

Working with Survivors of Torture and Political Violence in New York City

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Zusammenfassung:

Der Autor beschreibt anhand eines Fallbeispiels die Lebensbedingungen von Flüchtlingen nach traumatischen Erlebnissen im Heimatland und stellt anschließend ein von ihm und seinen Mitarbeitern entwickeltes Theaterprojekt der New York University vor. Es wurde für Opfer von Gewalt und Folter konzipiert, basiert auf ihren Erfahrungsberichten und hat u.a. zum Ziel, das Schweigen über die erlittene Traumatisierung zu brechen und der Person wieder tragfähige soziokulturelle und politische Sinnzusammenhänge zu eröffnen. Durch die Gruppenarbeit und den kreativen Prozeß können Ressourcen und Coping-Mechanismen reaktiviert werden, die dem Betroffenen zur Bewältigung der traumatischen Erlebnisse dienen, ohne daß dieser eine professionelle Hilfe in Anspruch nehmen muß. Ein wichtiger Bestandteil der Arbeit ist die Förderung der spezifischen, kulturabhängigen Ausdrucksfähigkeit, um das Erlebte - beispielsweise durch kollektive Trauerrituale oder Erzählungen - in einen sozialen Kontext zu reintegrieren.

For survivors of political violence, the way back to a meaningful relation to the world and other people may seem impossible. For those who have been radically disempowered as in the act of torture, the recovery of a sense of agency and power over one' life may seem far out of reach. In our work with survivors of political violence and exile currently living in New York City we see a wide range of reactions to the traumatic experiences they have had to endure. Those who have been tortured for political reasons have been assaulted on all levels. They are left mistrusting their intuitions and doubting their ideals. Their bonds to family and community are often severely disrupted. Pain may be associated with every action, pleasure, and object in their lives; every act of speech may lead to suffering. The survivor of torture is often left without a voice, just a shattered body to serve as an example to others of the consequence of protest In 1998, amnesty international documented torture in over 150 countries, an app. 20% rise in the past 10 years. It is estimated that there may be from 2.5 to 7 million torture survivors worldwide. Many survivors of torture live as fugitives in their own country. Once tortured, they may

be subjected to repeated arrests, and are highly at risk of being killed. For those who are fortunate enough to escape and seek asylum in another country, achieving a degree of safety and stability in their lives may be months or years away.

Sadly, in the US, the Immigration and Naturalization Service in an effort to curb illegal immigration and to prevent 'potentially dangerous' foreigners from entering the country have instituted procedures which are highly dangerous for asylees who have a legitimate history of torture or political persecution. Each year, tens of thousands of foreigners with false or missing papers are immediately sent back from the US to their countries of origin. Those who are able to convince immigration officials they have a „credible fear“ of returning, are taken to a detention center where they may be held for months while their case is being reviewed. For those legitimate survivors of torture and political violence who are detained in a jail and deprived of many of their rights, the experience can be severely retraumatizing. When a torture survivor is placed in jail in a strange country where he/she had hoped to find refuge, the likelihood of reexperiencing their previous torture and imprisonment is very high. During 1998, there were several suicide attempts made by detainees in US immigration detention facilities in the New York area (Llorente, 1999).

Many of the survivors of torture and other forms of state sponsored violence seeking psychosocial and medical services in New York City are in the process of applying for or have received political asylum and/or refugee status. While waiting months for their application to be reviewed, political asylees are unable to legally work, they received no public assistance for food, shelter, or medical care, and they are dependent on charitable members of the community for basic support. They are a vulnerable population, easily exploited in the workplace and often further victimized by violence on the streets. Close to one and a half million refugees and immigrants live in the New York City area. It is estimated that among the various refugee communities, 10 to 35% may have suffered trauma from political violence. Until recently, there were few specialized services offering them medical, mental health or social support (Rosenberg, 1997).

The impact of political violence and exile

Mr. W, an African man in his late twenties came to the clinic for an evaluation to support his claim for political asylum. He had been tortured a number of times as teenager. He and his family were persecuted as Christians. He had been living in New York for four years and was completing

his last semester at a local university. As he approached his exams, graduation and impending asylum hearing, the specter of his torturer began to make frequent appearances in his dreams. He spoke about the circumstance of his torture for the first time in years.

