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Transitional Justice, Post-conflict Agendas and Psychology
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Review: *Transforming societies after political violence: Truth, reconciliation, and mental health*, Brandon Hamber, 2009. Dordrecht and New York: Springer.

Many psychologists who have worked in post-conflict contexts have probably had moments where a question rises inextricably in uncertain moments--whether, in order to work most effectively with individuals and communities that have experienced political violence, "Does it mean abandoning psychology?" As a South African, a psychologist, and an engaged activist during the period of the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa between 1995-1998, Hamber--in his book on the subject--implicitly conveys a personal struggle to engage with the suffering and healing needs of victims of apartheid while being fundamentally attuned to and situated in the political context of transitional justice mechanisms and nation-building.

In transitional societies emerging from what Hamber refers to as "extreme political traumatization," many psychologists now recognize the limitations of interventions framed within a trauma/PTSD discourse. There is widespread recognition of the fact that livelihoods, shelter, education, and a future orientation are often more important to victims than a narrow focus on psychological symptoms. However, within the field of interventions now commonly referred to as "psychosocial interventions," it can be difficult to find a clear articulation of the relevance of psychological theory and practice to individual and collective social reconstruction agendas. This is particularly the case, as Hamber argues, because individual/collective "healing" has come to be integrally associated with political processes such as Truth Commissions where the role of psychologists has tended to be marginal while conventional psychosocial interventions are frequently viewed by victims as narrow or irrelevant.

The book begins by documenting the impact of "extreme political traumatization" which is argued to differ from traumatization caused by natural disasters as political violence attacks the individuals place in society, the right to exist. Hamber argues that the victim of political violence is dehumanized, "is delineated as worthy of extinction or suffering, sub-human and not fit to be part of society." (p. 25). Mechanisms such as Truth Commissions have become central to political objectives of reconciliation and collective healing. The extent to which victims may experience healing is integrally linked to the social spaces that Truth Commissions open up for the victim's sense of humanity, identity and belonging to be restored. A core theme in the book is to identify the tension or "gap" that exists between individual healing needs and political nation-building agendas. To be effective, mental health professionals have to facilitate individual transformation within a political space that is itself transforming. The work of the psychologist is fundamentally reframed and situated within this space.

Chapter 4 examines the contribution of psychology to the South African TRC and of the TRC to individual and collective healing. Psychologically informed practice included trained "briefers" or "cry people" whose role was to give information and support witnesses testifying before the TRC. Statement takers, responsible for gathering victim narratives, were trained in

basic psychological support and referrals. Tensions emerged between the bureaucratic need to gather thousands of statements in a factual, efficient manner and the needs of victims to tell their story and be heard. Hamber notes that 11 revisions of the statement-taking form reduced it to a series of closed-ended questions, a "dog licence application."

A key task of this chapter is to challenge simplistic perceptions that "Revealing," is in and of itself, "Healing." His close contact with a survivor support group and other victims highlighted that having one's story documented and acknowledged, to break through former State denial of victimhood was very important to victims--but this is only the beginning of the story. The compilation of thousands of individualized, often decontextualized accounts of gross human rights violations was at a cost to a comprehensive analysis of the institutional and intellectual structures and apparatus of apartheid which was core to victims' experiences of dehumanization/delegitimization.

In a deeper analysis however, Hamber documents the ambivalent position experienced by victims both in their own psychological process of healing and in their relationship to the reconciliation and nation-building agenda of the new South African Government and civil society. Chapter 5 analyses how "cracks" began to appear between individual and national experiences of resolution and "closure." Hamber argues that an implicit "trade off" in the TRC process was that "truth" would result in healing for victims, and then victims would allow the larger society to "move-on" from past horrors. He documents that, while the TRC helped create an official narrative of the past, it was limited in delivering truth and in particular justice, two issues central to victim's demands.

In an illuminating example of how victims can suddenly be denigrated if their interests clash with political nation-building agendas, the families of Steven Biko and others who died in detention in 1977 undertook an unsuccessful Constitutional Court Challenge against the Amnesty, arguing that it denied victims access to justice through the courts. The families were quickly positioned as "anti-reconciliation" and as "unconsciously working against the national interest." Hamber draws on similar examples--such as the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina who were labelled "mad mothers"--of how victims become problematized when they become a spanner in the works of political and societal interests.

With my colleague Giorgia Doná, we have observed similar dynamics in transitional Rwanda; that is, that individuals who fell outside of or conflicted with political agendas of forgiveness, unity, and nation-building were frequently accorded less status or rendered invisible as they threatened the "ideal match" between the nation and the state. For example in Rwanda, a post-genocide nation-state discourse of unity and reconciliation--"We are all Rwandans"--according to which each child was to be viewed as a child of the nation-state, coexisted with politics of "genocide victimhood" that positioned some categories of children as less deserving "other" in the national project of nation-state redefinition. In post-genocide Rwanda, *escapee* children became central to the self-definition of the new Tutsi-dominated state as a victimized nation whereas other categories of children, such as children accused of involvement in the genocide, children of *genocidaires*, street children and forced migrant children living in Eastern Congo came to be perceived as a threat to the formation of this new nation-state. In South Africa, Hamber notes that the issues facing perpetrators of violence and their children and families have generally been overlooked.

The complexities surrounding the psychological meaning of reparations are covered in

detail. Reparation is positioned as operating at two levels; as objects or symbolic acts that have meaning to individual victims and also as stating something about the intention of the giver (to atone, pay back, repair). Psychologically speaking, reparation was a weak link in victims' experience of South Africa's TRC process. This was fuelled by the fact that perpetrators were obliged to provide details of human rights violations they committed in order to avail or Amnesty but there was no onus on them to apologize. A significant barrier to reconciliation is what Hamber identifies as "an equity gap" between the TRC outcome for perpetrators (Amnesty) and the outcome for victims (some truth, insufficient reparation, little justice). Crucially, it is argued this "equity gap" fails to address unequal claims to citizenship and belonging that is core to experiences of "extreme political traumatization."

Furthermore, it is argued that the TRC has had little impact on gender-based violence, rape, and domestic violence and was under-represented in the Truth Commission. Hamber's analysis of ongoing high rates of sexual violence is limited, predominantly drawing on explanatory concepts of "violent masculinities." Yet this is something that needs stronger analysis in all transitional contexts. In Northern Uganda for example, the amnesty has resulted in immunity for sexual violence; and girls and women's experiences of violations in civil society and by armed forces and groups remain liminal.

Hamber argues for a reframed role for mental professionals to "speak the truth about the society--and the way it might, through structure, discourse, and praxis, perpetuate or ignore survivors or create conditions that prevent psychological recovery."(p.205). Sexual violence presents such an opportunity for psychologists to work with individual survivors but fundamentally to give voice to, analyze, and work to transform cultural and social factors that foster and enable continuing high levels of such violence.

This book has many rich moments of insight. The International Criminal Court has a complex victim participation mandate and this book heralds some cautionary tales. Fundamentally, the challenge for psychologists is to make their voice *relevant* at the macro-level. Hamber's contribution is to envisage a role beyond psychological "holding" to participation in political and collective change.

Hamber, a clinical psychologist, is director of Ulster-based INCORE (International Conflict Research).

Note

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