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The Impact of Trauma on Peace Processes

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Abstract

Almost everyone who survives situations of violent conflict will have experienced significant trauma. The impact of such experiences on the processes of conflict resolution and peacebuilding is, however, not well appreciated or understood. This article considers how the traumatic experiences of individual leaders and their collective constituents, their people, influence their respective abilities to engage in peace processes. It highlights the problems of shame and avoidance following trauma and describes what happens when an “encapsulated” past traumatic experience is reactivated or “triggered”: the individual and collective minds regress to a level that limits their ability to think about complex situations in the ways required within peace processes. Adopting a psychodynamic approach, this article also discusses how trauma affects the relationship between the leaders and their people, starting with how traumatized collectives choose a particular type of leader who promises to save them from their predicament, against all apparent odds, and upon failing to do so, finds scapegoats among them or creates external enemies. This need for an enemy contributes to the entrenchment of intractable conflict.

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Political psychology—“the application of what is known about human psychology to the study of politics”¹—has been based largely on “normal” psychology. More specifically, it has been strongly influenced by rational choice theory, which is “built on a set of basic assumptions about human behavior that resemble the requirements for a well-functioning citizenry.”² These assumptions may not hold when we consider individuals and collectives that have experienced significant trauma after prolonged exposure to violent conflict and war.

Trauma, however, is no longer limited to the battlefields; it appears to have become mainstream, even politicized, since the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York in 2001.³ As this article is being written, the Covid-19 pandemic is ravaging the world. Millions have died and the generational economic fall-out from the public health measures to contain the virus has resulted in many millions suddenly unemployed, affecting everyone, with no end in sight.⁴ The trauma of this pandemic is insidious and devastating and will have profound political impacts in every country and globally.

The intractable conflict in the Middle East seems limited by comparison and is a relatively easy example to consider when examining the relevance of trauma on the peace process. The trauma from decades of conflict and war in this region will undoubtedly have had an impact on its leaders and their people. The traumatic experiences of the leaders will not only shape how they see the world, especially the other, but will also affect their capacity to consider objectively the options before them. Traumatized populations, individually and collectively, also think and behave in a particular way and will elect a particular kind of leader. The dynamics between leaders and their constituents, which are already complex in “normal” populations in peacetime, are made even more complicated when all concerned are traumatized.

This article explores some of these dynamics and highlights the impact of trauma on the processes of peacemaking and peacebuilding. It begins by outlining a psychodynamic framework within which the issues can be considered.

A Psychodynamic Approach

The reader might not be familiar with a psychodynamic approach to peace processes because the dominant theories in political psychology are based on either cognitive and behavioral psychology or social psychology. Important contributions from psychodynamic or psychoanalytic approaches to politics over the past few decades include those from Andrew Samuels, Michael Rustin, Paul Hoggett, Werner Bohleber, and David Levine.⁵ Practitioners such as Gabrielle Rifkin have extended their understanding of the mind from their work with individuals to international conflicts.⁶ The most prolific of all contributors is Vamik Volkan, who has applied psychoanalytic principles in his work with peace processes across the world.⁷

I prefer the broader term “psychodynamic” to “psychoanalytic” in this context because “psychodynamic” encompasses both conscious and unconscious domains, while “psychoanalytic” implies a particular focus on the unconscious. Further, the notion of the unconscious is problematic in collective and social psychology; it can often be difficult to argue that a certain psychic element is residing in the unconscious of an individual, let alone to be certain that it is in the unconscious of many. Finally, the word “psychoanalytic” is associated with many assumptions, prejudices, and misunderstandings, leaving some to wonder, perhaps, how a country might be put on a couch!

Notwithstanding these caveats, there is considerable merit in trying to understand *those elements that are not easily or immediately apparent*, in particular, how they might influence those more obvious aspects of peacemaking and peacebuilding. There are several reasons some salient elements are not easily or immediately apparent: they might have been “forgotten” (i.e., were once known and may therefore be remembered); they might be repressed into the

unconscious because of their associated intolerable effects, such as guilt and shame (as suggested by Freud); or they might be somewhat known but made unspeakable by a range of personal, sociocultural, and political forces. I use the phrase “somewhat known” to refer to the range, or different depths, of awareness that exist when we are considering the psychology of a collective. It is easier to establish what is known or not known to an individual than to a collective of tens of thousands or millions. Some might ask, If we cannot be certain that a psychic element (e.g., an experience of a historical event) is present in the consciousness of a collective, how can we be confident that such an element has an influence in its thinking and behavior?

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the case for or against the notion of the collective conscious and unconscious, such as in William McDougall’s formulation of the group mind⁸ or Earl Hopper’s social unconscious.⁹ Those who work within a psychodynamic approach, however, would argue: (1) that something cannot be seen or measured does not mean it is not there—human cells existed from the beginning of life, well before they were visualized for the first time by Robert Hooke, following the invention of the microscope in the late sixteenth century¹⁰; (2) theoretical formulations of psychic functions have been validated consistently by the experience and observations of numerous practitioners for over a century; (3) these formulations “make sense” when applied to a range of relevant situations; and (4) prescribed interventions based on these formulations have produced predictable responses.

