GROUP 6.**

10.00 -10.10,15 -BREAK

**10,15 -10,45-EVALUATION**

10,45-11,00-BREAK

**11,00-12,15-LARGE GROUP 4.**

## **Collective trauma, memories and identity**

Dear colleagues and friends,

To be here with you in Sarajevo is a great honor. When the invitation came, I was enthralled immediately – Sarajevo, this name has a sound, it resonates and evokes many associations. At the same time I was intimidated; one hundred years ago the Great War started here; these days people around the world and especially in Europe celebrate the end of WWII in May 45. The Winter Olympics were held there in 1984 – and it's round about 20 years now that you here had the worst times after 45. So I asked myself - what can I tell you about trauma? I do not know what you went through, your pain, your sufferings – and also your joys and your pride. The only thing I can try is to stay with you, to be with you - and in this paper to offer you my thoughts on collective trauma and identity, then listen to your reactions, hoping that there is something that resonates with your experiences.

This paper is about collective trauma, about the influence of time and about some consequences in regard to personal and collective identities.

First I want to give a short outlook on what you can expect.

- First I'm going to specify different types of collective trauma,
- then I will connect these types of trauma to different types of memory, emphasizing different emotional tasks,
- eventually focusing – connecting to identity issues - on some consequences that are to be considered, if working in the field.

### Collective trauma – some specifications

Let us first have a closer look to the term 'collective trauma'. The term trauma - which originally means wound - in the psychic realm already is debatable, more so the term collective trauma, because a collective does not have a body, or only in a metaphorical sense. But usually the notion is not used in such a strict theoretical way. At first hand it doesn't say more than that a great number of persons had been harmed. The notion has been criticized as being too vague. A main further objection is that it is veiling concrete political circumstances and makes no difference between victims and perpetrators (Becker, D. 2006, Hillebrandt; R. 2004). One proposal to overcome the disadvantages of the concept was to specify different types of collective trauma (Kühner, A. 2007), since under the shared name of 'collective trauma' a multitude of phenomena is described, from a concrete mass trauma to the 'making up' of a trauma narration (Kühner, A. 2008).

I myself elaborated a bit on this subject (Scholz 2004, Scholz 2011), and want to share this with you. I use 'collective trauma' an umbrella concept, further specifying it in a first step into

*mass trauma and group trauma.*

Mass Trauma means first of all that many people are affected by an event (e.g. earthquake), or a field of connected events. Not all individuals experience the same, but many of them experience similar and terrible things and all experiences can be classified within and refers to the same context. Not all those affected will develop trauma symptoms in a narrower sense or connected mental illnesses such as depressions or anxieties (Heuft, G. 2008), and yet the mental organization of the survivors will to a large extent remain affected by the events.

For a mass trauma to be called a group trauma it definitely *presupposes a group* that is 'hurt'. Emphasis is laid on the aspect of the group as an already existing community of which the individuals are part. Following this definition e.g. wars are always group trauma.

A group trauma thus includes on a first level those that were directly exposed to a terrible event and secondly also those that feel connected to those directly concerned via identification with a previously defined social group. In this sense the 9/11 can be considered as a collective or group trauma. It not only affected the people in the WTC and their relatives, but via the immediately distributed pictures first all Americans and beyond that what is called 'the whole free world' (Kühner, A. 2007, Wirth, H.-J. 2004).

The example of 9/11 also shows clearly that the number of traumatized people – though a certain amount is needed – is not necessarily the crucial momentum for the characterization of a disastrous event as a collective or group trauma.

*A mass trauma can be considered to be a group trauma, when the event is relevant for the self-understanding and the self-definition of the group and thus the psychic life of the group members.*

This perspective allows a new approach to what is called 'chosen trauma' (Volkan, V. 1999), which I regard as - possibly the most important - special case of a group trauma, because very often it is connected to an ideology of entitlement.

With the term 'chosen trauma' Vamik Volkan describes large scale traumatic events which are unconsciously being chosen by a given group for their self- definition. What happened lies back so far in time (the fall of Constantinople, the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem, the Polish separations) that no personal or even family memory can exist. Nevertheless: to participate in the mental representation of these events – to feel certain feelings, to think certain thoughts - is what decides about group membership (no Irish protestant will consider the Battle of the Boyne – where in 1690 William of Orange defeated the Catholic Jacobites - as irrelevant, and if so he wouldn't be accepted as a true Irish protestant any longer.)

*Here again it is the identification with the social group that allows to speak of a collective trauma, but in this case the trauma is highly condensed through a transfer over generations.*

## Memories

This raises the question how the original traumatic events are communicated and transferred. Roughly one might say that direct trauma – on the level of mass trauma and of those personally involved in group trauma - is first remembered mainly without words, by body memory and by acting unconsciously traumatic scenes. Perhaps you know the men, standing at the window at 2 o'clock in the morning, sleepless, smoking, looking to the other windows, where they know other men are standing smoking.

Additionally – and later - speaking becomes relevant. And by telling to your family members, to the members of your community, what has happened, how it was, we are at the beginning of the narration of a group trauma. This mainly oral tradition constitutes the so called “communicative memory” (Welzer, H. 2005); it includes people not directly involved and creates a memorizing community – limited to the close and intimate context of a family and nearer community. Later books and films are added. While the body memories definitely die with the traumatized individual dying, the communicative memory can have a span of approximately 80 to 100 years.

