

Political events and the protection of human rights – impact on psychosocial work with traumatized refugees

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A clinician's perspective on our daily work.....which finds itself on the crossroads between global power and human suffering

As I have been so careless as to embark upon a venture as this one, namely to try to say something meaningful about the world, its policies and psychology and the interdependence between these. This is of course a task with an immense number of challenges – including the one of organizing the arguments, finding a good thread and a safe landing spot.

I will try to shed some light on some of the current political events and see how these impact our lives as human rights defenders as well as health workers. I will bear in mind that we are celebrating an anniversary – a historical event – namely the establishment of Oasis – and will therefore present some historical reflections, despite the fact that my main focus will be on the ongoing political processes and our responses to these events.

Some actual events

Start out with some Pictures - all depicting actual tragedies – but some of these pictures have already written themselves into history as a kind of icons of our time – the plane flying into one of the WTCenters, the Afghan girl from National Geographic, Gaza in rumbles, and African girl forgotten by the world, overshadowed in the international opinion by Saddam Hussein and his possible link to Al Quaeda.

Global power and local problems

The renowned professor of sociology, Zygmunt Bauman, famous for writings on globalization, modernism and holocaust, has described that in the world of today, there has developed a separation or division between power and politics. In the globalize world the power has become global, uncontrollable and extraterritorial whereas politics remain local, without power, and have to tackle problems produced globally (Zygmunt Bauman, *Metropolis*, 2002¹). The globalized world is characterized by a nomadic capital in search of profitable markets and comfortable stopovers, and uprooted, unsettled, vagabond populations in search of work, bread, drinking water or peace. He also argues that “the ambient uncertainty of future prospects and social positions and that haunt men and women of our times have global roots and so no local resource have effective or radical local remedies”. This implies that politicians are left with the challenge of finding ways to handle or stop the influx of global questions on a local level.

Because of the uncontrolled globalization, representing a power beyond local reach, he argues that cities become the dumping grounds for globally created problems. And that this represents an up hills struggle, where the issue is to find local solutions to globally produced problems. These thoughts were presented at a recent conference in Oslo, the VIIth Metropolis conference, where the challenges related to cities and city life are focused. And, Bauman further asked, what are the local solutions that politicians choose – what are the local responses to the results of globally created problems? And here he argues that the safety issue has been overloaded – that the response to the influx of problems is to create safe spots. Building walls and obstacles, and creating new lines of divisions seem to be such a response. Whereas walls have been torn down in cities, they are now literally being recreated. And the events referred to in the beginning of this presentation, the fright for terror and sudden danger, now built into an international concept of war against terror, naturally emphasizes the creation of “safe spots” as described by Bauman. He further launched the concept of “Mixophobia” describing this fear of mixing.

¹ See also Z. Bauman ”On globalization: or globalization for some, localization for some others” Thesis eleven, n. 54, 1998, pp 37-49.

Solutions become problems

When I heard him talk about this, and especially the cities as dumping grounds for the problems produced by global politics, I was struck by the idea that he is saying something that seems very true for our context. In the same way as the cities are dumping grounds for globally created problems, and where the politicians have to find some local solutions, we, as health workers working with survivors of forced migration and human rights violations, daily have to deal with, confront and try to find remedy to these human problems created out there – by the global powers. And we are not only dealing with the globally created problems, but we are also dealing with the consequences of their local solutions, namely the walls, the barriers and the exclusions. A concept like “Fortress Europe” used to describe the European policy on refugees and migrants attains an even stronger significance in this context. And Baumann’s concept on “mixophobias” remind us of the growing unpopularity of migrants and the strengthening of racist movements in our midst. Our focus within psychosocial work with refugees will be, not only on the human rights violations in the countries of origin, creating a situation of forced migration problem, but also on the problems created by the local solution, namely the restrictions and limitations that are placed on migration and integration. Psychosocial work with traumatized refugees is dealing with the human costs of power politics, and we are faced with the drama of being “dumping grounds” not only for globally created problems, but also for those created locally.