What is “dynamic” about this psychological approach to political processes is the attention given to the constantly changing web of relationships between what is known and what is unknown, and the reciprocal influences between them. Suppose, for example, that the dialogue between two countries in conflict has reached an impasse over a particular detail relating to their border. One country is disinclined to concede an inch as long as a historical, traumatic event experienced at the hands of the other country remains unacknowledged. The officials of the other country had forgotten about that event until it was brought up by a third party. The acknowledgment of that event led to an outpouring of grief and anger but also to a deeper engagement in dialogue and mutual understanding, initially over the historical event, then over other, more recent disagreements.

Another aspect of what is “dynamic” in this approach is an appreciation of the reciprocal relationship between individual and collective psychology. Wilfred Bion, through his pioneering study of leadership and groups among soldiers during the Second World War, observed that different types of leaders emerge out of particular sets of unconscious dynamics within groups. He considered these fundamental unconscious group dynamics to be operating under “basic assumptions.”¹¹ In each situation, the leaders, created by or chosen out of the unconscious needs and demands of their respective groups, would proceed to meet their requirements. The existence of such a close reciprocal relationship between leaders (and their proxies) and the communities or countries that “created” them suggests the need to consider the psychology of the individual and their respective collectives, concurrently.

Stuart Twemlow and Frank Sacco applied Bion’s formulation of unconscious group dynamics in their study of bullying and violence in schools.¹² While most researchers had focused on the relationship between bullies and their victims, they found bystanders played a critical role, unwittingly, in creating and maintaining this dynamic. Studies like these highlight the often unconscious but vital role of third parties, including mediators, in peace processes.

Psychodynamic approaches seek to understand these complex reciprocal interactions between all parties in a peace process, many of which are beyond the awareness of those involved and beyond the influence of contextual events, recent and historical, and elements from their respective shared consciousness. It would risk stating the obvious if one were to highlight how critical context is to any understanding of a situation. But I do wish to emphasize that context is everything in psychodynamic thinking. Such an approach pays as much attention

to the internal context (in the mind of the individual) as to the external events and social circumstances. Significantly, the “internal context,” which includes past experiences and unconscious elements, might not be known to the individuals themselves, let alone to others. Most important, the context of one person cannot be assumed to be the same as that of another. For example, the notion of “freedom” among the protestors in Hong Kong has developed out of the Western/British concept of political freedom, especially as “free speech,” while China’s concern is about the freedom that comes from breaking the shackles of colonialism and the legacy of the Opium Wars, and that which has been etched into its national consciousness as the “century of humiliation.”¹³

An Approach to Trauma

Given how commonly the notion of trauma is employed in a wide range of discourses, it might surprise the reader that there is no universal agreement on its definition or concept. The dominant notion of trauma arose from the classical Greek term *trauma*, meaning injury, as in physical injury. Its emergence in the late nineteenth century as a psychological experience was promoted by Jean-Martin Charcot and his student Pierre Janet in their study of hysteria.¹⁴ The present-day use of trauma as an injury to the mind has its roots in “shell-shock” during the First World War and was formulated into a psychiatric disorder in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).¹⁵ The focus has been on symptoms of flashbacks, hyperarousal, numbing, and withdrawal that can supposedly be managed, such as we would treat a medical condition. The predominant body in this field, the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, however, maintains a somewhat broader view; it keeps an open mind on the immediate and long-term impacts of trauma, which include the general consequences of stress.

Meanwhile, there is a growing call to move beyond what has been characterized as a medicalized, individualistic, Euro-American-centric perspective, to consider the sociocultural and political dimensions of trauma, with the inclusion of postcolonial discourses.¹⁶ This broader process of decolonization includes “decolonizing” trauma studies, which “[are] not just about expanding the scope [and] broadening the focus, but also about critically examining and revising dominant conceptions of trauma and recovery.”¹⁷ Though I agree with the sentiment of this movement to broaden the concept of trauma, the narrower notion of trauma as an injury to the mind is still useful. What needs broadening is the concept of the mind, to move beyond the individualistic model to include the collective.

I propose a definition of trauma as “the process by which a unit of consciousness is incapable of processing an experience: in the individual, it is the mind; for an organization, its systems; and for a collective, its culture.” Unlike the mainstream definitions that focus on a traumatic event (e.g., a natural disaster) and its effect (e.g., symptoms of stress or PTSD), I wish to highlight instead the subjective experience of being overcome, whether from a single, defined event, such as war, or a continuing process, such as dispossession, enslavement, or colonization.

Consider, first, the concept of cultural trauma. One might understand cultural trauma as an injury or damage to the shared consciousness of a collective, which, if a large group of people have shared some aspects of a common life for a long time, is commonly referred to as their culture. Alexander Jeffery and his colleagues have proposed:

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.¹⁸

This psychoanalytically informed sociological approach highlights the social processes by which a shared experience is collectively recognized as traumatic and how its impact is continually mediated through collective memory and representation. Their model, which conceptualizes trauma as a single, defined “horrendous event,” may be referred to as “single event cultural trauma.”

