

VIOLENT ETHNOPOLITICAL CONFLICT TRAUMATIZES WHOLE COMMUNITIES and regions. To encourage conflict resolution and prevention, facilitators should encourage communities to work with their collective trauma. If trauma is ignored, individual and collective pain and demands for accountability can easily set alight renewed episodes of violence. Following the war in Croatia in the early 1990s, forums focusing on post-war conflict and reconciliation provided an opportunity for Croat, Serb and Muslim participants to discuss the complex and heated problems they encountered between themselves and within their communities. By working with the “hot spots” of their interactions, or the points of inflammation where conflicts escalate and repeat, participants transformed their relationships with one another and found pathways toward reconciliation, community-building and peace.

Hot Spots: Post-Conflict Trauma and Transformation

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Introduction

The traumatic experiences of violent conflict affect not only individuals but also entire communities. Therefore, conflict resolution activities must address and transform community trauma to ensure that it does not turn into renewed episodes of violence. Using the theories and practices of Process Oriented Psychology, my colleague Lane Arye and I facilitated a series of bi-annual forums in Croatia between 1996 and 2001 that, over the years, brought together more than 300 Croat, Serb and Muslim community workers and leaders to discuss the painful and complex problems of return, reconciliation and reconstruction following the war (1991-1995). These forums offered participants a unique opportunity to work with the very conflicts and impasses to reconciliation that they faced in their communities and find pathways forward together.¹

Process Oriented Psychology

Process Oriented Psychology (or “Process Work”) is a body of theory and practice developed by Arnold Mindell, a physicist and Jungian analyst. Mindell’s work, spanning more than 30 years, began with a mind-body focus in working with individuals and expanded to working with relationships, group and organizational dynamics and community conflict resolution.²

“Deep democracy,” a central idea of Process Oriented Psychology, suggests that wisdom and direction will be found within a community when there is facilitated interaction between all points of view, including the mainstream and marginalized, and the emotions of conflict.³ Deep democracy also refers to an awareness of the different dimensions of individual, group and community life—the social and political issues of concern, underlying roles and polarizations and the deepest shared level of experience.⁴

Facilitation methods involve carefully observing interactions and communication, including intended, un-

intended and subtle signals. Facilitators may invite people to enter the polarizing roles that underlie their conflicts to further and bring awareness into a group’s interaction. For example, in one forum, two roles emerged during a discussion about refugees: the insiders (the settled group) and outsiders (the refugees). A woman was invited to express the outsiders’ emotions, which she related to as a former refugee. However, individuals have more than one role—while someone may find herself drawn to a particular role, she may also recognize herself in an opposite one. In the case of the former refugee, as she expressed the outsiders’ role she recognized that, now settled, she also identified with the insiders and was not always able to welcome newcomers. By identifying and understanding roles within a conflict, a group can move toward conflict resolution.

These methods are useful when facilitating group discussions in a wide range of situations, including seemingly intractable conflict. It is remarkable that, despite general agreement that strong and volatile emotion is a central element in the perpetuation and escalation of conflict, conflict resolution methods rarely work directly with the “heat” of these emotions. Instead, they favor rational communication or solutions.

Hot Spots

Process Oriented Psychology refers to points of sensitivity in our interactions as “hot spots.”⁵ A hot spot is a potentially volatile moment of communication where a conflict may rapidly escalate or people, sensing tension, may back off from the subject. While it is natural to try to avoid a hot spot, avoidance can be dangerous. When ignored, hot spots return and—if ignored repeatedly—lead to escalation and possible violence.⁶ However, hot spots can also serve as doorways to conflict transformation. Encouraging and facilitating dialogue at hot spots can lead to deeper understanding between people in conflict or finding a direction forward.⁷

When you touch a hot spot in a conflict zone, you meet a lot of pain and traumatic history just below its surface. While there is increasing recognition that violent conflict traumatizes whole communities, and that trauma is both a response to violence and a vehicle for further violence, there is a profound need for a wider understanding of the collective dynamics of trauma and corresponding methods of working in a community.⁸ Working solely from a paradigm of individual pathology, while important, is limiting and even potentially inflammatory because it implies that the pathology and point of intervention lies with the one suffering rather than with the wider system in which the suffering takes place.

