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The Dynamics of Violence in Peacetime:

Trauma-tic Continuities

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The phenomenon of re-enactment and its centrality in the lives of people who have been exposed to life-threatening experiences of trauma is well established in traumatic stress research. Early psychoanalytic formulations by Charcot, Janet, Breuer, and Freud all noted that extreme forms of trauma lead to some kind of psychic rupture and a fragmentation of traumatic memories that remain unresolved, which dominate the mental life of many victims of trauma.¹ There is sufficient evidence showing how these traumatic memories, and difficulties in their assimilation, often return as behavioural re-enactment, both at the interpersonal level as well as within societies.² The connections between traumatic experience and these behavioural manifestations of the return of trauma have been observed in therapy with individuals with a history of traumatic stress,³ as revictimisation of self in battered women and sex workers,⁴ and victimisation directed at others in criminals who suffered physical or sexual abuse as children.⁵ Re-enactment of trauma, scholars in this field inform us, is a major cause of violence in society.⁶ These findings provide compelling evidence to significantly influence the way we think about the violence that we see emerging in societies that have been ravaged by the trauma of past wars and mass violence, societies that, in spite of having achieved some political resolution – either through negotiation or by other means – still continue to witness and suffer severe forms of violence.

My focus in this brief presentation is on the brutal forms of violence that persists in South African society today, particularly in black residential areas. To address this issue I will draw on my observations of violence in post-apartheid South Africa and

discuss this in light of the concept of re-enactment of trauma. I'll then elaborate on this concept using my own understanding of the emerging trend of violence often witnessed in post-conflict societies, then present possible strategies for addressing this kind of continuing violence.

To set the stage I'd like to relate a story, which is based on a scene I witnessed on the streets of a black township in South Africa shortly after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had reached its mandate period and completed its work. Mlungisi, a township in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, is one of many black residential areas that became notorious in the 1980s for the gruesome murders that were committed by a method that came to be known as "the necklace": following some severe beating, a tire was placed around a victim's neck, doused with gasoline, and then set alight. While the victim burned, the murderous crowd and other bystanders circled around the burning body performing a macabre dance to some singing until the victim died. People killed by the so-called "necklace" were targeted because they were suspected of collaborating with the police, and rarely, if ever, had opportunity to defend themselves.

Here is what I witnessed in the township of Mlungisi:

"Let's play a game." It was strange, almost surreal, to see a group of young girls, seven to ten years old, laughing and cavorting in the streets of Mlungisi Township—the same township that in the mid-1980s had become the scene of so much misery, a tinderbox of inflamed emotion against the inhumanities of apartheid; but that was before these children were even born.

I was doing some work in Mlungisi and happened to be walking through their neighbourhood when I saw them. Their squeals and cries were the very embodiment of joy. My heart leapt. They looked like little tender shoots of foliage—little blades of life—poking out from under the cooled lava of a township once utterly devastated by apartheid's volcano.

"What game?" the others shouted back, skipping back and forth.

"Let me show you," the first one said. She was about eight and looked as if she might be the informal leader of the group. She began to demonstrate. The other girls

didn't seem too enthusiastic about this new game. What was wrong with just playing skip? But slowly, they became intrigued.

"It's called the necklace game," the leader said. "This is just going to be pretend necklace, not the real thing," she said. She pushed the other girls aside as if to open up the stage. Rotating through the role of victim, then killers, then onlookers, she seemed to my amazement to recall virtually everything that actually happened in a real necklace murder, even though she hadn't been born when the last necklace killing occurred in her township.

She flailed her arms, screaming in mock anguish as if being beaten, swaying back and forth, turning her head from left to right and begging for mercy with eyes wide open to show fright. Then she switched roles and play-acted someone going off to find gasoline, then another person offering matches, then someone running to demand a car tire from an imaginary passing motorist.

"Give me your tyre!" she ordered with mock hostility. She narrated the part of the motorist dutifully obeying, then the gasoline man, then the matches man. Finally, she returned to her victim role, struggling against the make-believe tire placed around the neck. Nervously, she made a gesture simulating the striking of a match, as if her friends—now a crowd of executors—had forced her to light herself up.

As imaginary flames engulfed her, she threw her arms wildly into the air. "Now sing and dance and clap your hands. I'm dying," she said. Her friends started clapping and singing in a discordant rhythm. They formed a circle and went round and round her "body." Gradually, the high-pitched screams of the girl with the imaginary tyre around her neck faded into a whimper as her life "ebbed away". "Consumed" by the flames, she slowly lowered herself to the ground and "died." It was all make-believe.

None of the girls I saw that morning re-enacting the necklace game had actually seen a necklace murder. But the unspoken events of the past—the silence of Mlungisi's lambs—had become imprinted on their minds. It was not just the outward form of the game, but its inner meaning, the sense of trauma to communal life that it carried with it. They carried the collective fear and horror somewhere deep within them. Re-enacting the death dance of a necklace victim may well have been a way of transforming its memory into something more accessible, and less fearful for the girls.