Chosen trauma usually date back much further in time. What ‘really’ happened fades over the generations, because oral and/or family transfer here cannot secure the tradition. What remains is a highly condensed version of an historic event, which becomes part of what Aleida (1999) and Jan Assmann (1992) call the cultural memory. Contents of the cultural memory have to be laid down/ externalized in holy books and in memorials, they have to be revived in ceremonies and rituals in order to bring them to mind over and over again so that they can become part of the mental representation of each group member and thus of the ‘we’-feeling (Bosse, H. 2005) of the group. E.g. the killing of 82 Swedish nobles in 1520 in the ‘Stockholm bloodbath’ - the chosen trauma and thus the founding myth of the Swedish nation – is revived every year by the ‘Vasaloppet’ a 89 km long cross country ski race with thousands of participants.

### Time collapse as memory-disorder and threat to identity

The special relation between trauma and memory is, that trauma is always now. That holds true on the individual level in the flashbacks. I remember my mother around 1960 throwing herself under the table in our living room, when she heard an airplane flying deep over the house (it was a late reaction to hedgehoppers at the end of WWII).

And it also applies to the collective level, especially when recent or not so long bygone traumas are interpreted against the background of a “chosen trauma”, which then can become ‘hot’, when it used as a pre-existing foil or mold how to experience, how to make sense of actual traumatic events (Volkan, V. 2006). You probably have many examples for that in your communities.

This might be on the collective level the equivalent to the individual’s flashback. Volkan summed up these collective phenomena under the term ‘time collapse’, i.e. when chosen trauma of the past are memorized and emotionally reactivated they can be felt as if the trauma occurred recently, as if belongs to the present – and its repetition is even projected into the future, where it can be fought. Past, presence and expected future come

together, the familiar order of time collapses (see Volkan, V. 1999). *In other words: chosen trauma causes something like a 'collective memory-disorder'.*

That is where on the personal as well as on the collective level the question of identity comes in. As you probably all know, Ego identity is defined as a feeling of selfsameness and continuity (Erikson 1946), whereas large group identity (ethnic, national, religious) is understood as 'the subjective experience of thousands of millions of people who are linked by a persistent sense of sameness' (Volkan, 2001:79). Erikson's notion was criticized being too monolithic, leaving out failed trials, circumventions and – very important – the others, that we all need to validate our identities (Keupp 1999). A similar criticism applies to Volkan's idea of large group identity, omitting all the power struggles within a community, that determine, what in the end will be considered to be worthwhile to become part of the collective memory. Nonetheless - personal as well as group identity is based on a feeling of continuity, and this continuity needs memories, some ideas that shape your image, who you are and what you are. *Disruptions or major gaps and dysfunctions of individual and collective memories will eventually be accompanied by identity problems, i.e. psychic pain– as trauma usually does: Nothing is like before, I am not like before, we are not the same as we were before.*

The task is to integrate painful and contradictory material with very difficult feelings (as helplessness, pain, despair, rage, hate, guilt, shame etc.) arising from the traumatic past on personal and collective levels, thus redefining the personal identity, which is embedded in the large group identity, which also has to be 're- invented' after major traumatic events. Often for this 'reinvention' a chosen trauma is used - because *the chosen trauma can be the (ab)used trauma* – thus becoming a source of new violent conflicts leading again to mass traumatization and becoming again part of the collective memory.

*So a better understanding of the processes involved might help to 'defuse' these hot spots in the foundation matrix of given large groups.*

Some conclusions

The differentiation made earlier in this paper, when I have tentatively tried to connect the different types of collective traumata with various forms of memory, wants contribute to this aim. Mass trauma and first level group trauma were allocated with body memory and scenic actions, group trauma additionally with communicative memory and chosen traumata with cultural memory. From this very rough scheme some different emotional tasks and therefore varied needs of action on various personal and social levels can be derived.

In case of direct traumatization the emotional task for the traumatized persons is to learn to live with their unbearable memories and feelings, to integrate them – slowly, in very small doses – into their personal identity, instead of dissociating them. On the individual level - psychotherapy – including group analysis - here has its place in bringing some relief. The task of the collective is to rebuild the elementary general living condition and to prevent further traumatization – which often is difficult enough and sometimes not impossible.

With regard to group trauma this naturally also holds true for those directly traumatized but

beyond this we enter into the area of identifications that buildup our identities. No individual and no group can do without identifications, but if they are too contradictory and/or become too tight, if only one identity is allowed, group members can be severely harmed. The most endangered are those from mixed backgrounds and affiliations (once a Christian Palestinian with an Israeli passport told me: “In times of crisis you better decide for one identity, if you are completely convinced or not”).

The task of the community here is to keep communication channels open (or to reopen them) for overlapping identities and different interpretations of traumatic events and to allow for deviating versions. That implies to guarantee the security of the (deviating) individuals and to prevent their expulsion from the group. Carefully constructed experiential groups can do a great job here.

Maybe some of you have heard about the Slansky process 1952 in Prague, which is sad example for these processes. In the heated atmosphere of the cold war Rudolf Slansky was accused to be a spy, sentenced to death and executed. He – being a communist, a Czech citizen and a Jew – had to be eliminated, also because the public was frightened by his different affiliations/identities and their complexities.

