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Trauma and Empathy in a Supervision Process in Guatemala

The article explores theoretically, and with the help of a case study, difficulties and possibilities of understanding complex trauma in supervision. Focusing on an experience in a post-conflict Guatemala, it is shown how empathy can be transformed into an in-depth understanding of underlying conflicts in a supervision group by using and applying countertransference images.

INTRODUCTION

Extensive psychoanalytical debates and scientific studies have shown that trauma neither ends nor vanishes with the ending of the traumatic experience. Khan (1963) as well as Keilson (1979) were among the first to point out that trauma has to be understood as a continuing, ongoing and cumulative process. Keilson's empirical evaluation of the therapies he provided to Jewish children in the Netherlands, who had survived the *Shoah*, clearly showed that trauma continued even after the atrocities had ended. He came to the conclusion that trauma is not the result of any single event, because it emerges and is reactivated and even aggravated in consecutive sequences. Unresolved it "will remain an insistent present" as Varvin (2003, p. 209) emphasized. Consequently, trauma might be transmitted from parents to children and even to grandchildren in a transgenerational process (Gampel, 2006; Kogan, 1995; Laub, 2000).

Clinical investigations and psychotherapeutic treatments of traumatized war veterans, victims of torture, survivors of genocide and terror (Becker, 2007; Bohleber, 2000; Herman, 1992) have reconfirmed these early findings of Khan and Keilson, leading to some alterations of the diagnostic formulation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Even though the formula of PTSD has assisted in unifying previously disparate fields of inquiry in trauma research, it soon became evident that PTSD fails to capture the protean sequelae of prolonged, repeated trauma (Herman, 1992; Silove, 1999). Despite the fact that an expanded diagnostic concept of "complex PTSD" (Herman, 1992) was eventually introduced, the psychopathological view of a traumatized individual remained to be the core focus of the concept. However, the validity of a concept based exclusively on individualized clinical health criteria, inevitably appears inadequate (Hopper, 2003). Therefore, psychoanalysts like Becker (1992), who worked with victims of torture in Chile and Martín-Baró (1990) from El Salvador, insist that it is impossible to understand trauma only in terms of the clinical diagnostic formulations of PTSD, because trauma often enough is the result of "man-made disaster" and, therefore, a social and political issue that affects society as a whole. That is the reason why they prefer to speak of "psychosocial trauma". Their

understanding of trauma reconfirms and amplifies Khan's cumulative and Keilson's sequential model of trauma, arguing that there is no *post*-trauma and PTSD is a completely default terminology.

This perspective is highly significant for psychosocial experts working in post-conflict societies, since they often have to deal with traumatized individuals, groups and populations that live in ongoing traumatizing situations. These experts cannot avoid being involved with people who suffer under the prolonged effects of psychosocial trauma, but their task does not include psychotherapeutic support. Nevertheless, they need profound knowledge about the psychosocial effects of massive trauma in order to deal with trauma in a professional, but nonclinical and nontherapeutic way. However, more important is—under these circumstances—supervision, which is not a "luxury" as Becker (2007, p.102) stated, but an essential health saving prerequisite. Otherwise, the risk of secondary trauma will increase, as Figley (1995) pointed out, eventually traumatizing helpers and experts themselves.
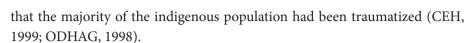
Taking these considerations into account, supervision turns out to be quite a challenge, because dealing with trauma in a supervisory group process could turn out to be a journey into the "agony of anxiety", as Ferenczi (1932/1988, p. 81) once called it, getting close to "feelings of death", as Becker (2007, p. 64) added.

With the help of a case study, I would like to explore now what kind of supervisory skills are needed to contain, to understand and to deal with traumatic situations arising in the course of a supervisory process. The central question is: how can supervision, as a nontherapeutic and nonclinical tool, deal with traumatic material in a group supervisory context?

First, let me briefly outline the political and social context of the workshop.

The social and political background

Just a few years after a devastating war had ended in Guatemala in 1996, the German government established a peace and reconciliation program to support the fragile peace building process in the country (Rohr, 2012). More than 200,000 people had died in a war that lasted more than 36 years, one million lived in refugee camps in Mexico and more than 600 massacres had been officially recognized (Rohr, 2009). Two truth commissions concluded

that the majority of the indigenous population had been traumatized (CEH, 1999; ODHAG, 1998).

Although the armed conflict had ended, violence continued. Lynching increased, criminal youth gangs terrorized the cities, and homicide of women reached one of the highest levels in all of Latin America (Amnesty International, 2013). Epidemic violence threatened the society's stability (SEPAZ, 2009).