Some of the geopolitical events in the period 1989-2000 affecting our work

I will in the following reflect a bit on the close relationship or interdependency between political and psychological processes. Political psychology is an area where this is a main focus. If we look at the political events in our time that influence our daily work strongly, we are able to describe both positive and negative forces and events. How have these affected our aims and priorities, defined our methods and approaches or given direction to our professional discourse?

The world – during these years – moved from cold war – the east and west conflict where the symbolic dividing line was the Berlin wall. The world understood itself according to this dichotomy and all political conflicts were understood in terms of east

west. A political conflict without this perspective – had no chance on the international scene. Questions related to freedom from oppression, deep social inequalities etc did seldom reach the threshold of being heard unless it could be defined within this dualism.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with the fall of the Berlin wall, there was a widespread optimism as to an alternative political agenda. A political discourse with more space for the discussions and political claims regarding inequality, oppression etc. And from one perspective – a new debate emerged more clearly than before – namely the human rights issue – where civil and political rights as well as social, economic and cultural rights were put on the forefront. And of course the growing interest in justice and accountability on an international level. I will come back to this.

At the same time, it opened up for serious conflicts in the region that up till now have not been solved in any peaceful way. The former president G. Bush also commented the collapse of the Soviet Union in the following way: "The new enemy is uncertainty, unpredictability and instability". This of course is a quite amazing response to the fact that Cold war was getting to an end.

On the negative side there have been the serious problems in the region – the wars in Balkan, showing off an extreme brutality and splitting people that had coexisted for many years. It was something that seriously destroyed our sense of peace and stability in Europe. We were again reminded of our vulnerability and this had serious and wide-ranging effects on our professional work. I will return to this.

In Latin America an important process took place in the nineties – the military regimes came to an end several places and civil governments took over. This did not mean full democracy and even less, a process where the recent past was dealt with. The lack of justice and willingness to bring to trial those responsible for the atrocities – or in other ways – demonstrating a will to look at the human rights violations, disclose the truth and assist the victims – was very significant. This of course represented a very strong disillusionment, and a long process of protesting the impunity and claiming justice started. This was very clearly seen both in Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay. In South Africa Mandela was finally let out

of prison, and managed to take the incredible step from Robin Island to the presidency of his country. He was elected president in 1994. After 28 years of imprisonment, he was finally able to leave the political prisoner behind, and explore his experiences and knowledge in a totally new context, namely as leader both of his people and enemies. His presidency saw the initiation of the important truth and reconciliation process, a process where disclosure, confrontation, the option of forgiveness and reconciliation were crucial elements. This process opened up for something new and no truth process in the world will ever be initiated without a clear reference to this historical example brought to the foreground by two real freedom fighters, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu.

But the nineties also represented a growing process of power centralization – and the development of superpowers – the globalized market economy, where power is concentrated on fewer hands but where more people everyday are written into this scheme. The international monetary institutions, World Bank, IMF etc, were dictating the standards and the rules. And we saw the development of the one super power – the US, now without the traditional big brother in the communist east. This had, for good and for bad represented some kind of power balance. This must have been the insecurity that former president Bush was referring to. At the same time – more countries in the world joined in trans-national bodies or organizations. NATO, that once defended the west against the east, was now becoming a military superpower perhaps protecting the civilized world against everybody else – which that might be. And the European Union – soon counting most of Europe, with its own monetary system, parliament, and citizenship – is defining the standards on a very wide scale. Not only for members, but for all those related to the Union by some treaty or another. All these are examples of the concentration of power and money. And we find similar structures – striving for domination in all the regions in the world. This has become one of the main political topics in most countries – how to relate to global or regional trade and financial organizations. Now lately in Brazil – where a new president wants to define some of the premises himself, may be shaking the systems.

A decade for human rights

I have mentioned how the decade of the nineties saw important political changes that represented both positive and negative developments. In the following I will look into this decade with one special focus, namely the advances made and at times – breakthrough in the realm of human rights, the interest for international law and justice. The following events stand out as good examples of this development.

