

Psychotherapy of EX-political PRISONER

Creating meaning under occupation. Social relationships in the centre of counselling of Palestinian survivors of torture.

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▪ Introduction

Dispossession, forced migration, occupation, economic siege. These are measures used by the Israeli government since 1948 to oppress the Palestinian people. Fifty seven years of systematic violation of virtually every internationally recognised human right. Since the beginning of the occupation in 1967 even more overt and destructive abuses have been used. Massive imprisonment is one of these abuses. Over the last 30 years more than 600,000 Palestinians have been detained with 175,000 during the first Intifadah from 1987 to 1992.

Systematic torture is another abuse used by the Israeli authorities in the conflict. Humiliation, sexual torture, systematic beating, and food and sleep deprivation are only some of many torture methods applied.

The Israeli occupation use torture not only to obtain information from their victims and to weaken the core of the prisoner's personality, but also to destroy his personal network of support and the social structure of the Palestinian society as a whole, as well as to discourage any thought or speech against the dominant power.

Additionally, the Israeli army has systematically shelled and destroyed Palestinian residential areas during the current Intifadah (Al Aqsa Intifadah). As homes have been bombarded and made uninhabitable, many Palestinian families are living in tents.

On the top of this, the economic crisis leading to unemployment and poverty and a political development marked by the failure of the peace process, represent severe on going stressors for the whole population.

Hence, a significant part of the population has been directly exposed to torture or other abuses, and a society as such heavily marked by economical constraints as well as oppression and human rights violations carried out by the Israeli occupation.

▪ Families, Networks and Communities

In order to improve this situation and enabling victims of violence to cope with their traumatic experiences individual treatment and social support is being provided from Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP).

The programme runs three clinics that geographically serve the population in the Gaza Strip. Therapy is provided to patients through multi-disciplinary teams, which have its weight on health professionals but also include social workers. Fundamental to our work is the understanding of the psychotherapist or counsellor as part of the multidisciplinary context involved in

helping the survivor.

The work is based upon a community mental health approach, which consider three levels of Palestinian social life: families, networks, and communities. We understand these as dimensions of systematic interaction in which individuals participate and through which they generate meaning and purpose in their lives.

- Families:

In the Palestinian family, gender and age plays a big role in specifying responsibilities. The father is usually the head of the family and the provider for its needs, while the mother plays a major role in raising children and taking care of the house. In the past most major family decisions were made by the father, but recently some of these decisions, are made jointly by both the father and the mother.

Sons and daughters are taught to follow the inherited traditions and are given responsibilities that correspond with their age and gender. Sons are usually taught to be protectors of their sisters and to help the father with his duties inside and outside the house, while daughters are taught to be the source of love and emotional support in the family, as well as helping their mother to take care of household chores.

Palestinians teach their children the cultural values and customs since early age. For every age there is an adequate responsibility of social behaviour and duties that expands in range as they grow older. Thus, an individual who grows up in a family inherits and internalises a range of meanings and habitual patterns or behaviour through which he or she relates to others to give meaning to the experience of the world.

All this suggests that it is not only the particular characteristics of the survivors, parents, and society that predict psychological adjustment after traumatic events, it is also plausible that the family atmosphere shapes the ways in which they can use their competences .

Consequently, a supportive family is the best recovery environment for a trauma survivor. Indeed, Garbarino (1992) observed, that children can cope better with stress and traumatic events if they retain strong positive attachment to their families and parents continue to protect their sense of stability.

However, The therapeutic team work with Palestinian torture victims and their families by making home visits to provide family counseling, psychosocial education and social support to help not only the victims themselves, but also to help their families to cope with their traumatic experiences.

- Networks:

Individuals who have grown beyond the stage of infancy relate

to many other individuals outside their families: friends, neighbours, and peers. These relationships have a sort of regularity and continuity of pattern over time, and can be labelled networks. Through these networks of relationships, the individual develops further patterns of interaction and communication and thereby elaborates his or her meaning system, whose basis is first formed in the family system.