This was the political frame for the group analytic supervision training, which had been initiated as part of the peace and reconciliation program and as a reaction to the psychosocial needs of professionals, working in difficult and often enough "traumatizing situations" (Rohr, 2013). Evaluations had shown that many psychosocial experts were engaged with extremely traumatized Mayan populations. These professionals were left alone with their agonizing experiences and with the extreme suffering of the people they worked with. A strong identification with the victims of war, combined with political commitment for those who had suffered most under the genocidal strategies of the army led to a high risk of burnout and symptoms of secondary traumatization. At that time, no supervision in the sense of counselling professionals existed in the country. Therefore, supervision workshops were organized in addition to the training, aiming to improve community mental health services, qualifying psychologists and social workers to offer professional counselling services to indigenous communities.

Offering workshops in such a vulnerable, social and political situation and in a culturally and ethnically diverse environment requires from a foreign supervisor a lot of cultural sensitivity, professional experience, skills and the disposition to venture into unknown transcultural spaces. However, what was most needed was "simply" empathy and a strong relational desire wanting to get into touch with this group of people.

A few thoughts about empathy are presented in the next section.

Psychoanalytical understanding of empathy

Looking into psychoanalytic literature, it is obvious that there has been a considerable amount of writing about empathy, starting with Freud, who acknowledged being somewhat ambivalent about this topic, because he could not deny its "mystic character" as he once wrote in a letter to Ferenczi (Grubrich-Simitis, 1986).

In relation to this ambivalence, Kakar (2008), an Indian psychoanalyst, points out that until today psychoanalysts seem to avoid the scientific challenge, which is connected with empathy, even though they work with it daily in their psychotherapeutic practices. He is convinced that this has to do with the very nature of empathy, because empathy, he reiterates, seems to function much more like a meditative practice than a scientifically proven technique. Freud seemed to be aware of this "meditative" nature of empathy, when he wrote:

> Experience soon showed that the attitude which the analytic physician could most advantageously adopt was to surrender himself to his own unconscious mental activity, in a state of evenly suspended attention, to avoid as far as possible reflection and the construction of conscious expectations, not to try to fix anything that he heard particularly in his memory, and by these means catch the drift of the patient's unconscious with his own unconscious. (1923/1975, pp. 238–239)

Freud's advice to the psychotherapist is, therefore, to liberate himself from all conscious thoughts and emotions in order to be able to receive messages from the unconscious of the patient.

Ogden speaks in this context about "day-dreaming experiences" (1997, p. 719), referring to the capacity to allow oneself to inconspicuous thoughts, feelings, fantasies, daydreams and body perception in the course of a psychotherapeutic process.

According to Kakar (2008, p. 117), many psychoanalysts today try to minimize the transcendental character of empathy, saying that the identification of the therapist with the patient is temporary, not regressive and under the self-control of the therapist and contains cognitive elements. There is obviously a lot of fear that empathy—and that is what Freud and Ogden are talking about—could only be a projection of the psychotherapist's feelings, an empathetic fantasy or a projective distortion. These definitions in combination with these objections and potential risks are, according to Kakar (2008, p. 118), responsible for the ambivalence found in the majority of scientific publications about empathy, because empathy seems to be connected too much to unconscious, mysterious psychological states of mind.

However, Bion (1967) reconfirmed Freud's explanation and described the ideal psychotherapist as someone who could give up, for the sake of the psychotherapeutic situation, memory, desire and understanding. He states

that psychotherapists should block off the noise of the material world and all sensuous perception in order to be able to receive the messages from the psychical world. According to Kakar (2008, p. 124), empathy only will grow when the functions of the self can be given up with greater ease and when fears to drown can be handled less defensively.

Neither Freud nor Bion mention the term "empathy" in these excerpts of their writings, even though both seem to explain how empathy develops. Yet in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud already had offered quite a unique definition of empathy: he referred to empathy as a process that "plays the largest part in our understanding of what is foreign to the self of other people" (Freud, 1921/1975, p. 108). But the translation of the original "*Einfühlung in das Ich-Fremde anderer Personen*" (Freud, 1921/1975, p. 119), has to read "to feel oneself into, what is alien to the self of other people" (Zepf & Hartmann, 2016, p. 742).

This definition seems extremely helpful when dealing with traumatizing contexts, because it helps to define the task we have to accomplish, to find access to that, what is alien to the self of other people. However, in a supervisory group process, it means to find access to that, what is alien to the self of the group or as Lorenzer (1986, p. 27) puts it: that what has been excluded from the social consensus.

The case study is presented in the next section.