- The Vienna World Conference on Human Rights 1993 a conference that concluded with the necessity of giving an equally strong protection and promotion of civil and political rights and the economic, social and cultural rights, together with right to development
- International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia established in 1994 and the Tribunal created for Rwanda in 1996
- The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to restitution, compensation and rehabilitation established in 1995
- The office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in 1996
- Question of the impunity of perpetrators of human rights violations (civil and political), 1997
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission that finalized its work in 1998
- Truth commissions in Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala
- The International Criminal Court formally established in Rome, 1998
- The UN Millennium Declaration, 2000

When the ICC was established, Kofi Annan said the following: “There can be no global justice unless the worst of crimes – crimes against humanity are subject to the law”, Rome, July 17, 1998.

The UN Millennium Declaration 2000 had as objective “To ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world’s people”

Our professional conversation underwent some changes

Much of our work was born out of solidarity, where a non-neutrality position was adhered to and a defined human rights oriented position was a preferred or privileged position. Strong debates on Western, medicalized models appeared.

From an experience where Latin American refugees formed an important backbone – and working in a situation where solidarity and support to their cause was natural and practically the basis of our work, we were – from the 80ties we encountered new groups of refugees – and all of a sudden both culture and religion came to take on a new role –and we were confronted with a number of new issues and challenges and many of us where forced to rethink our conditions and our platform. How did we deal with the many conflicts we were confronted with – where were our sympathies and our models for understanding, and also – how do we deal with conflicts that are coming so close? As one of my colleagues said – during a very short time span – we were thrown out into a war and new professional duties that we had never planned nor contemplated.

Of course – these challenges have strengthened us and changed us. We can say that professionally we grew up – and the pioneer intensity reduced. In a way we moved from a more clearly position of solidarity, commitment and activism to professionalism, research etc. Generally, a more systematic approach with research and a professional attitude grew out of this. Centers were established where the perspectives were more in line with the mainstream health system. Our centers have become more clear-cut service providers and our frame of reference much more one of research and the ongoing discussions in the field. Our work has developed on the basis of being health responses to organized violence, and a clear, solidarity based identity was prevalent. I think it may be fair to say that both in relation to organization, our working methods, strong criticism of mainstream thinking and professional preferences. The position that strongly informed our work was that of solidarity and anti-imperialism. On the clinical side our identification with the direct victims of US imperialism both in Vietnam and in South America was evident. And it was in a way easier to identify with the Latin American refugees than the Vietnamese. And our discussions were also strongly influenced by our Latin American colleagues. They taught us both methods and approaches in our work – like for instance the work that

later developed into a witness approach, brought further into the exile context by Agger and Buus Jensen (-). But we also learned about the close relation between politics, values and health work – that the position of neutrality was impossible in a context of human rights violations - the emphasis on understanding a socio-political circumstances in which one lives and that political abuses are not medical issues – that is, a medicalized, western conceptualization of the pain caused by organized violence and oppression may in fact even cover the power issues – and – they strengthened our understanding of the importance of working with communities – communities affected by violence – in both political oriented themes and others. Finally – I would say – the Latin American experience and inspiration during these important formative years – conveyed an extremely important message – that is: they warned us on one hand against professional nearsightedness - that is, that narrow professional concepts may lead to status quo and even the upholding of oppression. On the other hand they pointed to the potential power of psychology – and in the works of Martin Baro² from El Salvador – himself brutally murdered in 1989, and Paulo Freire from Brazil made invaluable contributions to this. And from this perspective – the psychology and also the pedagogic of liberation developed – and what Mauritzza Montero calls the Latin American community psychology (19).

We will probably never move away from these positions – working with human beings who have been exposed to human rights violations – will never permit us to forget the wrongdoings of oppression and inequality. But – on the other hand – there has been a development where this work has become more strongly integrated into the general or overall scene – that is both in relation to research – as we have heard of already – and in seeing ourselves as parts of a broader health care system – or rather – part of a wider community activity.