All action mentioned till here are necessary yet insufficient in the area of chosen trauma. Since in this case we deal with a transformation of collective identity on a great scale, additionally the ‘invention’ of new rituals, museums and memorials is called for. To bring these huge changes in mentality forward, you will always have protagonists; at best you have transformative leaders. As the transformation of large group identities affects every single individual of the group in the core, enormous emotions are set free; what is needed then is to safeguard a culture which guarantees the physical protection of 'dissenters' which in this context are easily called 'traitors'. The killings of Martin Luther King, J.F. Kennedy, Itzak Rabin, Anwar El Sadat (just to name a few ) and e.g. the concern colleagues in the US still have for the physical safety of president Barack Obama speak its own language here and probably are only the tip of an iceberg. Creating and maintaining such a culture of openness and safety demands among other things a multifaceted civil society and a wise government. If we have to deal with a non-existing or criminal state things will go bad for a long time.

The arguments outlined above imply that group analysis can contribute a lot to the understanding of these processes, though its direct possibilities to influence them are limited.

It is obvious that the time rhythms of the mentioned processes and the dimension of the groups involved imply emotional forces of such magnitude that their containment cannot be achieved by one group leader alone (or with a co- leader) and moreover needs time in itself. The treatment of a trauma always means “reclaiming space and time” (Schlapobersky, J. 2000), i.e. the abolishment of the time collapse and thus restructuring identities on personal and collective levels.

It's about leaving (or sometimes for the first time assigning) the past its worth in the past in order to live the present and to meet the challenges of the future. One could also call it to discontinue or at least to mitigate the repetition compulsion. That again is a collective task in

which persons, small groups, all sorts of social groups and institutions take part. Our workshop here is part of and an example for this kind of larger endeavors. This is our contribution - not more, and not less.

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Hello.

Thank you for including me in this conference.

When thinking about working with trauma, boundaries are important, even time boundaries. This is particularly important when boundaries of all types might have been crossed or violated.

I hope to maintain my frame, start on time and end on time, something important when doing trauma work.

Let me reflect on a supervision panel in Rome 6 years ago...

A comment of the group reminding a man in the audience of an Elvis Presley Song, "Only the Lonely"

Allow me to briefly discuss a consultation with IAGP member in Kiev, Ukraine..

I mentioned to her that I was presenting in Sarajevo and asked what topics she thought I should cover in this talk...

She said, "there are all types of trauma... natural disasters, sexual traumas, war conflicts..."

She described how the war in Ukraine is effecting her and colleagues:

sadness, hurt, depression, anger, fear... but most of all.. loneliness... like in the Elvis Presley song that Ivan associated to...

I describe how the impact of trauma, on the people experiencing it as well as the treater, include all of the same feelings, especially loneliness.. AND ISOLATION.

describe how in Japan, I'm working with a colleague who did work in and around Fukushima...and how there is the additional component and prominence of SHAME after the trauma. in Fukushima, there were four disasters, not only three.. the earthquake, the tsunami, the nuclear meltdown and the SILENCE about the nuclear problems.

Shame and silence are pervasive after disaster and traumas..

The same is true after the recent sinking of a ferry in South Korea, where so many children died...

Again - Silence and shame were huge components that added to the aftermath of this disaster-

I describe the groups i led in Belfast, where brother were killing brothers, and the culture of silence was also pervasive but for different reasons...

IN JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA THE SILENCE WAS FUELED BY SHAME

IN IRELAND SILENCE WAS FUELED BY SELF PRITECTION

In Ireland, the saying was "whatever you say, don't say anything" because when you said something substantial, people could and would die.

Describe the group in Belfast when a man in the group described taking a shower, singing a

song to determine his mood for the day...

When my intervention was, "who else relates to singing?" a member of the group said he didn't have positive associations with showers.....that when he was in school, he was repeatedly raped by other students in the showers after they played football... He was a married man with grandchildren, and he had never spoken about his rapes to anyone ever until this group.

Then another man revealed that growing up he had been put in a reform school, for children with severe behavioral problems, and he was so ashamed of this, he never told anyone about it, not even his wife, children or colleagues...

Shame is a pervasive and toxic result in many cases after disasters or traumas.

How shame is metabolized is up to both the human being in the context of the culture that he or she lives.

The psychiatrist Judith Herman states that the number one mistake clinicians make is not talking about the disaster/trauma.

The second and equally important mistake is probing for and discussing traumatic material before an atmosphere of safety has been established - before trust and a solid working alliance has been established.

Very important to remember.

Judith Herman describes her model of three stages of trauma work:

Establishment of Safety

Quoting Ganzarian and Buchele:

"The primary focus in doing trauma work is to create a safe space for the work of the group - This is true regardless of the nature of the trauma, i.e. natural disaster, industrial accident, intentional act of interpersonal terrorism"

TELL THE STORY OF THE BEE STING. How my colleague's son was stung by a bee at 10am but didn't tell him about it until 2pm. After my colleague removed the bee stinger, he asked his son how come he only tells him now at 2pm about the bee sting.

His son replied, "but dad, sometimes you have to be in a safe place to talk about scary things!"

Out of the mouths of children...

Remembrance and Mourning

Reconnection

The meaning of and response to traumas has a cultural component-

NEVER ASSUME WE UNDERSTAND WHAT THE EXPERIENCE MEANT TO THE PERSON

The English analyst Donald Winnicott wrote that there 'is no such thing as a baby- that there is always a baby 'and another'

Same applies to traumas - They exist/occur in the context of the culture it occurred in-

For example, let's look at the cultural responses to two earthquakes, one in Japan and one in Haiti, two similarly devastating natural disasters was very different.

In Haiti, hundreds of thousands of people died, far more than expected, because Haiti, a poor country, braces itself against hurricanes, not earthquakes, by reinforcing all of the roofs of all of the buildings with slabs of concrete.

A defense against one natural disaster logarithmically increased the number of fatalities and injuries after their earthquake.