At the time of the interview, he reported that he had not slept for two or three days, and that he worked on an evening shift at the airport as a way of avoiding sleep. At night when he would lay in bed, he became extremely fearful that his torturer was attempting to strangle him. He had frequent nightmares about one torturer in particular, a man who would sadistically cut his leg with a razor blade each day as he was being interrogated. He claimed to know the man from his village, and would remember his face as the symbol of his torture. As with many traumatized refugees, Mr. W avoided spending time with others and engaging in more than superficial conversation, because he felt that no one could really understand what he had been through. At school he reported difficulty concentrating on his work. He feared that if he were returned to his country, he would either be killed by his torturer or mistreated by the current government. During his first meeting, he spoke of his imprisonments and torture as a teenager and his difficult and lonely life in New York. When asked to draw a picture of himself, he drew a bug enclosed in a glass jar.

Weeks later Mr. W. wanted to share a dream he had had during an unusually restful night of sleep he had after sharing some of his history. He was giving a piece of paper to draw the images in his dream.

„In the dream, I was sleeping in a hammock tied to a tree. The tree was thick and protected me until a huge black bird with the face of my torturer swooped down and pulled me up by my feet, which had not been protected by the tree. I was hanging head down with my feet grasped by the big black bird as it flew up in the air over a dangerous v shaped chasm. At the bottom of the chasm was water filled with sharks, and in the sides of the cliffs were the bodies of those people who had been tortured and had died. When the big black bird dropped me into the cliff, I was suddenly surprised by four or five small black birds that flew up from the cliff and surrounded me. I felt myself growing feathers and wings and flying. As I looked around I saw thousands of black birds flying there to help me. I landed on the other side where in the distance I could see the setting sun, which has always represented for me my destiny.“

Mr. W. had already interpreted the dream. He awoke to tape-record the dream in his own dialect and then he associated freely to the many elements of the dream. He saw himself over the years as having survived by clinging to the memories of his family members, represented by the shelter of the tree. Yet he knew someday that he would have to cross the dangerous chasm of memory to reach his destiny. The memory of the torture evoked in him the fear that he would suffer the same fate as those who

had not survived. But with the help of others he felt he would make it across the chasm and that in speaking of his suffering he had already begun to cross the most difficult obstacle in his journey. The dangerous dream bird had flown away for now, and as he stood on the other side of the chasm in the rocks and mud, he saw himself making steps towards his destiny. He again drew a picture of himself as a bug trapped in a jar, this time with a crack in the jar. A few weeks later, he graduated and received political asylum.

By the time asylees or refugees have reached a host country like the US, they may have experienced multiple traumas. Many have lived through years of violence inflicted upon their family and community often including the disappearance, imprisonment, or murder of family members. They are often themselves recipients of violence, torture, or imprisonment or have witnessed violence perpetrated against members of their family and community. After imprisonment, they may live a life of chronic threat of arrest or in hiding. They are often marginalized in their society, stripped of their previous occupation, status, and property. Those who were parents may find it extremely difficult to carry out their functions in child rearing and in providing for their family. The process of fleeing their country is also dangerous. When they finally arrive in a host country, they must deal with the problems of residency status, racial prejudice, and numerous obstacles - socio-economic, educational, occupational, and linguistic. The stresses of previous stages are ongoing; concern about family and friends, ambivalence and grief about fleeing from one's country, coping with disturbing traumatic memories, and physical and psychological sequelae of torture and related traumas.

Many political asylees are socially isolated. They do not join their ethnic community because of factionalism within the community or an ongoing fear of reprisal by agents of repressive regimes. The asylee or refugee is often in a state of continuous stress due to unresolved political and family calamities in the home country which are superimposed on the difficulties they have in adapting to their new and often alienating environments.

Survivors of torture and political violence are immediately faced with the ongoing need to survive and establish stability and predictability in their lives. They are confronted with the impact of the multiple losses of family and friends, and living in exile - the stripping away of their previous relational web, the loss of home, possessions, work, role, status, the loss of one's traditional culture lifestyle and language, and the loss of political agency. Migration in order to survive is considered by many survivors a form of continued torture and persecution, exile is considered by some worse than the torture itself. For many it involves the separation from their previous social world, from family, community and culture. It involves the loss of identity, the sources of defining oneself, as well as the loss of a framework for mea-

ning. Many are continuously plagued by traumatic stress reactions - the uncontrolled intrusion of haunting memories and nightmares, the constriction of their lives in order to avoid experiences, people, or cues that may trigger traumatic memories, and disorders of concentration, sleep and arousal.

Some will suffer from severe depression, anxiety, organic brain impairment, substance abuse, and sexual dysfunction.