Our active discussions:

With this important discussion and experience brought to us by our colleagues in the South, combined with the general political criticism of traditional approaches and Westernized models in particular, we felt a deep engagement and many also as active participants in the heated debate on PTSD – a concept with some strong

² Martin Baro

imperialistic overtones – a side product of the Vietnam war and a concept that was activity brought out to all parts of the world

The concept has been strongly attacked – and of course still is, and the arguments are many. First of all reference is made to the incapability of the current concept to grasp the traumatic events, namely a sociopolitical situation characterized by violence, threat and fear, and the reactions following. For instance David Becker (1995) has argued that the concept of PTSD, with a “post” that implies that events are over, and a “disorder” which implies labeling reactions as sickness or disease, not only is inadequate but also unfortunate in work with people exposed to this kind of violence. It has further been argued that the Western values and orientations inherent in the concept, implying an individualization, decontextualisation and medicalisation of historical and political processes render it of limited value both within a human rights context and in a Third World context (Bracken, Giller & Summerfield, 1995; Summerfield, 1995; Martin-Baró, 1996b; Fischman, 1998). And – this debate is far from over – last year there was a quite active debate on the web pages of the British Journal of Medicine where Derek Summerfield’s strong critique of the PTSD business - was met both as a deep provocation and as a valuable and necessary contribution³.

This debate is of course far too comprehensive for this presentation – but it certainly has informed our debates. And – to continue – our professional models have been influenced by our preoccupation with the political traumas and strong suffering – and our interest in very strict diagnosing was limited as well as our interest in other aspects of people’s stories – for instance, references to premorbid personality have to some extent been a taboo – not only did it refer to life before trauma, it took us into the realm of traditional western models and concepts – away from the political debate.

And during the way – I am sure we may say that we have thrown some babies out with the bath water – but on the other hand – we did bring the issue of ethics and

³ British Journal of Psychiatry

politics – in specific – the human rights issues - into the central core of health work with refugees.

New conflicts challenged us

In the years following the Latin American refugees to Europe, we saw a number of conflicts from other areas, all producing refugees to our territories. But in contrast to our meeting with the refugees from Chile, Argentina and Brazil, and with the exception of the Palestine refugees, we had not defined ourselves as a “moral” part of their struggle. Their conflicts were new to us when they presented themselves as refugees, and we had no preferred positions on some of the conflicts that we witnessed, beyond the fact that we were dealing with oppression and human rights violations. This probably also opened the way for a more general perspective and interest in human rights, and less on the defined political conflicts we had defined ourselves as a part of⁴.

September 11 has changed the global picture – and the present situation is dominated more strongly than ever by a we /they dichotomy. It reminds us of old divisions in history – dividing the world and its people in Christian/non-Christian, free men and slaves, civilized vs. barbarians etc. The discourse of today takes us back to this – it is us against them – the civilized and free world – against all the others – who – the uncivilized? Those who are not with us are against us – today known as a Bush quotation – was actually a Dgengis Khan quotation

The grand story today:

The story dominating our world at the moment is the so- called “war against terrorism”. It has even been termed a crusade against terror – and against the evil axis, a concept coming into being in the wake of the WTC attacks in 2001. The world is back again to a division of the good and evil, the we and they – and as it was at the time of the cold war - all conflicts are defined within this paradigm, and those conflicts that do not lend themselves into being subsumed under this grand story – falls outside the range of public interest or priority. HIV, malaria, natural catastrophes etc. – and that means outside of the international political agenda. And all other conflicts

⁴ Refer to other articles on this issue

– whether they are in Chechnya, Middle East or in Indonesia – are immediately defined, understood and interpreted in term of this dualism – immediately drawn within this grand story. So the grand narrative of today – excludes and precludes other issues. And this of course affects those we are working with. And it affects the progress of international endeavors to protect the human rights instruments.

War on terror has been made into the most important political strategy – an attempt to have a global and unified response against an enemy, which has been pictured as an international organization – not unlike Specter – from the James Bond movies. A strategy that has been defined by the Security Council resolution 1373 of 28th of September 2001 – this resolution implies that all countries are directed to act to suppress terrorism through a range of financial and other measures. And states are required to report within three months how they have fulfilled the Resolution. And later – that if there are derogations of any accepted rights, a notification must be presented.