My model, called “complex cultural trauma,” gives greater emphasis to a continuous experience of trauma, and its impact is not only in the change of the content of the collective mind but on its operation. Cultural trauma occurs when the apparatus or system through which a collective makes sense of its experience is corrupted, distorted, compromised, or destroyed.¹⁹ This is the nature of colonization; it involves an insidious distortion and dismantling of a culture, which might be conceived of as the “thinking apparatus of a collective.” The long-term impact of complex cultural trauma is far more devastating than single-event trauma. While one event might change how a collective sees itself through what it remembers of a particular experience, the distortion and destruction of its thinking apparatus affects how it experiences that particular event and, subsequently, how it represents that compromised experience to itself and others.

Elsewhere I have highlighted how the Holocaust and the dispossession of Aboriginals in Australia through colonization were more than single, definable events; they involved a thorough distortion and destruction of their respective cultures.²⁰ Both incidences involved a superimposition of multiple events on a continuing cultural change. In the case of Australian Aboriginals, the numerous massacres and incidences of the systematic removal of their children and their placement in institutions are superimposed on a process of cultural dispossession and continuing discrimination and prejudice.

With these examples in mind, one can imagine how cultural trauma can affect a collective for generations. The trauma of an individual can similarly be transmitted across the generations. This phenomenon is becoming known as transgenerational trauma. When trauma is transmitted across generations in a collective, it is, in my formulation, a cultural trauma. While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the mechanisms of such a transmission, it is important to bear in mind that the trauma of several earlier generations can have a profound influence on the psychology of individuals and collectives today.

A Brief Psychology of Trauma

A traumatic experience may result in one of several outcomes. If those for whom the experience is not too severe have the courage and mental strength to face it, they can slowly process or digest it, asking themselves the following questions: “What happened?” “How did what happened affect me?” “How do I feel about what happened?” “Why did it happen?” They may ask these questions repeatedly, and after a while, they are said to have digested it and are able to move on, unencumbered by the experience.

If an experience is overwhelming or if the person involved is, for whatever reason, unable to face or process it, the mind automatically wraps it up and hides it out of consciousness. This process has been referred to as “encapsulation.”²¹ The person no longer is distressed by that experience nor has any memory of it. All the emotions that were originally associated with that experience have also been removed; the person will usually be emotionally detached from any fragment of memory that might remain of that experience.

From time to time, people whose memories are encapsulated might come across something that reminds them more strongly of the hidden or encapsulated experience. These unexpected and often unwelcome reminders are commonly referred to as “triggers,” and colloquially, those experiencing them are said to be “triggered.” What usually follows is a growing recollection

of the experience with an associated overwhelming emotional response and anxiety, sometimes a panic attack—a very distressing state of mind.

One can imagine, therefore, that individuals with a history of severe trauma would develop a set of behaviors or function in a manner that avoids being triggered; they try to avoid certain places and topics of conversation, and their life and options become increasingly limited. These self-imposed restrictions could be so severe that the person becomes frozen. Being in this state contributes to that sense of “stuckness” common among traumatized people. For most, this state of numbness (emotional detachment) and stuckness, without memory of their traumatic experience, is a relatively good outcome.

If they were to be triggered and become connected to their traumatic experience again, they would feel emotionally overwhelmed. The mind would try to wrap up the exposed traumatic experience once more. If it succeeds, the individual is said to have recovered; and this recovery usually takes several weeks, sometimes months. If the mind is only partially successful, or fails completely to cover up the trauma, the person will experience symptoms of anxiety, hyperarousal, and flashbacks, a condition that is described as PTSD. This state of mind can persist for months, even years.

While the “trauma-encapsulated” state of mind is associated with numbness, avoidance, and stuckness, the “trauma-exposed” state of mind is associated with agitation, a sense of timelessness, hypersensitivity to shame and humiliation, and regression.

Agitation

When individuals are exposed to an earlier trauma, they are reconnected with the emotions from that time and with their present-day emotional reaction to that whole experience; it all adds to an overwhelming emotionality. Anxiety, hyperarousal, and flashbacks are well-known symptoms of PTSD. What is less recognized is a state of reactivity and impulsiveness, and a propensity toward disinhibited behavior, such as violence. One might say that people exhibiting such behavior have become “unhinged” or that “the lid has been taken off.” Their behavior becomes unpredictable and highly reactive to the slightest provocation. They are, in such a state, likely to respond to threats with aggression and violence. Their behavior, characteristically, is driven by impulsivity, which can be defined as “acting without thinking.” For example, the leader of a country might suddenly respond to a perceived threat by ordering a retaliatory bombing of the enemy without thorough consultation and thoughtful consideration of the possible consequences of such action.