How the countries responded was different.

Haiti reached out to the international community.

Japan's culture of 'SAVING FACE' reinforced their shame at having experienced and been wounded by the earthquake

In the beginning of my training as a group therapist, I was invited to form and lead a group of men who were survivors of childhood sexual abuse. In some cases they survived incest, in others the perpetrator was a household helper.

When the group formed and I added a new member, how do you imagine the group responded to this new person??

They cried, without anyone saying a word for almost five minutes... their shame at their 'incest wound' being exposed... was overwhelming.

TALK ABOUT WALKING ON EGGSHELLS- my countertransference to the group was to treat the members too gently for fear of retraumatizing them. One group member confronted me and said, Richard, stop treating us like we are so fragile!

He supervised me and allowed me to be more authentic with the group members.

THE GROUP WILL ALWAYS BE YOUR BEST SUPERVISOR.

BEING WITH, NOT BEING RIGHT OR SMART.. LET THE GROUP MEMBERS BE SMART!

TRAUMATIC COUNTERTRANSFERENCE!

Avoidance of some material

Sleepiness in the session

Shame

Guilt

Hypervigilance

Rescue fantasy

Get supervision/consultation

LET THE GROUP SUPERVISE US

PATIENCE

TRUST THE GROUP PROCESS- THEY WILL GO WHERE THEY NEED TO GO

\*\*\*\* Process HORIZONTALLY- we don't need more data! \*\*\*\*

What was it like to tell us this now... Or How did everyone feel hearing what was just said. It keeps the group in the here and now and increases group cohesion.

PEOPLE ARE RESILIENT

Shame can be a toxic aftermath of a disaster, and it can be detoxified in a group setting...

The Dutch Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk states that COHESION of a trauma group is the key factor in incorporating the healing/helping qualities of a group.

When human beings have survived a disaster a trauma, they don't need an intellectual interpretation... they.. we.. need an authentic human interaction and experience according to the Analyst, Anna Freud.

We might say that affiliative ties are severed... that's one way of describing the loneliness that our IAGP colleague described in her Skype conversations with me from Kiev.

Loneliness... cut off from friends, from family, from oneself...

Hopefully, in groups, regardless of the culture, and regardless of the nature of the trauma/disaster, we can help people reconnect with others and themselves.

Now lets return to where I began, as I described how at an IAGP CONGRESS in Rome, a group that took place in New York City was recognized to be composed of LONELY people by an IAGP colleague from Croatia.

Loneliness is a universal phenomenon.

In Sept. 2001 in New York City, after being invited to help a company situated in one of the towers of the World Trade Center that had lost hundreds of employees, several people asked me, 'how are you going to help us? I looked them in the eye and said, 'I don't know.. we will have to figure this out together..''

As the psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan stated, "it takes people to make people ill and it takes people to make people well"...

All of us here believe in the utility and power of a group; the meaning of universality- that we are not alone in having lived through an event... that we can bear witness to each other's experiences as others bear witness to ours... as we know that we can never undo the trauma, the disaster that people have survived.

Both the psychiatrist Judith Herman, whose specialty is working with women survivors of sexual assault, and Earl Hopper, psychologist and IAGP past president, have described a seminal function when working with disasters. WE BEAR WITNESS ... WE LISTEN..., which is an act of respect and also the beginning of our attempt at understanding what the events have meant to those who survived.

We help people organize their experiences to help make meaning of it.

As we listen and as we bear witness to the members of our groups, we bring to help reduce the interpersonal and intrapersonal loneliness within us all.

I will emphasize about the presence of silence in the communications in family and in societies where those conflicts and how silence is an efficient mechanism of transmission of trauma, and also indiscriminate transmission to children, to offspring's, by traumatized people without taking in account their capacity of assimilating. I will talk something about the guilty and same feelings below silence.

As you see, I will focus in next generations prevention...

Dr. Gregorio Armañanzas Ros SPAIN GOYO

Richard-

I would convey that I cannot truly know what they have suffered because I was not there, but I am present now to listen, learn, understand and help in whatever way I can.

Bonnie

Bonnie Buchele, IAGP president elect USA

I agree with you Bonnie. I would add to see/listen and share with those who have suffered, to recognize their pain, their despair and their stories in order not to forget and to learn what could be done in the future to restore what has been destroyed if ever possible.

IAGP immediate past president Jorge Burmeister, SPAIN

with dedication and persistence our Japanese colleagues unrelentlessly continue their outreach work to help the victims and families that were/are effected by the tsunami and nuclear fallout -- the support they have asked of us is "to walk with them" Esther Stone USA

To Sarajevo group therapists:

When you feel overwhelmed with helplessness, when you haven't a clue what words, method or strategy could possibly address the amount of unspeakable pain in front of you, get up off your chair, stand in front of the speaker and open your arms. Hold the person. Say nothing. Marcia Karp UK

Dear Richard

In loss for words I agree with Marcia. When pain is overwhelming holding, using words, is a comforting solution. I am sending my love and a strong will to help.