The road to recovery

The Refuge project sponsored by the International Trauma Studies Program at New York University has been involved with the development of a variety of approaches to address the mental health needs of refugee survivors of torture and trauma living in New York City. The project bases much of its work with current survivors of political violence on the 50 years of accumulated research and clinical experience with the survivors of the Nazi Holocaust and their families. Much of what is known about how Holocaust survivors dealt with their massive loss and psychosocial trauma also applies to the many groups of refugees arriving today in the US, Europe, and Asian countries. First, the majority of Holocaust Survivors did not seek or utilize psychotherapy to aid them in their process of recovery and rebuilding their lives. They often formed informal support networks and small groups with other survivors where they could share their painful experiences with the only people they felt could really understand what they had gone through. They married and started families - the most direct affirmation of life they could make and they worked through many of the themes of loss, violence, separation, survival guilt, and safety, within the context of their families. They developed community practices and rituals to memorialize the dead. Some found ways of representing the horrors of what they experienced through the arts, religious practices, political activism, through placing their autobiographical stories in testimony archives so as not to be forgotten. In a characteristically Jewish way of coping with tragedy, they found ways of situating their experience within the history of the Jewish people.

Some Holocaust survivors did need treatment for severe psychopathology resulting from their Holocaust experience and for problems preceding the war. Others sought treatment for their children who had difficulties especially with separation. Many children of survivors sought treatment and were helped to deal with the effect of the transgenerational transmission of the trauma (Perel and Saul, 1987).

Holocaust survivors, like current political refugees were confronted with a public which knew very little about what they had gone through, was not

interested in hearing about the massive atrocities they had endured, and tended to look upon them with suspicion and sometimes even blamed them for their misfortunes. As a consequence of this conspiracy of silence, which for Holocaust survivors lasted 40 years, they were deprived of the public acknowledgment of the horrors they had experienced, an acknowledgment now known to be very important to the process of healing. This conspiracy of silence unfortunately exists today for current refugees who have suffered from the traumas of torture and other forms of political violence. As a consequence, there is silence about the ongoing atrocities in their own countries and their difficulties adjusting to life in the United States.

The silence is an obstacle to accessing resources that may help them with their social adjustment and recovery. In the New York area, there may be close to 100,000 torture survivors, and perhaps three times that number who come from refugee or immigrant population and have been directly affected by political violence. Yet given the minimal coverage in the media, refugee survivors of torture and other traumas are an invisible and thus underserved population.

The Refuge project takes the perspective that given the resources they need, most refugees who have suffered such traumas will rebuild their lives and gradually find ways of healing from the experiences they have endured.

Based on our knowledge from Holocaust survivors and newly arriving populations, the mental health profession can be a very important resource, especially when it is attuned to the hierarchy of needs of the population in need of services, rather than imposing its own concepts and goals of healing. We take the perspective that a mental health approach which promotes empowerment and ownership by the community of the resources that it determines important for recovery can be most effective and sustainable in the long run. Mental health services are probably best provided by practitioners from the community who understand its culture, language and practices. These approaches are more successful when they involve creative integration of scientific knowledge about trauma recovery with the particular sociocultural context of the community in question. At the current level of knowledge about refugee mental health, we need to work at refining existing methods of intervention - pharmacological and other medical treatments, psychosocial methods, family support and crisis intervention programs, home visitation programs, and community based efforts. We also need to develop new intervention strategies for prevention of mental health difficulties and maintaining healthy or effective functioning.

The process of recovery from trauma has been described by Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), as comprising three stages or thematic foci: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. While these sta-

ges may not follow in a straightforward, linear progression, they are helpful in organizing the major themes in treatment. These themes may be revisited over and over again in an almost spiraling way in the process of recovery.

But in the process of recovery there is the gradual progression from unpredictable danger to reliable safety, from dissociated trauma to acknowledged memory, and from stigmatized isolation to restored social connection.

Though torture often consists of an assault on the body or mind of a single person, the consequences have a rippling effect upon the family and community. The rupture travels from brain and body to psyche and spirit, and to family and community and nation. Since torture is most often an assault on a category or class of people, with the goal of suppressing and depowering opposition, it is important to look at the process of recovery in the context of collective healing.

In our work with survivors of ethnopolitical violence from various cultures, the process of healing and renewal is embedded in a tapestry of communal relationships, shared meanings, and cultural forms that reestablish social integration and weave the personal stories of suffering into broader political and/or cultural narratives. But for those individuals and families who have fled their homelands because of war, state terrorism, or torture, one of the first challenges lies in recreating social contexts in which cultural meanings, resources, personal and family history and prior emotional connections can be reevoked.