Timelessness

Individuals who are in a traumatized mental space, that is, a trauma-exposed state of mind, have a distorted sense of time; they experience the present as if they were in the past. There is no clear demarcation between the present and the past. They might even struggle to ascertain what day, month, or year they are in. If they are fully immersed in the past, they might relate to the people around them in the same way they did in the past, speaking to those in the present as if they were figures from the past. Consider, for example, two countries in conflict accusing each other of breaking their agreement to a ceasefire. They are both enraged by such accusations until they clarify which ceasefire has been broken—the present ceasefire or the one several months or years earlier. Such a confusion of time and its associated reality can complicate peace negotiations because the two sides might not be discussing the same thing. Thus, one should not assume that the participants at a negotiating table share the same sense of time.

Hypersensitivity to Shame and Humiliation

Inevitably, when individuals are traumatized, they experience shame and humiliation. This effect may be explained by the fact that trauma breaks down our ego defenses and exposes our most vulnerable selves. It could be said that we become psychically naked during a traumatic experience. A certain degree of hypersensitivity to shame and humiliation persists well after the traumatic experience has been “wrapped up” or encapsulated and put out of our memory. This hypersensitivity becomes heightened once again when a person is triggered into a trauma-exposed state of mind.

As I explain later in the section titled “Entrenchment of Intractable Conflict,” certain leaders with narcissistic personality structures already possess such sensitivity to shame and humiliation; they are often preoccupied with protecting themselves from any experiences that expose any feelings of inadequacy by, for example, running counternarratives that espouse their success and greatness, even if doing so requires a gross distortion of reality. When these “narcissistically vulnerable” leaders are traumatized, they are overwhelmed by shame and humiliation; they disengage from their people and withdraw from the meaningful dialogue that is part of a peace process. As their insecurity deepens, their compensatory sense of grandiosity often expands accordingly. Their perception of threat becomes more and more distorted, increasingly more imagined than real. They become prone to lashing out angrily and attacking prematurely, well before any confirmation of the reality of perceived threats.

Regression

When an individual, a collective, or a system is under strain or its ego is punctured or it is triggered into a trauma-exposed state, it regresses. Regression is the psychological notion of retreat, the mind retreating to an earlier state of function that is stronger or more economical. In his early writing, Freud proposed two sets of mental functioning. The first, called the “primary process,” is found in the operations of the unconscious and dreams, where psychical energy is free flowing, complex ideas are condensed into simple forms, multiple ideas are reduced into one symbol, and there appears to be no logic to the connection between those simplified ideas and symbols. The second, called the “secondary process,” occurs in our conscious waking life; the psychical energy is regulated and the predominant activity is the creation, amplification, and connection of symbols and ideas, the process commonly referred to as “thinking.”²² Freud later developed his theories of psychosexual development and considered regression in terms of a reversion to an earlier developmental stage.²³ Some might find interest in deconstructing the personality of leaders in terms of their psychosexual development and subsequent regression. I have found the impact of regression on mental functioning, especially with regard to the process of thinking, more relevant. At its simplest, individuals’ mental functioning regresses from the secondary process to the primary process when the individuals are under severe stress or traumatized.

Looking into it more closely, we can distinguish complex forms of thinking from binary or dichotomous thinking.²⁴ A leader who possesses complex forms of thinking is capable of grasping metaphors, ambiguities, and ambivalence and appreciates multiple perspectives. Leaders who think in binary terms see things in black and white, with no possibility of grays. There are only two options, right and wrong, and there are only two ideas, theirs and the other’s; usually, theirs is right, and the other’s wrong. Leaders who are usually capable of complex thinking may regress to thinking dichotomously when they are under severe stress or traumatized. President George W. Bush, in his address to Congress in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, said, “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”²⁵ In that situation, there was only “us” or enemies; there was no possibility of neutrality.

I propose that there is a form of thinking that is simpler than binary thinking, which I call “unitary thinking.” In this most basic form of thinking, there is only one idea, and the notion of the existence of contradiction or opposition to that idea is beyond comprehension. Leaders who are in a unitary-thinking state of mind are not simply dismissive of ideas different from their own; they cannot comprehend that there are any ideas other than what they had thought of themselves. Negotiating with such a leader, I imagine, would be impossible.

Collective Psychology of Trauma

How much we can apply our understanding about the mind of an individual to that of a collective may be a source of contention. A generation before William McDougall formulated the concept of the group mind, Gustave Le Bon, in his now famous study of the psychology of the masses, described how the characteristics of a collective are different and more than the sum of the constituting individual minds.²⁶ It is unfortunate that the psychology of large groups has popularly been associated with that of the mob. Social scientists prefer to focus on “quantifying” the individuals who make up a population and mapping out the interactions through social network analyses.²⁷

As highlighted earlier, many proponents of psychodynamic theories apply an understanding of the mind to their work with collectives, such as groups, communities, and societies. In their work, the idea of a group mind or singular consciousness is usually assumed without elaboration. But some have gone on to describe the “hidden” aspects of shared consciousness in terms of an unapparent web of relationships, such as S. H. Foulkes’s concept of matrix²⁸ or a wider notion of “unawares,” broadly referred to as the “social unconscious by Earl Hopper,”²⁹ or the sense of a shared unconscious “mental space” proposed by Rene Kaes³⁰ or, as I prefer, the unconscious aspects of a culture.