Yaffa A. Moore Israel

might say that it is very deeply shattering when we experience just how terribly human beings can behave toward each other, killing, raping and maiming for life, without any apparent reasons or qualms of conscience - that this not only traumatizes individuals, but can also disrupt the whole fabric of society, so that it is not only necessary to be there for the suffering victims, in the way that has been eloquently described here, but also to work toward repairing a sense of justice and of the requirements of human dignity in the whole society at large - something that can often take many years, even generations, but that it is a fight that we must not give up on. Maybe this comes more from my own work with the second and third generations from a

genocide that happened 70 years ago,  
Felix de Mendelson, Austria

I do not know if what follows applies: Those of us raised and educated as Catholics are instructed to grow with a sense of guilt due to what was explained as the ORIGINAL SIN. Never understood why, or what it was about. As I grew older, understood that guilt makes us accept punishment without even asking why, since punishment is the only way to erase guilt and the uncomfortable feelings related to it. To be instructed to accept guilt just for being born is a way of control that the instructor has, be it lay or religious. It was also a good way to become agnostic in due time.

Respectfully,  
Roberto de Innocenco Spain

Where there is life, there is hope, and where there is hope there is life. By hope I mean the ability and willingness to exercise the transcendent imagination. However, I think that it is important to understand the symbolism of the conception of Jesus by God's word through Mary's ear. Relational listening and hearing, and conveying that the traumatized have been heard, are vital for our work. It is hard not to sound trivial and pretentious in the context of so much despair in while in the comfort of one's home within fairly stable democratic societies. Earl Hopper, PhD. IAGP past president UK

IAGP – International Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Processes  
*Analytic Group Section*

Ljiljana Milivojević, Chair

WORKSHOP, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, May 9-11, 2014  
„PSYCHIC TRAUMA AND GROUP IDENTITY-

WORKSHOP, Sarajevo, Bosna i Hercegovina, 09.–11. 05. 2014.  
„PSIHIČKA TRAUMA I GRUPNI IDENTITET-

ETHNIC GROUPS AND  
COEXISTENCE: IS THE CULTURE OF  
FORGIVENESS AND  
RECONCILIATION POSSIBLE?

Ivan Urlić

Abstract

In writing about the culture of forgiveness and reconciliation processes, the essential idea was to describe them within the dynamics of deep narcissistic wounds, the sequence of confrontation with trauma and the mourning of losses, thereby allowing forgiveness and possibly even reconciliation to occur.

All the clinical subjects I will talk about have remained in the environments where they were born, but which have acquired new features due to the punishing atmosphere of war and its aftermath in the psychotherapeutic frame of reference. Therefore I have followed the developmental line of my experiences with the tragic consequences of war events.

In conclusion I underscore the mourning process as the most important precondition for the forgiving process to develop. That process should unfold in four stages: confrontation, mourning, forgiving, reconciliation, as well as five steps process that should unfold on both sides in conflict. Besides individual psychotherapy, group modalities in dealing with severe stress situations are recommended as the approach of choice enabling open talk about traumatic experiences and their consequences, thus opening the possibility for restoration of the capacity to believe and for mourning, forgiving and reconciliation processes to develop.

Key words:

Severe psychic trauma, culture of forgiveness, reconciliation, group psychotherapy

ETNIČKE GRUPE I SUŽIVOT:  
JE LI KULTURA OPROSTA I POMIRENJA MOGUĆA?

Ivan Urlić

Apstrakt

Govoreći o kulturi opraštanja i pomirenja osnovna je ideja da ih se opiše u okviru dinamike susreta s dubokim narcističkim ranama u slijedu konfrontacija s pretrpljenim traumama i žalovanjem zbog gubitaka. Na taj se način omogućuje da se odvijte potreba za opraštanjem, a možda čak i za pomirenjem.

Svi klinički primjeri koje ću navesti vezani su za mjesto nastanka, ali su dobili nova značenja zbog kažnjavajuće atmosfere rata i njegovih posljedica u psihoterapijskom okviru. Stoga sam slijedio razvojnu liniju vlastitih iskustava s tragičnim posljedicama ratnih događaja.

U zaključku stavljam poseban naglasak na procese žalovanja kao na najvažniji preduvjet da se razvije proces oprosta. Taj proces bi se trebao odviti u četiri faze: konfrontaciji, žalovanju, oprost, pomirenju, kao i putem procesa od pet koraka koji bi se trebali odvijati na obim stranama u konfliktu. Osim individualne psihoterapije preporučuju se grupni načini pristupa teškim stresnim situacijama kao način izbora koji omogućava otvoreni razgovor o traumatskim iskustvima i posljedicama, otvarajući na taj način mogućnost ponovne uspostave sposobnosti za vjerovanje i žalovanje, te za razvoj procesa oprosta i pomirenja.

Ključne riječi: Teška psihička trauma, kultura oprosta, pomirenje, grupna psihoterapija



## **1. Introduction**

Psychosocial help and psychotherapeutic processes, always bearing in mind the therapeutic aim of attaining the level and creating the space for the culture of forgiveness to develop, open possibilities for reconciliation with oneself and others.

I recommend that these (therapeutic) processes should be accompanied by the parallel task of mourning of losses and unattained wishes. I suggest that forgiveness and reconciliation can only become attainable achievements and constructive aims of psychotherapeutic and psychosocial interventions through a thorough mourning process.

## **2. Enemies, conflicts and armed clashes**

To speak about ongoing hostilities is quite a complex and difficult task, as is the necessity of coexisting with enemies of all kinds. It is always possible to ask ourselves, time and again, whether there can be a space for the mutually exchangeable and recognizable phenomena we call reality, and how do we enter a space filled with prejudices, judgmental positions and cultural stereotypes that obstruct curiosity and questioning, very often providing space for aggressive and destructive expressions.