This incident provides an illuminating metaphor for the way in which trauma is passed on intergenerationally “in ways subtle and not so subtle,”⁷ through silences, fear, and through the psychological scars and pain that are often left unacknowledged. The language of violence is etched in the memory of many victims of violent conflict, and passed on to the next generation, and to the next, in the way that traumatic memory so often does. The externalised skit of a necklace murder I’ve just described could be seen as an expression of that which cannot be spoken – a desire to escape the cycle of pain that is already part of the young girls’ individual and communal lives, a crying out for the dignity that some take for granted. This death “game” is hardly Dungeons and Dragons. It is based on reality where real people die.

There’s been a resurgence of different kinds of murderous violence in South Africa. Some of you know about the crisis of child rape that has wrecked especially poverty-stricken black townships in South Africa. This repetition of real events from the past seems like a transformation of traumatic experience into ritual, perhaps a cathartic way of putting into action the struggle to find language that expresses the frustrations, helplessness, disempowerment, and dire poverty of people whose lives have become meaningless. Whether they sleep or wake up in the morning is of little consequence; they don’t have much to lose because they count for little in the greater scheme of things – their lives never counted in the past; they continue to have little significance in the present.

Some Perspectives on Traumatic Re-enactment

The effects of trauma on individuals and communities can be quite profound, particularly human-induced trauma such as mass political violence. Psychological trauma is a state in which the ego is so overwhelmed that it is forced to employ defence mechanisms to avoid immensely distressing material. One of the most well known psychological mechanisms used to cope with early childhood experience of trauma is “identification with the aggressor,” identifying with the perpetrator through a repetition of the traumatic event. The notion of identification with the aggressor, however, contradicts the very basis of this theory. How can the re-enactment of an unpleasant event

be a strategy to cope with its distressing features? How does this fit in with the ego's "pleasure principle," its goal of avoiding unpleasant states of mind? In his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud⁸ lays out the elements that explain how a traumatic experience is transformed into one in which the victim reverses the roles by converting the experience of helplessness into one of active doer. And here lies the central significance of identification with the aggressor: By stepping into the shoes of the aggressor, the power that was lost in a moment of helplessness is regained.

Another widely accepted theory of re-enactment suggests that re-enactment is a way of dealing with the sense of powerlessness, shame, and humiliation felt at the time of the original trauma by a repetition of the traumatic event in the hope of regaining control and mastery over it;⁹ however, this attempt at mastery may establish the basis for a lifelong pattern of violent behaviour because the choice to become an aggressor does not authentically resolve the very issues that drive that choice, the feelings of shame and humiliation that lie within.¹⁰ Violence does not confer the honour it promises, and what promised to be a moment of honour reclaimed may draw itself out into a lifestyle of bondage to aggression as the person moves from one short-lived feeling of honour to another. Each subsequent act lowers the threshold for committing the next by desensitising the perpetrator, liberating him (or her) even further from society's taboos against aggression. The person may find aggression addicting not only because revisiting unresolved feelings through aggression brings temporary relief, but also because the repeated acts of aggression do not resolve the deeper feelings of being humiliated, disrespected, or dishonoured. This plunges the person once again into a spiral of violent behaviours.

A Different Point of View

I would now like to offer another point of view, one that doesn't contradict, but elaborates on these two perspectives on re-enactment discussed above. It seems to me that what we are seeing in South Africa today is a *return* of past violence, a representation of the connections that bind history, past political events, and present reality: today's perpetrators of violence are following a script that was enacted during the years of apartheid. Anti-apartheid violence was "contained" in a meaningful context in

that the violence had a cause. The shame and humiliation that propelled it then, in the years of apartheid, however, has not vanished with the advent of the “new” South Africa. What has disappeared is the container of the violent behaviour, the political purpose that provided the vital context. For today’s “re-enactors” of past trauma, the dignity and respect that was lost through the humiliation of apartheid has not been regained; while political change has given power and economic success to a few, *they*, the re-enactors, remain buried in the abyss of economic and psychological suffering. This plunges them back, as traumatic re-enactment so often does, into the vortex of violence.¹¹

What concerns me about the violence in South Africa is the brutal form it has taken in recent years, in the form of violent enactments that seem to be targeting innocence itself, the very essence of life. Has the new South Africa unleashed groups of monsters in the population?

If traumatic re-enactment is a clear outcome of traumatic experience in individuals, are the manifestations of trauma expressed differently at a societal level? Does psychological trauma *damage* those who have experienced traumatising? Or can traumatic events also corrupt victims’ personality, which implies that they can grow up with maladaptive characters, predisposed to becoming horrible, murderous people?