Four aspects of the impact of trauma on a collective are discussed in the following sections. Trauma in this instance is inevitably associated with shame and humiliation; it creates a collusive silence that is accompanied by an avoidance of the collective’s history relating to the trauma and anything else that might be linked to it; it creates a sense of stuckness much like that observable in individuals; and it causes regression as it manifests in a group.

Collective Shame and Humiliation

Hypersensitivity to shame and humiliation following an individual’s traumatic experience has been discussed. Signs suggestive of an enduring presence of shame include behaviors such as the avoidance of eye-contact and social withdrawal.

Hypersensitivity to shame and humiliation manifests itself collectively in diminished social gathering and group formation. Members of a group cannot demonstrate resourcefulness and confidence, even if they believe they are in possession of them. Those who are willing to speak publicly fear exposing their vulnerabilities and further humiliation. They have to overcome an unspoken collusion or group/peer pressure to remain hidden. They appear passive and isolated, at first glance, but if the burden of shame and humiliation is lifted, their collective strength can return quickly with surprising assertiveness.

I observed that traumatized communities, such as the Aboriginal communities in remote Central Australia, can experience shame collectively and behave predictably. They were reluctant to be seen and public gatherings were rare. Among the members of the communities, I witnessed an initial avoidance of eye contact with each other. Once shame was overcome with understanding, empathy, and respect, however, a mutuality of gaze returned. Thus, one of the first steps in any peace process that involves traumatized individuals and groups is to address the problem of shame, which often causes the humiliated parties to remain hidden in their self-imposed trenches.

A collective that has been shamed and humiliated is also more likely to elect a leader who possesses a narcissistic personality, whose personal agenda is always to be “great” and by extension to make them all “great again.” Meanwhile, the members of the collective escape their shame by basking in the reflected glory of their “great” leader.

Collusive Silence and Avoidance

The assumption that silence about a traumatic experience suggests healing or resolution is common but erroneous. That assumption has led to misunderstandings about the mental state of survivors of massive collective traumas, such as genocides. In my experience of communities of survivors of genocides in Melbourne, however, and according to studies of the Armenian, Jewish (Holocaust), and Cambodian genocides, avoidance of any links to the traumatic experience of a community continues for one or more generations after the event. Slowly, a small segment of the community begins to talk about what happened; but others collude to maintain silence about the subject.

One can imagine, therefore, the impediments that may arise in any peace process taking place in the aftermath of such massive trauma. The party that has suffered might be trying to avoid the risk of triggering past trauma, while the party that inflicted the atrocities might be trying to sidestep the subject too, to avoid the guilt and shame associated with what they have done. After some time has elapsed and some trust has been regained, the party that suffered might find the courage to bring up the painful subject, and the party that inflicted the traumatic injury might be encouraged to accept responsibility for their actions; this process of acknowledgment can form a richly meaningful part of a peace process.

The difficulties that come with such a process take on an added dimension if the trauma occurred in the context of a conflict or war. In this situation, both sides would have been traumatized; but the side that considers itself the victim of the other’s aggression might protest against any suggestion of equivalence in their respective traumatic experiences. Often, the aggressor is not allowed to bring into the peace process their own trauma. Their inability to process their trauma then hinders their ability to apprehend their sense of guilt and shame over what they have done. This inability to process trauma may in part explain Japan’s inability properly to take responsibility for the atrocities it committed during World War II. Even in Japan today, this subject remains largely unspeakable.³¹

Sense of Stuckness

The “paralysis” of a traumatized community and society is not as apparent as the stuckness that is experienced in a process of conflict resolution and peace negotiation. This stuckness is partly a symptom or a result of a broader paralysis of the respective traumatized political groups/communities/societies and their leadership. At least three causes of such paralysis can be identified. The predominant emotion in these situations is usually fear; this is often an unacknowledged emotion and its impact is greater than if it were openly expressed. One might think of a state of being “frozen with fear.” Also, a state of paralysis can be caused by a pervasive avoidance of an underlying encapsulated trauma, or it can result from regressive states of mind (which I discuss in the next section), in particular, the effect of the distortion or loss of the capacity to think.

One of its clearest examples of complex cultural trauma, which, as I have said, occurs when the ability of political groups/communities/societies (and their proxies) to process complex situations is severely compromised because their “collective thinking apparatus” has been distorted or destroyed, is the experience of colonization by First Nations people. Sometimes their collective thinking apparatus has been damaged so extensively that they

cannot articulate their own position or mount an argument against their colonizers; a pervasive sense of helplessness and paralysis sets in.