Human rights violations have been legitimized by war against terror

This plan of action i.e. war against terror, has become a successive strategy in the sense that it has made it possible to define a lot of unwanted events within this. And this last year has seen a number of examples where war on terror has been the official reason for action – a pretext so to speak for oppressive and humiliating action. And, it has practically become accepted that other human rights principles are set aside if this can be connected to the war against terror. We have seen it on all levels and on all degrees of graveness. On the legal side in Norway there has been an increase in active police controls, the immigration policies have become stricter and new anti-terror laws have been passed.

The ex high commissioner of human rights Mary Robinson – saw these dangers at an early moment – and UNHCHR had additional point made – that if there are derogations of any of the human rights – accepted rights, a notification must be presented to the UN, to the general secretary. Britain has notified on detentions – but others – for instance - the US has not notified anything. Mary Robinson has contended that it is possible to have robust effective action against terrorism within a

commitment of upholding domestic and international standards of human rights protection⁵.

The danger we are facing is that the International rule of law may be endangered, and that a weakening of human rights instruments may be developing. And certainly there are strong attempts by certain states to undermine important international accomplishments like International Criminal Court.

How do we professionally meet these global challenges?

What are the problems we meet and how do we deal with them – and how do we define our work in relation to this? First of all we have seen a far stricter refugee policy both on national and international level. On the European scale – and especially the European centers engaged in work with refugees are facing some very challenging conditions. There is a dramatic increase in number of refugees. A number of actions are taken to control our borders and return people to their countries of origin. The concept of Fortress Europe conveys a clear message. Professor D. Ingleby – who presented some of the main lines in European asylum policy at the ISHHR conference in Cavtat last year, has described the politics of deterrence and the "The refugee squeeze".⁶ Another aspect of this that has become a serious problem to many centers is that funding of psychosocial centers and rehabilitation centers is being cut down.

The anti terror laws passed in most countries creates a higher level of suspicion in people – and xenophobia may be a result, or also, as Bauman has coined it, mixophobia. This is not only fear, but also less interest, higher walls and self-protection, a tendency that has become rather dominating in the world today.

And how are we trying to deal with them?

In different ways we are trying to go beyond the dichotomy – trying to bridge the gap – reconstruct one just world. Create some kind of common ground – during the cold war we had the third way – the alternative built upon the Euro communists – inspired

⁵ Mary Robinson, January 02

⁶ John Ingleby

by Italy and Prague Spring – today I think the way out of the dichotomy – is the human right approach – as expressed by MR – “if human rights are respected, if basic education, housing and health care are secure, if there is freedom from personal violence and freedom for men and women to earn their living and raise their families, not only are human rights violations prevented, but conflict, terrorism and war can be prevented also”. John Shattuck – Responding to terrorism requires a long-term commitment – the heart of that commitment should be the redoubling of efforts to expand human rights to all nations.

That is – defining the realm of human rights – not as a discourse up and above – but one that takes into account that human rights cannot be respected without providing decent life conditions – that is – no human rights without responding to basic needs and security.

And in a world where these rights are being questioned and put into jeopardy – in a situation where a lot of battles were won – and when there – for the first time in history – was developed a system to fight impunity – where crimes against humanity have been defined as something that can never find protection – where the right to redress and compensation has been regarded as basic and defensible rights on a global level – where instruments have been developed to sharpen national jurisdiction on these matters – etc. The new power divide and the global war on terror have endangered this important development. And as it has been contended by several political scientists, never have the achievements within international law been under such a serious threat – that is – we must fight for what has been obtained so far. So – in our context – the active participation within human rights may be a priority – and perhaps it is fair to say that our solidarity and activism from the 80’s – tied closely to the anti-imperialistic voices at that time – has been replaced by a stronger and clearer position on global human rights, accountability, justice and repair. But this never gives us solutions at the more concrete level. So again we must ask: How does this affect those we are working with? How does it affect our professional approach and priorities? And how can we defend the human rights within our professional context?