A basis for collaboration: creativity and cultural imagination

Individuals, families communities and nations have been dealing with the effects of the traumas of violence, brutality, war, and genocide for centuries if not millennia. Civilizations, in order rebuild after such tragic events, have had to transmit effective mechanisms, rituals, social enactments, narratives, and various forms of indigenous healing practices to deal with the destructive effects of trauma and loss. In every culture one will find a repertoire of resources that have been successful in helping the members of that culture heal themselves from the deleterious effects of trauma. It is important to facilitate the use of these cultural resources and frames of meaning that maybe already being employed by refugee communities. The institutions of psychiatry and psychotherapy have recently contributed a body of knowledge and set of resources to aid in the recovery process.

Since many of the survivors of torture and political violence arriving in New York are from non-western cultures one of our first tasks is to find a basis for a therapeutic collaboration. Psychotherapy is an alien concept for most

refugees. If there were mental health professionals at all in their country of origin, psychiatric care is most likely associated with the stigma of severe mental illness. Therapy as a western cultural endeavor, with its emphasis on individualism, materialism, and a democratic ethos rests on a set of assumptions different from those of the refugees coming for help. Our conceptions of personhood, social process, health, illness and healing bear little resemblance or applicability to people from non-western cultures. At the same time, working with people who have been severely traumatized and have experienced such dramatic disruptions in their social and cultural lives, highlights the importance of the socio-cultural context as the framework in which traumatic experiences are integrated into their lives. This has led to our developing models for working with survivors which are sensitive to their particular hierarchy of needs, and involve accessing the strengths, resources and coping capacities however they may be defined, and deemed by the survivor as important to his/her recovery. We have found these needs and resources to be tremendously varied

There are mechanisms in many cultures that promote healing from traumatic experiences just as there are mourning rituals that create a structure for the emotional expression and regression and reengagement in daily life that must take place after loss. In most cultures there are practices by which the survivors can put their individual stories of suffering into a larger context of meaning and which guide them through a healing process with social support and familiar symbols which lend significance to the events.

For example, Jewish survivors of the Nazi Holocaust attempted to find a historical connection with the suffering of previous generations as well as a specific Jewish meaning for their suffering within the context of the traditional Jewish past. Tibetan survivors of torture and political imprisonment often see their suffering in the context of Buddhist karmic philosophy and will practice the cultivation of compassion toward their Chinese persecutors, the „real“ sufferers from the violence.

For many refugees living in exile and uprooted from their traditional context, they may only be able to evoke cultural and religious resources through imagination.

One Middle Eastern survivor of years of torture and the murder of over 150 members of his extended family, spoke of not being able to live in peace until some day he could go back to his country and build memorials for the dead, most of whom had never been properly buried.

As a painter he derived solace from painting landscapes. He found himself eventually painting the pictures of the memorials, an imaginative act which allowed him for the time to symbolically satisfy his religious duty and move on in his life.

A Guatemaltecan woman who had been severely tortured was living in exile in the United States. In a psychotherapy session one day, she expressed difficulty solving a problem in her life. Her face went blank and she was unresponsive for over 20 minutes. The therapist was concerned about the depth of her dissociative state. Eventually the woman returned to conversation with the therapist and reported that she had been able to solve the problem by receiving advice from her dead grandmother who she had just visited.

Cultures are creative repertoires that support and offer a variety of tools that can provide helpful solutions to the different problems of survivors in the process of recovery (Fabri, 1997).

Western mental health professionals often make the erroneous assumption that refugees' primary concern is with the alleviation of post-traumatic stress symptoms. We have found that the concerns of refugees coming from different cultures are often very particular and unique, such as to make contact with family remaining in the country of origin, or to document one's experience for a human rights organization, to perform a purification ritual or a ceremony to memorialize the dead.

Creating a transitional family

As therapists we can facilitate the process of recovering the intuitive and natural resources for healing by helping the survivor rebuild meaningful social contexts in their lives. Working with people who have been severely traumatized and have experienced such dramatic disruptions in their social and cultural lives, highlights the importance of building a socio-cultural context as a framework in which traumatic experiences can be integrated into their lives. It is also important to recognize that trauma not only has devastating effects on individuals, families and communities, but it can also unleash powerful salutogenic forces, and a tremendous amount of creativity and humanity.

The creation of small support groups for survivors, consisting of either members of the same country or from different countries have been found to be extremely important. Research and experience have shown that social supports such as small informal groups of peers promote the process of healing from the traumatic aftereffects of political violence, especially when these groups have opportunities for pro-social action and provide a safe place for self disclosure. Many survivors of war, torture, and political violence see a political and spiritual dimension to their suffering and find a way to transcend it through social action. By taking what they have experienced and tur-

ning it into something positive for others, they can reestablish a sense of purpose in their lives.