Colonizers not only impose their culture on the colonized but insist that theirs is and forever will be superior. Through the psychological phenomenon of “identifying with the aggressor,” the colonized consciously and unconsciously adopt the thinking and assumptions of their aggressor and continue to prioritize the perspectives of the colonizers over their own, long after the colonizers have left. They will try to overcome the trauma of being colonized by writing about their experience but often, unthinkingly, in the language of the colonizers. Their ability accurately to represent and remember traumatic experiences and therefore to find healing from them will remain compromised until they are able to reclaim their original culture or, if that has been lost or destroyed, to build new ones.

Colonized people who have suffered damage to their culture are unable to negotiate on equal terms with their colonizers. Their position is further compromised by their unconscious adoption of the idea that their culture is inferior. The colonizers will, of course, negotiate within their long-held assumption that their own culture is superior. The notion of “parity of esteem,” which might have been agreed on as a basis of negotiation, will easily be undermined by these unconscious cultural assumptions; for the colonized or, more strictly speaking, the previously colonized, such is the legacy of their cultural trauma.

Collective Regression

Loss of complex thinking capabilities and a tendency toward binary and unitary thinking, which characterize a regressed state of mind in an individual, have their parallel in the collective mind. Consider, for example, the parallel between extreme polarization of societies and binary, black-and-white thinking in individuals. Compare religious fundamentalism and political totalitarianism with the unitary states of mind where only one set of ideas is permitted. As my experience working with traumatized communities has revealed, these shifts in modes of thinking are among the early signs of collective regression.

As regression proceeds, a collective becomes more and more preoccupied with its boundary and identity. This increasing preoccupation is illustrated in Vamik Volkan’s successful use of psychodynamic theories relating to large groups in the context of international diplomacy. Through this lens, Volkan made astute observations on issues relating to national borders and identity and proposed interventions that resulted in good outcomes. Though I cannot do justice to his extensive work here, I can strongly recommend his book *Psychoanalysis, International Relations, and Diplomacy: A Sourcebook on Large-Group Psychology*. In another work, Volkan points out that leaders reawaken particular, chosen traumas that become a point of common identification by the masses to create large group/national identity. His examples include Slobodan Milosevic and Radovan Karadzic’s reactivation of the six-hundred-year-old humiliation of the Battle of Kosovo of 1389 to arouse Serbian nationalism during the Balkan wars in the 1990s and fuel vengeful atrocities against the Bosnian and Kosovar Muslims.³²

While efforts to secure boundaries and identity can be manipulated by leaders, sometimes with catastrophic outcomes, a failure to do so will lead to fragmentation of the collective. This phenomenon is most readily seen in the political environment. Initially, small groups will split off from the main political parties, and as the process of fragmentation proceeds, the large political groups will fragment further into smaller groups. A recent example occurred during the 2019 British general election, which took place in the context of Brexit.³³ A detailed network analysis by Josh Holder and his colleagues reveals how four political factions developed out of the usual two dominant parties in the lead-up to that election.³⁴

I have observed in severely traumatized communities that the degree of fragmentation becomes so severe that the people struggle to form groups. An example of fragmentation at the societal level was seen in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. At one level, it was a conflict between two sides, Protestant and Catholic. But factions developed within each of these sides, especially in their political and paramilitary domains, that led to multiple splits. Achieving consensus and taking collective action were extremely difficult under these circumstances. It was a remarkable feat that some form of peace was achieved in that situation after three decades of conflict. Interestingly, however, immediately after the cessation of violent conflict, in civil society, more than a thousand nongovernmental organizations and community groups were registered in a population of less than 1.5 million.

If regression in communities continues beyond fragmentation, devolution or implosion may take place. In individuals, this phenomenon can manifest in individuals in various forms of self-destruction, from limited self-sabotaging behavior to suicide. At a societal level, it may manifest as conflict between two polarized political parties that, at its worst, is civil war. The preoccupation for the collective as a whole is existential, and the fear is one of annihilation. Sometimes a leader might try to externalize this internal catastrophe toward an enemy in an action commonly known as “uniting against a common enemy.” Sometimes the enemy is created but more commonly, simply resurrected.³⁵

Entrenchment of Intractable Conflict

Intractable conflicts, as defined by Daniel Bar-Tal and Eran Halperin, are “very particular types of severe conflict that last for a long period of time, as parties involved in them can neither win nor are willing to compromise in order to reach their peaceful settlement.”³⁶ In the light of what I outlined earlier about the impact of trauma on peace processes, I propose that a conflict can become intractable not simply because neither side is “willing to compromise” but because one or both sides suffer from the effects of trauma. Thus, the leaders and their proxies on one or both sides may lack the necessary capacity to engage with a peace process, and traumatized leaders and their constituents may be caught up in a mutually restrictive and destructive relationship.