Where does it leave us?

The world seems more divided than ever and those we are working with are often on the other side of the dividing line – that is, we meet people for the areas now know as part of the evil axis. The political worldview or rhetoric seems more frozen or conclusive than ever – little room for explorations or negotiations. In this situation it is easy to feel powerless and that nothing matters. The decisions are made elsewhere – where is the motivation to try to make a difference?

Moving into our professional context

In this situation it is interesting to ask what professional strategies do we develop? And to explore the professional responses to this situation. And my perspectives on this are far from being based on wide research or discussions – but I have been struck by the thoughts and am more than happy to discuss them further.

Culture and differences have been central issues in our work – and we have explored these differences and contextual variances – because they have been important in order to understand human reactions – and we have explored differences more that looked for similarities – to a certain extent – and our willingness to develop models for work that could be valid universally has also been very restricted. At the moment I see to different – but strong influences in our work – and both of them may be based on a kind of search for universalities and sameness. And – permit me to argue that these two different trends in our work – may be ways of bridging some gaps.

Two lines of approach in our work

There are two interesting lines of interest in our professional work – it is focus on community and context on one hand and on the other, on a cognitive and neurobiological approach.

The community-oriented approach has its main focus on psychosocial intervention in the community and social reconstruction, on empowerment, participation and collaboration on equal footing. This work has been inspired by Latin American liberation psychology⁷, by the initiatives to obtain social and personal reconciliation

⁷ Ignacio Martin Baro

after conflict and by the many experiences from community and reconstruction work in affected areas. This approach also has a global perspective on rehabilitation meaning that rehabilitation will never only mean physical healing but also moral and social repair, also implying that justice is done.

The community approach is important from the point of view that people with extreme stresses and experiences of violence will often see their world as blown apart. How to recreate some meaning and understanding of the world seem to be a challenge of priority. The community approach – this term has not been used very long within the context of refugees – and in fact – not very long within the trauma field either. But there is a strong body of research and practical experience based on community-oriented approaches in psychology and medicine. Much research in the disaster and traumatic stress area focuses on the first three of those four aspects - the ecological metaphor is intended to build on this body of work by elaborating on the fourth source of variability: «under what environmental conditions»?

A lot has happened after this was said in the mid nineties. And I would say that the prevailing perspective to day – not only in Europe, but globally seems to be a response to this need to think community.

How can we characterize the community approach?

It has a contextual understanding and frame of reference, implies an active psychosocial intervention, has focus on resources and resilience, a holistic perspective on rehabilitation and has social reconstruction, justice and democracy as objectives.

In a refugee context a community approach is characterized by the following: Multimodal framework, an opening up the centers and working in the community, outside the centers, and focus on resilience, empowerment, resources and the future.

A clearly formulated outline of this work was presented by Mary Petevi, WHO, at the ISHHR conference in 2001: WHO believes that given the nature and magnitude of the problem, new approaches must be developed to "do the most for the most". A public health model associated with active community participation, with multisectoral

and pluridisciplinary capacity building must be used. It is established that local, non-mental health personnel and community workers can be effective in providing the needed community-based psychosocial support once they have adequate training, technical guidance and the political and financial support. WHO believes that this approach will reduce the risk of pathologising suffering, will stimulate resilience and empower the concerned communities to work towards personal and community reconstruction, poverty and vulnerability reduction in a more efficient, cost-effective and sustainable manner.

The other perspective that has grown stronger the last years, also in the context of psychosocial work with refugees – is the cognitive and the neurobiological perspective, where the cognitive revolution, the new developments in neuroscience and especially the studies of the traumatized brain are central. The research in this area, and the rapid development and widespread interest for this field seem quite predominant in the whole field of psychology and medicine – and it is a good example of an area where the borders between psychology and biology is practically disappearing. Because – it is the study of the brain – but not only of structural damages – but processes, functions and stimulation – that is, more psychological questions. And there are as many psychologists as people with biological background in this field – and some experts say that it is the neuropsychologists who may be bringing out the most interesting results. And again – this discussion and field go way beyond my competence and knowledge – my curiosity and interest far exceeds my competence – though I am in fact married to a neuropsychologist actively working with the clients of our center - but by looking into some of the interest and discussion – it seems correct to say that this area of research has become very strong within the trauma field – and thus – moving into the refugee trauma context as well.