There is evidence that the effects of traumatic re-enactments can be so profound that they can cause distortions in character and shifts in personality.¹² So, what we see is not simply an indication that people have become monsters – or what in South Africa has been termed “moral degeneration” – but signs of a largely unconscious process, which is the centrality of cycles of re-enactment in people’s lives in a way that dominates their being.

The process by which traumatic “re-enactors” are able to maintain their destructiveness has been described as a “drive”, a force that propels the violence unleashed by the trauma, annihilating the very essence of life.¹³ To the extent that we are concerned with others, with their safety and their well-being – to the extent that our relationships with the community of human others is endowed with an ethics of care – we normally seek engagement with others in a way that respects and promotes the goals of life. Inherent in this *human* orientation is the assumption – particularly in societies that value communal existence – that one’s livelihood is inextricably interwoven with that of

others; but when there has been a breakdown in this perception of the relational sphere, when the human capacity to feel with, to experience others, and perceive them as real has been obliterated – when there's been a dearth of empathic capabilities¹⁴ – then extending care and empathy to others is severely diminished. There is, in a nutshell, little or no commitment to the preservation of life. (If one's life and the lives of those who inhabit one's world are worth little, where can one draw the capacity to extend worthiness to others?)

Failure of Mentalisation

Another psychological concept that has been used to explain the destructive tendencies that characterise many behaviours rooted in past traumatic experience, is the concept of “mentalisation.” An adequate capacity for mentalisation is considered to be a crucial part of psychological development. Mentalisation is the appreciation of the mental foundations of human behaviour, and grows out of an awareness of, and sensitivity to, the psychological world of others.¹⁵ This capacity for mentalisation can be traced to an early stage of development; if a parent reflects on a child's self-expressions inappropriately, i.e. in a manner that fails to provide the holding¹⁶ or containment¹⁷ of these expressions, then the child's own reflective process (capacity for mentalisation) is likely to be impaired, and the result is a fragile psychological self. The diminished capacity to “mentalise”, in other words to picture the mental states of the other, “reduces inhibition of aggression by representing the victim as devoid of thoughts, feelings and the capacity for real suffering.”¹⁸

The patterns of traumatic re-enactment, which have been found conclusively to be a result of overwhelming trauma, and to be rooted in the psychic disintegration and personality disorganisation associated with post-traumatic reactions, suggest strong links with failure of mentalisation. In fact, the critical relevance of this connection has been raised elsewhere.¹⁹

Conclusion

There is no longer any doubt about the link between violent aggression and past experiences of trauma. A troubling consequence of traumatic re-enactment is the dissolution of the empathic and attachment bonds within the human community.²⁰ When the trauma is experienced collectively, as in on-going political conflict, what insights can be drawn from our knowledge of individual effects of trauma to understand the dynamics of persistent violence in societies that have suffered mass trauma? Our knowledge of social psychology tells us that the strong bonds of groups that share a painful past and present suffering are often strong. The consequences of the force of these bonds have been observed in the cycles of violence that so often repeat themselves historically.

The tools that are used to restore normality and to address the roots of violence need to transcend ordinary methods that lean mainly on the criminal justice system: better policing, more effective arresting procedures, improved rate of conviction, etc. Anger and violent aggression directed at others are central themes in the lives of people who have suffered traumatic abuse, whether political, familial, or individual. Cycles of violence do not occur in a vacuum; they are symbolic of unacknowledged events that have been experienced in the past, a re-enactment of old scripts that are finding voice in the present. When these scripts are played out in the social domain, the consequences can be quite explosive. Communities that are vulnerable to repeating past traumas need to be helped to regain control over their current lives. Measures of quelling violence, such as improved policing, are important. But far more vital in the long term are effective strategies for dialogue about the past, and government initiatives to bring about real transformation in people's lives. Hope – the restoration of shattered hopes – is where transformation begins.

My government has put in place remarkable legislation aimed at redressing the inequities of the past, to empower previously disadvantaged groups, including women. But creative strategies are still needed so that the benefits of such legislation can reach the many individuals and communities that have become breeding ground for brutality; where dreams of a future, of transformation, and of human dignity live only as distant horizons, where present feelings of helplessness and worthlessness evoke the humiliation of the past. Transitional societies that have emerged from violent conflict should have as

their goal the education of their younger population, and creating opportunities for their training in specific skills. This will help restore dignity and meaning in the lives of so many young people who are likely to be vulnerable to traumatic re-enactments.

It is gratifying to see that the UN doesn't consider human security and dignity to be just philosophical concepts. People need to live and experience these concepts for them to be meaningful in their lives. Security and dignity bestow compassion and empathy in the human community. Our capacity for such empathy is a profound gift in this brutal world we have created for one another as people of different races, creeds, and political persuasions.

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