“Necessary capacity” would include the capacity to overcome any sense of shame that accompanies their traumatization; to regulate and contain strong emotions, such as anger and hatred; to grasp and think about complex situations; and to consider the other/enemy as a real entity in their own right and not just “an inconvenience or obstruction” that must be obliterated. The constituents of these leaders who lack the necessary capacity to engage in the peace process, as a collective, may also have a diminished capacity to engage in a peace process for the following reasons: (1) their overwhelming sense of shame (which accompanies trauma and is heightened by the humiliation of defeat in a conflict) may cause them to withdraw and disengage from social and political processes that could influence the thinking and behavior of their leaders; (2) their collusive avoidance of anything that might trigger memories of the conflict and its associated trauma may leave them with a sense of stuckness; and (3) fragmentation and disorganization within the collective may lead to a polarization of opinions and a resulting inability to reach a consensus.

The cycle of a mutually reinforcing relationship between traumatized communities and their leaders highlights the dynamic interactions between individual and collective psychology. In his study of leadership and groups during and after the Second World War, Bion found that group members with particular characteristics appoint a leader who they expect will fight to save them, while they take flight from all responsibility to solve their problems. These members, he notes, were somewhat immature. I would add here, in the context of our earlier discussion of trauma, that these members may be traumatized and regressed. These dependent

members elect leaders who are sufficiently grandiose in their estimation of themselves, who believe they can solve all their constituents' problems and save them from their predicament. They are often referred to as narcissistic leaders.

Narcissistic leaders rarely possess the personal qualities required for engagement in a peace process. They require continual affirmation to counter deep, unacknowledged insecurity; these leaders put their own interests ahead of those of their people and their country. Also, they are prone to regression, with its associated binary thinking; they are unable to grasp the complexities of situations beyond an oversimplification dominated by black-and-white thinking, where disagreement and conflict are governed by zero-sum thinking. They are hypersensitive to shame and humiliation with the associated tendency to react defensively, and unthinkingly, with violence. The possibility of a considered response is unlikely when the fragile narcissistic ego is injured by a traumatic experience and overwhelmed by humiliation.³⁷

Narcissistic leaders do, however, have an unspoken agreement—"a deal," as former US president Donald Trump would say—to protect and save the collective that appointed and supported them. Furthermore, these leaders also absolve their constituents of any responsibility for their problems, a move that will lead only to further regression by the people and greater dependency on their leaders. This cycle of absolution of responsibility followed by greater regression and dependency leads to an increasing sense of disempowerment and fear among the people and their need for someone powerful to protect them. When these leaders prove unable to provide the promised sense of safety, as usually occurs in a conflict or other catastrophe, their sense of grandiosity will inflate even further, sometimes to a delusional level, causing them to see themselves as saviors. Meanwhile their people regress even further, forming their own delusional belief that one day soon their savior will perform miracles or their problems will disappear. In brief, the greater the failures of the leaders, or the greater their problems, the more powerful they become in the eyes and minds of the people. Some might say that the people endow their leaders with power proportionate to that required by the situation, which sounds logical on the surface but is deeply delusional when taken to its conclusion.

At the core of this "deal"/unspoken agreement between narcissistic leaders and their people is an absence of reality testing. The inevitable discrepancy between what is believed within the bubble of distorted reality and what is really happening draws them further down the spiral of regression, further diminishing their capacity to think clearly. Thus, the cycle continues to such a point that it is impossible for the people to wake up to the reality of their situation.

Trapped in a cycle of dependency and a collusive denial of reality, these people and their leaders need someone to blame when they are increasingly confronted by the growing seriousness of the situation. They might either find scapegoats among themselves or create external enemies. From a psychoanalytic perspective, they are said to be unconsciously projecting the unwanted or bad aspects of themselves into either one of their own (the scapegoat) or an external object (the enemy). Thus, there is a need for an enemy. In this situation, too, there may be a need for a conflict to be intractable because of an unspoken fear that a genuine end of conflict, and the disappearance of the enemy, will lead to fragmentation and implosion, manifesting as intra-collective conflict. (Within a country, this is civil war.)

In this light, the aim of conflict resolution and peacebuilding may not be the complete end of conflict, or of the existence of the enemy, but some form of co-existence with the enemy and a mutually agreed-on yet contestable boundary between them, where tension prevails with sporadic eruptions of containable conflict. The situation between India and China along their Himalayan borders may serve such a purpose. The two countries seem to have an unspoken agreement that allows sporadic low-level conflict (only hand fighting and stone throwing permitted) to relieve the tension and thus serve the need to have an enemy.

Bar-tal points to the “unwillingness” of parties to compromise to reach a settlement in an intractable conflict. This apparent intransigence may be underpinned by a much greater concern: the loss of a much-needed enemy leading to the possibility of the mutual destruction of the leaders and their people and the implosive annihilation of their country.

Trauma-Informed Peace Process and the Role of Mediation

The role of mediators in helping to bring conflict to an end and build peace rests on the premise that there is such a thing as a third, independent party that can take a neutral stance toward the situation. Mediators certainly believe that there is such an entity. But for those in conflict, acceptance of the premise that there can be a third position rests on their ability to move beyond the kind of binary thinking that allows them to accept only two positions, theirs and their enemy’s. The common expression of this perspective “Either you are for us or you are against us” rules out the possibility of neutrality. Any sense of neutrality is held precariously in the traumatized mind of those in conflict; mistrust and suspicion are set to undermine this privileged position at any moment and end the role of the neutral mediator.