Many refugee survivors of political violence will form informal peer groups which are like transitional families. In these groups they can be themselves, speak about the past if and when they want, get support with issues arising in their current occupational and family lives and avoid the stigma of having to pursue professional help which would be an admission for some of having been damaged. The creation of new families was for Holocaust survivors a powerful reaffirmation of life after having experienced such overwhelming brutality and dehumanization. For many Holocaust survivors, recovery after liberation took place within the context of marriages and the birth and development of children. The themes of separation, dependency, responsibility, trust, attachment, loss and cohesion, were played out within the families. The Israeli psychoanalyst, Hillel Klein (1973) saw in the families of survivors, the polarity between the drive to master psychologically overwhelming experience and the passive submission and repetition of Holocaust trauma. In telling and working through the experience, the survivor took an active stance toward mastery and adaptation.

It can be very important for survivors to reconnect with their pretrauma past and particularly with the family from which one has been separated.

One African man who had been a student and had survived torture, had a great need to emotionally reconnect his family. He had suddenly left the country to avoid arrest and his family had not known of his whereabouts.

He had a great need to speak with his family to assure them that he was alright. But it was too dangerous for the family to contact them at the time. He was also very interested in documenting his experiences of torture to submit to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on torture. He started to write letters to his family documenting the events that led to his exile, without sending the letters. The letters were in his own language and dialect, with shared memories and references from the past, and with all the emotional power this familiarity could evoke. He also began writing letters to fictional characters in order to force himself to be as factual as possible about the events and which could become the basis for a written testimonial. He found this testimonial process, though painful, to be helpful in placing the traumatic events in the past and experiencing his freedom in the present. Eventually he found a way of writing letters that reached his family by sending letters from fictional characters and in a code which did not reveal his identity to authorities.

Testimony and representation in art

In the giving of testimony, healing in the private space of psychotherapy gives way to the need for public affirmation, intervention, and the recovery of a political or cultural voice. The politically traumatized survivor's representation of past experiences of violence through public documentation has been recognized as an important mode of healing. (Agger and Jensen, 1990) We have found valuable in our work with survivors, the creation of a venue where they can bear witness to actors about their experiences and then work collaboratively to create theatrical performance.

The shift of the frame from healing to artistic representation can liberate the survivor from the tyranny of repetitive memories of past experience by recontextualizing them with the support of an engaged group.

Creativity is often central to the process of healing for those who have endured the massively traumatic experiences of war, massacre, torture, displacement and exile. The impulse to create, to make objects, to symbolize, to rebuild what has been destroyed, to externalize memories of suffering so that they can be communicated to others and thus transformed is inherent to humanity's adaptive capability in times of destruction.

That the creative process is even synonymous with the process of healing is something we have long suspected from our psychotherapeutic work with children. Children find ways of healing from painful and traumatic experiences through play and artistic expression. Adults are often constrained by their reliance on the word. The language of the imagination can engage the entire person and all of his/her capacities, certainly needed in the process of recovery from severe trauma.

When we look at non-western collective approaches to dealing with trauma, it becomes apparent that we in the west have placed too much emphasis on the verbal narrative as the primary mode of integrating traumatic memory.

In many non-western cultures, verbal as well as non-verbal modalities, such as visual representation, dramatic enactments, music and other art forms are employed in the process of bearing witness and in weaving together the personal and collective stories of traumatic events.

Theater Arts Against Political Violence is a theater group which creates performances based on the testimonies of survivors of state supported violence and refugee trauma living in the New York area. In December, 1997, a group of actors and a director worked with staff from the Bellevue/NYU Program for Survivors of Torture to train Immigration and Naturalization Service asylum officers. The actors played torture survivors and were interviewed by INS officers as part of their instruction on compassionate approaches to interviewing severely traumatized seekers of political asylum. Following the training, the director of the Artaban Theater Company, Robert Gourp and

Jack Saul, a psychologist who then directed mental health services at the Bellevue program started a theater group to raise awareness about the consequences of severe human rights violations and the plight of refugees living in this country. This theater of witness was one strategy to break the conspiracy of silence surrounding torture, political violence and refugee trauma in New York City.

As the theater project evolved, members of the refugee community in New York were invited to the theater workshop to tell their stories and then to work collaboratively with the group. Members of a number of refugee communities now participate on an ongoing basis with the theater project, giving testimony and working with the theater group to tell their stories of suffering and how they have been able to move beyond the trauma and rebuild their lives. Theater Arts Against Political Violence has proven to be especially suited to the dilemmas and possibilities of working with not only survivors of torture and political violence, but with those involved in trauma field work, forensics and documentation. The processes of theatrical experimentation and performance provide access to a unique combination of communication, witnessing, creative transformation, documentation, storytelling and education.

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