Community trauma mirrors the dynamics of individual trauma. In an attempt to survive and function in daily activities, an individual may cut off from the traumatizing experience while the trauma remains locked within her body and psyche, intruding in flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, headaches and visceral memories of the traumatic experience. Likewise, an entire community may cut off from the horrors of the past and attempt to focus on rebuilding their society. Meanwhile, widespread trauma pervades the very fibers of the community body, intruding in community-wide burnout, hopelessness and episodes of renewed violence. This dynamic also repeats when parts of society with the privilege to forget past atrocities talk about moving on—and even bemoan the fact that those who suffered traumas continue to talk about them. Calls for forgiveness can further fracture the community if they are not accompanied by attempts to recognize the pain of trauma and pleas for witness and accountability. In the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Chair of South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission: "You" cannot forgive what you do not know."⁹

This failure to acknowledge traumatic experiences is a part of the dynamic of collective trauma. If the experience is not witnessed, felt and included in the wider collective narrative, the pain of those who suffered remains ready fuel for another round of violence. Trauma associated with conflict, genocide and systemic oppression is a collective and political matter as well as a deeply personal and spiritual one. Communities must grapple with the trauma from historic and current atrocities and find pathways to include individual and collective stories and establish a process of accountability to move forward. To do this without repeating the trauma, facilitators need special skills to help communities work with the volatile emotional, physical, social, political and relational dynamics at the hot spots of their interactions.

Moreover, facilitators must notice subtle shifts in interactions and atmosphere, such as de-escalation, or a change of heart or momentary resolution. Bringing awareness to such shifts, which Process Oriented Psychology sometimes refers to as "cool spots,"¹⁰ is vital as a group finds its way through an apparent impasse and toward a deeper resolution.

Terror, Trauma and Transformation

You can recognize a hot spot when a conversation touches upon a charged topic and everyone immediately changes the subject. Sometimes a hot spot occurs in a fleeting moment, followed by tense silence, laughter or someone abruptly leaving. The following example from the forums in Croatia demonstrates how a hot spot can appear.

Near the end of one afternoon's session, in a group of Croats, Serbs and Muslims, a discussion arose about the difficulty of bringing new ideas into one's work and community. Participants spoke about feeling put down for their attempted contributions. After the session closed, I learned that a new participant had become very agitated during the conversation. She said that she did not feel free to speak in the group because another participant had been making jokes.

Later that evening, as Lane and I prepared for the following day's session, we recognized that the group had touched a hot spot concerning inclusion and exclusion. But we felt that something was missing in our understanding. That night, after having difficulty falling asleep, I awoke in a cold sweat during the early morning hours. I was terrified. But why? Soon, I realized that "ghosts," or implied experiences behind the woman's upset response during the session,¹¹ were creating my terror and were also present within the group's dynamics. I took a few notes and was able to go straight to sleep.

The next day, I spoke to the group about how the topic from the previous day might touch deep feelings and even traumatic experiences about exclusion from the community. Then, the woman who had been upset asked to speak. She began to tell a story that she had never told anyone before; how during the war she had been arrested and terrorized over three days by paramilitary soldiers who threatened to "disappear" her.

She spoke haltingly, trembling with both the memory of past terror and her present fear of speaking before the group. Lane and I encouraged the woman to share her story, if she chose, while understanding that her fear of being marginalized within the group related to her terrorizing experiences of threatened death or expul-

sion from the community. We told the group that the woman's story might touch upon others' war experiences and suggested that it could be useful if we represented the role of the paramilitary soldiers who kept her frightened and unable to speak. With her permission, we represented those voices that expelled her and threatened her life.

We went on to represent other voices that we thought might be present in the minds of those in the group who would not want to hear the woman's story. Many nodded in recognition as we said: "It's too hard to listen." "There are too many stories like yours." "No more tears." Another participant came forward, offering to speak personally from this role: "The reason I can't hear you is because of all the dead who can never tell their stories." The only way he could ever express his grief and outrage, he continued, would be to go into the main square and set himself on fire. With help from Lane, his gestures evolved into a fiery dance that expressed an essence of that rage, passion and life force. Everyone in the room felt moved by witnessing both the part within themselves that excludes by saying: "Do not speak," and the public expressions of their endless pain.

Then, the man who joked the day before came forward and encouraged the woman to complete her story, assuring her that he was by her side and wanted to listen. She was touched by the man's actions, particularly since he was a Serb while she was a Croat.

The woman was deeply relieved to have told her story within the forum. Likewise, members of the group felt a sense of profound connection with one another and recognition that by working carefully with the most difficult emotions they did not recreate conflict, and instead were able to engage and transform their relationships.

For Community Builders

A characteristic of trauma is the lack of choice at the point of the traumatizing event. This lack of choice continues when the traumatizing event is replayed through flashbacks, nightmares, physical symptoms and repeating violence. It is therefore important for individuals and whole communities to choose when and how to talk about their traumatic experiences. It is sometimes said that one reason for the success of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the large grassroots involvement in providing feedback on its design. In Croatia, as we spoke about conflict and issues of reconciliation and community building, we found that people who were initially hesitant to speak

of their most painful experiences in the community really wanted to do so if they could find ways to avoid setting off their own and others' trauma.¹²

We saw how teachers, social workers, politicians and other community leaders who are regularly exposed to immense suffering in their post-conflict communities often feel uncertain as to how to face the pain and outrage, especially when they are also deeply affected by their own war experiences. Many struggled with fatigue, chronic headaches, anxiety, sleeplessness and flashbacks of their own traumatic experiences in addition to the overwhelming problems in their communities.