Mediators themselves might be traumatized but appear to be functioning well while their trauma remains encapsulated. They too might be avoiding potential triggers for their trauma. Their avoidance of certain areas might be misunderstood, arousing mistrust and suspicion, and their neutrality might be questioned. If mediators are triggered, and the trauma becomes exposed, they too can become overwhelmed and their capacity to think clearly and to support the regulation of their emotions during the peace process will be compromised. Such is the precariousness of the situation; the mediators need to move very carefully, mindful of the trauma and triggers of the negotiating parties but also of their own trauma.

If mediators can take into account the trauma each side has suffered from the conflict, and they are prepared for the possibility that either party might be “triggered” with an emotional eruption, they will have begun the task of creating the safe and supportive environment needed for the peace process. The next step in what may be referred to as a “trauma-informed peace process” is to address the problem of shame by encouraging a general, respectful attitude and facilitating empathetic understanding of each side’s experience of the conflict as it arises. It is important that mediators do not bring up past trauma or probe because doing so would risk triggering overwhelming past experiences. Inevitably some triggering of past trauma will occur during a peace process. And when it does, if the situation is handled carefully, it can offer the opportunity for real engagement of some depth. If, for example, one party’s vulnerabilities are exposed and the other party responds with empathy, this response can lead to an unexpected rapprochement.

Sometimes, perhaps often, a party may not feel sufficiently safe to be vulnerable and will manage their risk of being triggered by avoiding certain subjects or areas of negotiation. If they feel pushed into an area of discussion beyond what they feel is manageable, they might suddenly leave the negotiating table. The other party might misunderstand the situation and express offense. Mediators might wish to manage such a potentially delicate situation by preempting it, talking about “the possibility that painful memories of past events will be stirred up” and setting ground rules that will allow parties to take leave without suggesting the cessation of negotiations or that will formally register a cooling-off (or recovery) period of a day or two.

Throughout the process of negotiation, mediators would be mindful of the dynamics between the negotiators and other proxies of the leaders, as well as the relationship between the leaders and their people. In this era of social media and the twenty-four-hour news cycle, mediators can readily monitor these dynamics, taking into account the need to check their accuracy regularly; “fake news” can powerfully influence negotiations and can trigger the reactivation of past trauma. Mediators have the difficult task of containing the situation by

responding to its emotionality with a supportive stance while trying to encourage thinking about the accuracy and meaning of the news at hand.

The stress of these emotional triggers and eruptions put a “downward regressive pressure” on the minds of individuals and collectives alike. The availability of a safe and supportive environment, where the basic needs for physical safety, sustenance, and emotional support and mutuality of respect are met, will help buffet the tendency toward regression. It is worth remembering, however, that because regression is a mind’s way of protecting itself, it is not, in itself, a bad thing. The greater concern should be in attending to the causes of the stress and to take into account the associated limitations imposed by the regressive behaviors, such as changes in the mode of thinking from complex to binary to unitary.

Much more can be said about the mechanisms and practical operations of a “trauma-informed peace process”; regrettably, a more comprehensive treatment is beyond the scope of this article.

Notes

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³ David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

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⁷ Vamik Volkan has written extensively on large-group psychology and its application to politics, in particular, international diplomacy, for the past four decades: *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies: From Clinical Practice to International Relationships* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1988); *Blind Trust: Large Groups and Their Leaders at Times of Crisis and Terror* (Charlottesville, VA: Pitchstone, 2004); *Enemies on the Couch: A Psychopolitical Journey through War and Peace* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2013); *Psychoanalysis, International Relations, and Diplomacy: A Sourcebook on Large Group Psychology* (London: Karnac, 2014); *Large Group Psychology: Racism, Societal Divisions, Narcissistic Leaders and Who We Are Now* (Bicester, UK: Phoenix, 2020).

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¹¹ Wilfred R. Bion, *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers* (London: Tavistock, 1961).

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¹⁴ Jean-Martin Charcot (French neurologist, 1825–1893) and Pierre Janet (French psychologist, 1859–1947) developed the theory of trauma and dissociation.

¹⁵ Marc-Antoine Crocq and Louis Crocq, “From Shell Shock and War Neurosis to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A History of Psychotraumatology,” *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 2, no. 1 (2000): 47–55.

¹⁶ Sonja Andermahr, Introduction to *Decolonising Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism*, ed. Sonja Andermahr, special issue, *Humanities* 4 (2015): 500–505.

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²⁰ Ibid.

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²⁵ George W. Bush, “Text of Address to Joint Session of Congress on September 21, 2001,” *Guardian*, September 21, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/21/september11.usa13>.

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³⁷ Elsa F. Ronningstam, *Disorders of Narcissism* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1998).