At the beginning of the war in Croatia in 1991, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, it was very popular to quote the Chinese curse: "Might you live in interesting times". These times in Yugoslavia started to evolve a decade before the war broke, culminating in the armed conflict. The "usual" dynamics of life became an "interesting" one, bringing about deep changes, leading to death and destruction in personal, social and cultural spheres, as well as in construction of some new independent states, different organizations of these societies, and the possibilities for them to reaffirm their specific cultures and cultural heritage. The coping mechanisms of all kinds were set in motion, and many couldn't confront such deep and even radical changes in an efficient way.

There is an old, wise saying that tells us that time heals all wounds. It might be said that PTSD is the result of a failure of time to heal all wounds. The memory of the trauma is not integrated and accepted as part of one's personal past. Instead, it comes to exist independently of previous schemata (Urlić, 1999, p.487).

### Clinical example 1:

#### The Escape from Bosnian Hell

From the refugee camp, one 18-year-old young man was referred because he was overwhelmed with great fears that he would become mad and irresponsible for his behaviour.

At first, he was unable to speak, could not even glance at me, and was shaking with all his body. It turned out that he was Muslim, from Eastern Bosnia. Serbian nationalists encircled the small town and started to kill the population and rape young women. He was living in a large family. In that situation, he joined one group that found the way to the mountain. There, in a small valley, there was a farmer's house. They rushed to find some shelter, but someone from inside started to shoot at them. Finally, they discovered there were friendly people from the same town that let them enter. There, he found his eldest brother, armed, heavily wounded in his right arm. He was trying to adjust the machinegun toward his head to shoot himself. The brother shouted that they were encircled by enemy soldiers, that for him there was no escape, and was pressing his young brother to help him shoot himself and then he should try to escape...He refused to help his brother to shoot himself. Shooting started, a shell exploded, the youngster found himself in the woods again...After three days of wandering in woods, he was found by some people and brought to one gathering point for refugees. Helped by the Red Cross, he was brought to Split, but he did not even know where exactly he was. Desperate, not knowing the vicissitudes of other family members and whether somebody survived the massacre, he was uttering his dilemma: should he have helped his wounded brother die, instead letting him at the mercy of enemy soldiers; how he could have killed his own brother; whether he will ever find some family members...And, where to go now...?

In front of such despair, it looks like an impossible task to try to help with any possible word or action. It is my belief that what can connect people in these situations might be deep compassion, containing, listening, understanding. But words prove to be far too weak to enable a real dialogue. Perhaps the example from besieged Dubrovnik is another episode indicating how in situations of extreme danger and destruction, it is only despair, vengeful needs and feelings, and survival strategies that are filling the frame of collapsed space and time. In these cases, the empathic listening might be seminal in preventing vengeful fantasies from becoming acts.

Such expressions block the unlearning processes, so that new knowledge and insight are unable to enter the situation. Thus, ghosts of the past and present often occupy a place where open-mindedness would serve much better.

UN statistics show that there are more than 100 armed conflicts and wars in the world almost every day. What a remarkable monument to uncontrolled human aggression! As of 2004, a total of 228 armed conflicts had been recorded after World War II and 118 after the end of the Cold War.

In Europe, the twentieth century was marked by two world wars, clashes of two totalitarian ideologies and the rise and fall of empires of various colours. It was believed that the lesson about unleashed human aggression had been learned and that another war in Europe was highly improbable. The former Soviet bloc and the former Tchechoslovakia have dissolved without a bullet shot. Nonetheless, Europe had to pass through another war experience during the final decade of the twentieth century, the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia. The unimaginable had become a reality.

## **2. Reactions of people under extremely stressful conditions**

“War is the woe of human nature”, wrote Marin Držić, a Renaissance writer from Dubrovnik. At the end of the twentieth century, the Croatian and Bosnian and Herzegovinian populations had to pass through another woe of this kind, after having endured two world wars and three entirely different political and social systems.

In trying to understand post-traumatic stress more fully, I would like to quote a proposal expounded by Joseph et al. (1997): “A traumatic event presents an individual with stimulus information which, as perceived at the time, gives rise to extreme emotional arousal but interferes with immediate processing”.

Representations of these events/stimuli are retained in the memory, due to their personal salience and the difficulty they present for easy assimilation with other stored representations.

## **3. The (therapeutic) mirroring of traumatic hatred**

After having suffered severe traumas and being deeply wounded by them, the essential question arises how to understand, approach and help healing processes to start and develop?

Some clinical vignettes will illustrate different dimensions of wounds of warfare and its long shadows that influence the entire human personality and the society.

### Clinical example 2:

The Bosnian film director Jasmila Žbanić’s film, “-Grbavica”,<sup>1</sup> obtained the Golden Bear at Berlin film festival. It is a story of the worst possible war atrocities—the destiny of raped women and consequences on the next generation. Even 16-year-old girls were raped and released from concentration camps only in advanced phases of their pregnancy. There are still no confirmed numbers of raped women in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but their number was estimated between 2,000 and 20,000. Many of them feel so ashamed that are not willing to expose themselves to new shame and humiliation in front of themselves and their social worlds. Some brought their children with them, but the majority of them left these babies. Those crimes were consciously planned in order to humiliate people and to break all bridges among various ethnic groups and individuals. It might be asked what was their guilt that deserved that much hate. The young director of that film put an open question, in her TV interview, what kind of personality and what kind of society is the one where men experience erection out of hate?