What do we find here – and how does this coincide with the rest of what we have been doing and thinking? I think at the present moment the interesting observation that one can make is that the development goes on two different tracks – they are not mutually exclusive – but they are different – and I do not even know if there is any established dialogue between the community oriented and those who are strongly engaged in the neuro-cognitive field.

But this may well be established in the time to come

What can be said about this briefly – neurobiological research has presented us with the following: traumatic events do lead to neurobiological changes –that is – a biological substrate for the observed psychological changes may thus have been shown. And that – repeated traumatisation seem to result in rather defined changes – and pathological signs. This means that repeated trauma creates a higher vulnerability – one gets sensitized to stress – one does not adapt to it. This may mean that the old saying by Nietzsche – what does not kill you makes you stronger, may have to be exchanged by Pavlov – into another saying – formerly neutral stimuli are conditioned into being stimuli for severe stress reactions. Again meaning that a person who has been exposed to repeated experiences of violence and threat, may become much more alert and constantly in fear of new blows. The threshold goes down not up – and the person experiences a permanent vulnerability. Something that we have known clinically for years – but now there seems to be a biological explanation for this phenomenon. And what this implies – is again that people with these experiences have a reduced level of functioning, they are on their guard and are easily mobilized in relation to fear and threat. Again – we have seen it – but what is new is that this field of research seems to offer alternative descriptions and explanations regarding the fact that these kinds of responses do not seem to habituate.

So – what we see clinically is that tolerance for stress – even in the most reduced form – at home and in the family – is lowered. And what we learn is that these kinds of events, especially when it has happened often and overtime – create vulnerability that can be explained beyond the psychological sphere

This is an exiting field with new ways of studying the matter, using methods known as neuro- imaging studies. Through this we may be more acquainted with the brain processes under the influence of traumatic memories, or stress and lack of sleep. And these studies may teach us more about the dissociated memories – the frozen images so to speak, that do not seem to lend themselves to the “natural processes” of becoming weaker or less disturbing with time. And hopefully we shall learn more about how to “move” these, or find ways in which they can be processed or modified.

Is conversation or verbal therapy the answer, is medication, and is movement. Studies of movements and stimulation may lead us onto some different tracks, and at the present a number of empirical studies related to EMDR are undertaken. And with further studies we may again find that this in fact does include old knowledge as well – that rituals, dancing, certain ways of clapping etc may all be ways of getting movement into something that has become immobilized. Reorientations after having been stuck, opening eyes after they have been closed, widening the scope after one has looked into tunnels.

Some finalizing comments

This has been a quick glimpse of some of the important political and professional events that have influenced and shaped our outlook and practical work. I have been able to touch upon this in a very superficial way but with the hope that our conversation will move us further and into more details. My main intention has been to reflect upon how our work with survivors of human rights violations are directly related to the ongoing political processes and events, and that we are faced with the challenge of providing clinical answers to political problems – or at least to politically formed problems. It is no solution to say that we refrain from doing this – that since the root of the matter is macropolitical power that we refuse to apply our clinical knowledge. We know that the world events produce health problems and we have to relate to that – and in this endeavor we must try to find ways and approaches - that is working models that may combine good strategies and interventions for the alleviation of suffering as well as long time rehabilitation, while at the same time flagging our position as human rights defenders. We are thus faced with the dual challenge of working actively on both micro –and macro level. But I am of the conviction that we do better service also on the macro level if we show patience and interest in developing good practical strategies – whether it is on a community level or on clinical and even neurological level.

I take the opportunity to congratulate Oasis on their active work and important contributions to the field for the last 15 years. You have been an active and inspiring part in the professional conversation I have been talking about. I wish you all the best in the future.

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