During one discussion, a group of women talked about their burnout. What soon emerged from their conversation was a shared belief that they had to listen to others' trauma while keeping a "professional distance." They believed that there was no space for their own grief and outrage; if they revealed their emotional response to the extensive trauma they met in their communities, they would simply fall apart.

One medical professional told a story about how she cried as she testified in a tribunal about a war crime she witnessed. The judge reprimanded her, saying that surely as a professional she could keep her emotions under control. She responded that it was her emotions and humanity that made her professional. The judge, in this instance, was the one who behaved unprofessionally.

Remaining emotionally distant to one's own and others' responses to tragedy and atrocity only exacerbates and recreates trauma.¹³ One is left vulnerable to intrusive post-trauma symptoms; to falling back into the story and overwhelming feelings. Trying to put community-wide trauma behind us in order to move on is likewise insufficient. To ensure successful conflict prevention and post-war community-building, it is important for whole communities to find pathways to include their traumatic history. Following their transforming experiences in the forums in Croatia, in which they engaged in conflict and spoke about their war experiences, participants often said that they never imagined it would be possible to talk so truthfully and emotionally in a large forum with others who had been on opposite sides of the war.

Facilitators in conflict zones need support to ensure that they are neither cut off from nor swallowed up in a community's emotions. In Process Oriented Psychology, the term "burning wood" describes the process of working through one's personal and collective history as it is activated at hot spots of conflict.¹⁴ Community facilitators need training and opportunities to work with their personal experiences and discover how they become polarized in relation to others.¹⁵ Working

on oneself in this way is not a one-time event; rather, it is an ongoing recognition of how our deepest personal and collective stories emerge and merge at the hot spots of our community interaction, how easy it is to fall into a replay and how our awareness makes a difference in preventing cycles of violence.

Conclusion

When individuals and communities “burn wood,” they develop their capacity for leadership in post-conflict community-building and help ensure the prevention of future violence. When we do not address hot spots, our emotions can be used as fuel that is set alight to create fresh rounds of violence. In the former Yugoslavia, the fuel of past traumas from ethnic conflicts in 1389, World War I and World War II was intentionally tapped to help ignite fresh violence among Croats, Serbs and Muslims in the early 1990s.¹⁶ The less we know about our personal and communal traumas, the more easily we can be manipulated and fall into dramatic polarizations and replaying cycles of conflict.¹⁷

Forum participants repeatedly described a sense of responsibility that came from working with their conflicts and trauma. They began to speak about the part they played in the unfolding events of war, and how they now felt a sense of possibility to create a different future. One former soldier said, “It never occurred to me before that I had anything to do with what happened in this region... This feeling of responsibility does not make me feel guilty. It gives me hope for the future, knowing I can make a difference in my community.” Others responded, “Dare we ask what might have happened if such forums occurred before the war?”¹⁸

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ENDNOTES

- 1 This project was coordinated by Udruga Mi, with the vision and leadership of Tanja Radocaj, Nives Ivelja and other staff. It was funded primarily by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, as well as by grants from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, several embassies and private foundations. The project included a wide range of non-governmental and international organizations as well as government agencies. See www.cfor.info for more information about community forums.
- 2 Mindell, 1984; Mindell, 1985; Mindell, 1993.
- 3 Mindell, 1993: 154-155; Mindell, 1995. Additional information about deep democracy can be found at www.deepdemocracymovement.net.
- 4 Mindell defines the dimensions as Consensus Reality, Dreaming and the underlying sentience or unity.
- 5 Mindell, 1995.
- 6 Ibid.: 27, 42.
- 7 Ibid.; Audergon, 2005: 273-277.
- 8 See Chart of Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Individuals and Signs of Community and Collective Trauma in Audergon, 2005: 281-284.
- 9 University of Witwatersrand. “Historical Papers: Archival Collections: Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu.”
- 10 Amy and Arny Mindell official website, “Worldwork Themes.”
- 11 Mindell, 2000: 550.
- 12 Audergon and Arye, 2006.
- 13 Audergon, 2005: 181.
- 14 Mindell, 1995: 127, 150.
- 15 Audergon, 2004; Audergon, 2005.
- 16 Audergon, 2005: 8-14, 187.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Audergon and Arye, 2006.