After the war, it is possible to feel the more or less repressed pain. I remember autumn 1995, going to besieged Sarajevo in Bosnia-Herzegovina. There were no more shootings and the Serbian army was withdrawing. Some parts of the town were destroyed, some others were severely damaged. Only two main streets were lit, and the town was sunken into darkness every night. It was looking like ghost town. I was asked to help reestablish the University teachings. The hall was filled with students who either couldn’t stop talking or were obviously very distracted. I realized that the special situation was asking the adequate approach. And I said to students that I have come to Sarajevo to talk to them but being there, I realized that I’ll be better first to listen to them. They were very eager to share with me some of their wartime experiences, and they were pointing out many nice and touching moments between going and

coming from battle lines, finding friends and family members again, or staying in couples the whole night embraced with just one bottle of plum-brandy and having fun and feeling closeness and happiness. As a matter of fact, they were in constant death peril. Life was very cheap then, and the joy of survival immense. Then we made an agreement: I'll lecture according to our program and after, we will take two hours time to talk in the group. The third day, the space among us was created as well as inside us. That evening, space had become a very friendly encounter, able to stimulate and to contain horrible but even very intimate personal stories.

One town, two absolutely different experiences. Some citizens of the town were attacking and destroying it, while the other part was defending it. It was depending on the way of approaching, either from the side of hatred and despise or of love and humaneness. Somehow, it was a similar experience I had from the therapeutic setting. Many times, the unconscious reparatory processes were finding their ways of expression first through dreams.

But, first, some intriguing thoughts ...William Hazlitt (1778-1830) in his work "On the Pleasure of Hating" wrote: "Nature seems (the more we look into it) made up of antipathies: without something to hate we should lose the very spring of thought and action. Life would turn to a stagnant pool, were it not ruffled by the jarring interests, the unruly passions of men".

And:

"Love turns, with a little indulgence, to indifference or disgust: hatred alone is immortal..... Our feelings take part with our passions, rather than with our understandings".

Once again we might put the question where are all human hatred, violence and other aggressive behaviours coming from, and what provokes and supports that way of relating to others? And, how to articulate all therapeutic procedures to enable the grieving process and the forgiving process to unwind, in order to try to heal deep narcissistic wounds, destruction of self and interpersonal relations? In other words, how to reconcile with oneself and the others?

#### **4. On the culture of forgiveness and the possibility for reconciliation**

*"To forgive means free the heart from feeling of vengeance"*

Pope John Paul II ending his first visit to Croatia, 1994.

— ... there will be always the need for the process of forgiveness and reconciliation in order to repair splits that emerge in relationships: that is an inevitable fact of the human condition.

**"NO FUTURE WITHOUT FORGIVENESS"**

Desmond Mpilo Tutu, 1999

McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen (2000) highlighted a fundamentally psychosocial element in forgiveness, defining it as "intraindividual, prosocial change toward a perceived transgressor that is situated within a specific interpersonal context".

The fundamentally interpersonal basis of forgiveness may be pivotal in our evolving understanding of forgiveness' underlying dynamics. Forgiveness is generally seen as a response to unfair treatment that includes the reduction in resentment and the advent of beneficence toward the offender (Enright, 2001).

Worthington and colleagues (e.g., Worthington & Scherer, 2004) make the distinction between decisional forgiveness, in which motivations change, and emotional forgiveness, in which negative emotions are replaced with more positive, other - oriented emotions (e.g., empathy).

The same author also stated that in addition to the work of mourning to retrieve the lost libido, the patient must do the work of hating, to liberate his aggression from continued service to the past. Forgiveness is accomplished by recovering the aggression that had been pre-empted by the desire for revenge and redirecting it toward a new goal. The work of forgiving allows for the symbolic blending of aggression and libido into an endeavor created to replace a hated object.

With forgiveness, the blocking introject loses its significance. The goal of revenge passes. Comfort in a stronger ego affords the patient the prospect of a future freed of hatred from the past. I support the idea that freedom from hatred from the past signifies the regained ability to sublimate aggressive feelings, thus deciding for human relations to continue in a more productive and positive way.

Although no "gold standard" definition of interpersonal forgiveness exists, there is general agreement among theorists and researchers about what forgiveness is not: It is not pardoning (legal term), excusing (implies good reason for offense), condoning (implies justification), denying (implies unwillingness to acknowledge), forgetting (implies failed memory, something outside conscious awareness), or reconciliation. (Enright & Coyle, 1998; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000).

As such, forgiveness involves both the reduction of unforgiveness and an increase of positive emotions and perspectives, such as empathy, hope, or compassion.

### Clinical example 3.

Some Experiences from the Center for psychosocial help in Sarajevo, 1995

1995, the end of the war, Sarajevo was giving the picture of an entirely devastated town. It was still besieged, but there were no shootings anymore. The organization for psychosocial help "France Libertés" was helping in organizing the University activities and was establishing a small network of Centers for psychosocial help. At that time, it was the much-needed initiative, because the whole social life was ruined by a thousand days of siege and

waves of refugees coming from other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It happened that in one of those Centers, one young man activated a hand-bomb, wounding himself and endangering lives of two helpers of the Center, one young man and one young woman. They were so scared that wanted to leave the psychosocial work immediately. I was asked to try to help them, as well as the whole Center, to overcome the trauma by working it through, if possible.

When we met in the Center for the first time, I was told by the whole team that they were not intending to proceed with their work because their lives were threatened. But, they accepted my proposal that I would talk individually about experiences with every member of the team, and that we would have group meetings of the whole team, together with French helpers and organizers, in order to understand better their work and motives for it, as well as their fears. The proposal was accepted. In the meantime, the young woman was re-traumatized by encountering the aggressor in the Court of Justice. At our final group meeting, the whole group was able to work through the trauma to the point that they promised, regarding leaving their psychosocial helping activity, to think it over and to say their final decision in two days time ... They decided to continue with their helping activities in the Center.