Palestinian networks help and support each individual in the society and enhance the person's sense of well-being by providing social and economic resources through their own collective efforts, social integration and interaction to make people able to deal with ongoing problems and change. These factors and their positive impacts helping to restructure those that have become weak. Both the informal sector (family, friends, neighbours) and the formal or professional sector (doctors, nurses, social workers, and the rest of the health care professions) intervene and play a significant role in this process.

The importance of support networks are generally recognized within the health and mental health sciences, and understood as an essential and significant determinant in maintaining health, recovery from illness, preventing the ill effect of torture, and recovery from trauma.

Although Palestinian culture, traditions, and Islam strongly stress the importance of friends and neighbours roles in taking care of each others, we can see how the Israeli organised violence in all the aspects described above is aimed at severing the connections between people, controlling their ways of being together and relating to each other, including the siege and separation of the Palestinian villages and cities to prevent the social interaction among them. The main conclusion is that the Israeli assaults on the Palestinian support structures have left a weakened and conflicting support system.

The GCMHP's team also work with the networks through local advocacy and networking which involve interaction targeted at a large number of local civil society institutions, with statements and appeals issued according to events and need to prevent abuse and promote respect of human rights especially related issues to torture and its psychosocial effects and goal.

At the sometimes, therapists use the resources and possibilities of the family, networks and community to provide social support in helping the survivors to function independently as much as possible into the society.

- Community:

Both the family and the network exist within the context of a larger group of people with a shared language, a shared system of meanings, shared pattern of, and rules for, interactions and communication, and shared symbols, values, and concepts of individuality.

The culture of the community gives meaning to the survivor's experience in the language, and symbols of his or hers community. Thus, it is of utmost importance to recognise the rich sources of meaning and symbolism available to the survivor from his or her own culture.

The destruction of the community, within which the family and network have existed and from which they have derived their most fundamental values and systems of meaning, is one of the most demoralising experiences for survivors.

At the community level, many activities have been carried by the team, such as bi-monthly journal, which has a wide local

distribution on issues of human rights imprisonment, torture and rehabilitation, public education and media activities are targeted towards the community at large and providing training courses for police/prison on related issues of human rights and mental health.

- Aspects of counselling and psychotherapy in Palestinian culture

In accordance with these three dimensions CGMHP adopts a community mental health approach that is sensitive to the needs of Palestinian society and its culture. It is necessary to take account of the social nature of human existence and to recognise that a person's sense of self is rooted in his or her relationships with others. Our focus, therefore shifts from the "individual" person to the "individual in relationship to others." Thus, we regard torture and organised violence as an assault, not on an individual alone, but on the family and the community to which that individual belongs. There we focus counselling on these social relations.

This is why the family plays an important role in the therapeutic process. Home visits are carried out aiming at involving the family of survivors of torture in the treatment plan thereby ensuring that survivors have a supportive environment to facilitate treatment. The implementation of community education campaigns which seek to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness and raising awareness of mental health disorders in the community is another method used.

Much caution is taken on the building the relationship between the therapist and the survivor. First of all, it is important to respond to the foreseen role the society has to the therapist. In the Palestinian society the therapist is looked upon as an authority figure in the same way as parents, teachers or leaders in society who consider powerful and responsible. Moreover, the therapist is being seen as representative of the community and not as representative for the individual. These characteristics are important to respond to by the therapist to ensure a successful therapy or counselling process.

Treatment of Palestinian ex-political prisoners are often difficult due to the problems of constructing a trust based relationship to the therapist. They consider themselves heroes who have struggled for freedom and nationhood and feel that they should not have psychological problems. Therefore, they are hesitant to accept the need for treatment. They have always told stories of their heroic experience – the only stories that people were wanted to hear, and identify themselves with symbols of power and possess a heightened self- image that can not be compromised by acknowledging weakness or problems with themselves. This has as a consequence that the problem of stigmatisation is worst among ex-political prisoners. Hence, to build empathy with them as a therapist you must pursue an equal relationship, where the experience and active participation of the survivor is given priority.