It might be said that some work on reconciliation with the threat and uncertainty was done by all members of the Center. But, in order to attain the possibility for reconciliation, especially under very difficult circumstances, the process of forgiveness had to take place, and some grieving for the loss of some earlier idealizations of themselves and their aims. There are limits for everyone and for everything, they had to admit.

However, within the forgiveness literature, there is a three-dimensional model of dispositional forgiveness which, aside from forgiveness of others, identifies forgiveness of oneself (forgiveness regarding one's own previous transgression against others) and forgiveness of situations (a tendency to accept and seek closure around a negative life event beyond one's control, such as an earthquake or illness). (Yamahure-Thompson & Snyder, 2002)

## **5. The neuroscientific model**

Neuroscientific research is developing the Neurological Model of forgiveness:  
(Alvin J. Clark)

The cornerstone hypothesis is that, before forgiveness takes place, memories periodically arouse fear stemming from the amygdala. This fear drives a pattern of anger and fight-or-flight readiness.

Under appropriate circumstances the frontal cortex interrupts the pattern and quells the fear response in the amygdala. The resultant relaxation of muscular tension signals the cortex that forgiveness has occurred. In addition, the memory pathway from the rhinal cortex and hippocampus to the amygdala is inhibited.

Finally, a tangible act confirms that the memories no longer stimulate the amygdala and the

pattern of anger and stress do not recur.

Forgiveness may be a prerequisite for reconciliation, but it is a different process.

The fact that monkeys, apes, and humans all engage in reconciliation behaviour means that it is probably over thirty million years old, preceding the evolutionary divergence of these primates ... Instead of looking at reconciliation as a triumph of reason over instinct, we need to begin to study the roots and universality of the psychological mechanisms involved.” (De Waal: Peacemaking among primates, 1989)

## **7. Mourning of losses**

But, all loss first must be mourned. Not only the dead, or the good enough mother. The loss of self-esteem, of certainty, of group charisma, a physical power, of the rights and privileges associated with a particular phase of life ... must all be acknowledged (acc. to Hopper, 2003).

The mourning process is the most important precondition for the forgiving process to develop.

### **THE FOUR STAGES OF FORGIVING**

1. HURTING: we feel hurt – we can only forgive people, but we can't forgive nature or systems. Forgiving is always a personal event.
2. HATING: We hate – hate is our natural response to any deep and unfair pain. It is hate and not anger that needs healing.
3. HEALING ONESELF: we heal ourselves – forgiving someone for hurting the first gift is a new insight. The truth about those who hurt us is that they are weak, needy, and fallible human beings.
4. COMING TOGETHER: We come together – with truthfulness you can make and honest new beginning.  
(L. B. Smedes, 1996)

How people forgive ?

- Slowly!
- With a little understanding!
- In confusion!
- With anger left over!
- A little at a time!
- Freely or not at all!
  - With a fundamental feeling! (L.B.Smedes, 1996)

According to Gruchy (2002), “reconciliation begins when, without surrendering our identity, who we are, but opening up ourselves to the “other”, we enter into the space between, exchanging places with the other, in a conversation that takes us beyond ourselves. In doing so we find ourselves in vicarious solidarity with, rather than against the “other”, willing to do to the “other” only what we would want them to do to us. Furthermore, in the process our self-understanding begins to change...

Siassi (2007) wrote: “One of the fruits of forgiveness is a “forgiving attitude”, which is also a developmental accomplishment allowing some people to be more forgiving than others, vis-à-vis oneself and the rest of the world. As the process of mourning carries a person from anger to sadness, the superego softens. The work of forgiveness further continues this softening as the residual narcissistic anger in the relationship gives way to understanding and a longing for rapprochement—to make good the lost relationship”.

I believe that to free oneself or one society from hatred and other hard feelings the path leads through the processes of four stages:

*confrontation - mourning - forgiving - reconciliation*

To heal the undeserved wounds on personal, social and ethnic or national levels there is a path that I understand as a five steps process that should unfold on both sides in conflict.

### **8. To sum up:**

There is the five steps process that should unfold on both sides in conflict, in the frame of confrontation - mourning – forgiving –reconciliation dynamics:

1. becoming conscious of the problem complexity (confrontation with many different realities and experiences);
2. develop deeper understanding of its manifest and especially latent contents (the mourning process);
3. working through the newly gained insight;
4. renounce of vengeance and making forgiving possible;
5. creating the space for reconciliatory processes to unfold, with oneself and other(s) (i.e. restoration of the capacity to believe).

Urlić, Berger, Berman : “Victimhood, Vengefulness, and the Culture of Forgiveness”, NY, Novapublishers, 2010

The first three steps correspond to the well known usual psychoanalytically informed attitude/work.

The fourth and fifth steps, besides rational and emotional components, include ethical, philosophical, spiritual/religious and cultural contents.

Group modalities in dealing with these psychic issues represent the approach of choice



enabling open talk about traumatic experiences and consequences, offering the possibility for mirroring of suffering and of traumatic hatred in the group (therapeutic) setting, thus opening the possibility for restoration of the capacity to believe and for mourning, forgiving and reconciliation processes to develop.

*I believe that the process of reparation from traumatic experience should unfold starting from confrontation and mourning processes for suffered losses in order to promote the culture of forgiveness – leading to reconciliation with oneself and the other(s).*

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