The recognition, respect and understanding of the religion, the socio-political system and values of survivors is also important to use for an effective in the therapy. The therapist has to understand the culture and the political attitude of the survivors of torture and the meaning of individual differences on political and ideological attitudes. He or she should also know how to recognise these differences and shape the counselling and therapy to fit the client's world.

To create a safe environment, as a therapist you have to listen and to share the experience of the client and to be aware

of your behaviour, especially not to remind the victims of the interrogators behaviour, otherwise the survivor will feel vulnerable which prevent him to express himself / herself and to talk about his suffering. At the same time, the therapist should be aware that the survivors are using denial as a defence mechanism to establish a state of psychological balance. Trust building between therapist and survivor is therefore key to the successful treatment. Providing new relationships in which trust and empathy can be re-established, provides the basis for generation of new meanings which can make sense of their experience.

In paying attention to the survivor's socio-political status and subjective experience, it is necessary to take account of the social nature of human existence and to recognise that a person's sense of self is rooted in his or her relationships with others, which means that therapists should understand the sub-culture of the society and have enough knowledge of the deferent Palestinian political organizations in order to establish a good therapeutic relationship with the victims and their families to facilitate the therapy process..

A fundament for this process is that both the survivor and the therapist understand the political-social-historical context, and that the survivor was subjected to torture scientifically designed to destroy the core of the prisoners' personality and the social structure of Palestinian society.

All the above mentioned elements enhance and facilitate the therapeutic relationship with the tortured survivors.

• Conclusion

In this article an orientation towards understanding the individual within the contexts of family, social network, and community has been presented. It is through relationships in these contexts that individuals establish and maintain a sense of identity and a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives.

Torture and organised violence radically transform and sometimes destroy these contexts of family, network, and community and the patterns of relationships within them. The transformation or loss of these patterns of relationship drastically undermines the individual's sense of purpose and meaning in life. It is, therefore, extremely difficult to retain a sense of continuity and to reassert a sense of identity, purpose, and meaning. The individual is not only suffering mentally and physically but is faced with new economic and social culture problems.

In our work with torture survivors, we focus not just on the torture and its impact on these individuals, but also consider how their relationships have been changed and how they understand themselves now as a member of a community. Our therapeutic task, therefore, is to provide a context in which previous systems of meaning can be recovered and new ones can be developed.

Palestinian patients seeking treatment for their psychological problems has unique characteristics related to socio-political, cultural, and other factors that impact the therapeutic process. These patients present challenges to their therapists owing to the contrasting cultural understanding and conceptualisation of mental illness and therapeutic process. Therapists need to fully appreciate the relationship between culture and psychotherapy, especially when they provide counselling for ex-political prisoners.

We are further aware, not only of the value of scientific theories, generalised categories, and conceptual frameworks, but also of their limitations. We see our role not so much as directors and organisers of process, but as participants in it. This calls for us to engage in the process not only at a professional level, but also at a human level. To be prepared to subordinate our scientific theories and professional in a struggle for human rights and human values.

The process of arrest, torture and release involves trauma at many levels, this trauma can be understood, not only as an assault on the individual person, but also an assault on the links and connections between people and patterns of relationships through which people define themselves and give meaning to their lives. As Palestinians, we share a trauma which affected all of us and that all of us need help and in return can give help to others.

However, without stable political and geographical boundaries and without recognizing the rights of others to re-build their countries the suffering will increase. That is why, those of who inhabit communities that are currently stable and democratic must support us who have chosen to practice their therapeutic task, at great risk to themselves, in countries under occupation. We as Palestinian share a trauma, which has affected all of us.

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