Pedro's case

Pedro, the only man in a group of women, volunteered right in the beginning of the supervision process to present a case that still was disturbing him, as he said. The workshop participants seemed to be grateful that he volunteered to present a case and encouraged him to start. He started to talk.

Together with a colleague, he had travelled to an indigenous village, way in the north of the country, to organize an exhumation process of a mass grave. It took them more than five hours to get there. They had travelled there many times already, because it turned out to be a rather complicated process that developed after the exhumation had taken place. An indigenous family who had lost the father during the war and suspected him to be one of the bodies in this mass grave had fought for years to get the authorization for an exhumation of the grave. Finally, the forensic anthropologists started with the

exhumation. In the mass grave, they not only found the dead body of the father of this family, but the body of an uncle and many other dead bodies as well. This uncle's family lived in a refugee camp in Mexico. Since Pedro and his colleague were in charge of the exhumation, they decided to search for this family to inform them about the exhumation, asking, at the same time, where to bury the dead man. After a lot of research, they managed to find the only living daughter and travelled to visit her in Mexico. When they arrived, she told them that she wanted her dead father to be buried in Mexico, close to where she now lived. Returning with this message to the village in Guatemala, her aunt and cousins rejected this idea, arguing that it was them who had fought for the exhumation and that the body of the uncle should be buried in the village, where he had lived and died. Pedro and his colleague kept on travelling back and forth to Mexico, but the positions on both sides remained rigid and it seemed impossible to find a solution.

Weeks passed and Pedro and his colleague felt exhausted and hopeless. No matter what they tried, nothing seemed to work. Moreover, the judge in the nearby city urged them to organize the funeral, since the dead bodies had to be buried soon. The judge told them, if they would not be able to reconcile the families, the dead father of the young woman would be buried in a community mass grave. Pedro was desperate; he could not understand the daughter or her aunt and cousins. He and his colleague had tried everything, now they were at their wits' end. What to do now was his question to the supervision group.

After a short silence, one of the women in the supervision group asked him, somehow reproachfully, why he was engaged in such an emotionally difficult job, adding that she thought this was too much to bear. She continued by saying that, as a psychotherapist, she had learned that it is necessary to protect oneself and not to trespass one's boundaries. Pedro looked at her with a contemptuous smile, no, that was not his problem, he considered it his political duty to be engaged in this type of work and he knew, he added, how to take care of himself.

Anxieties connected to the case and strong defenses in the supervision group were obvious. This woman represented the fears and anxieties of the group, insisting that it was important to protect oneself. She obviously felt the urge to protect the group, maybe feeling insecure, not knowing if I, as a stranger, would be able to protect the group or if I might

push the group too far with this unknown method of supervision. However, underlying these anxieties, a conflict emerged between Pedro and this woman: Pedro was known to be a man of political ethics and of strong, left wing political believes. Whereas the woman obeyed the stereotype of the upper-class psychotherapist, keeping out of politics, making sure to protect herself by not getting involved or voicing her own political convictions. There was a lot of unspoken tension and aggression in the group. Shadows of the war had entered our supervisory space and the irreconcilable conflict with all its unresolved hatred hovered around, scaring everybody.

While listening attentively, associations were racing through my mind. I simply felt shocked listening to the story, not knowing if I really had understood everything. I had serious doubts if we would ever be able to understand this case. I noticed that resistance, fears, anxieties and aggressions were dominating the group and I felt overwhelmed with feelings of helplessness. Nevertheless, this uneasy countertransference sensation helped me to understand the underlying feelings of helplessness in the group. Then someone in the group dared to ask Pedro about more details and he talked about the exhumation and the difficult situation in the village. Again, I had the feeling not to be able to follow his words; I just could not imagine this village. It felt like a blurred picture, as if a photographer had trembled when taking the picture and even though I tried very hard to get a clearer image, I did not succeed. Feeling irritated and profoundly disturbed, I missed most of what was said. I felt as if I was on a journey into nowhere and I noticed my Spanish vanishing. I just could not think of anything to say anymore. Then someone asked again about the massacre and I heard Pedro talk: he described what had happened. Now I could follow his explanations, even though the images he described were simply horrible: the father of the daughter, who now lived as a refugee in Mexico, had been denounced to the army as a supporter of the *guerrilla*. The army invaded the village, captured him and many others to be tortured in front of the whole village. Every woman and child were forced to watch. After all the men had died, the guerrilla came and killed those who had denounced these men. Pedro finished by saying that dead bodies lined the streets, leading out of the village.

There was silence, pain and agony in the group. Then someone said, with a breaking voice, how shocking this was to hear and to imagine these atrocities. I think we all were caught in this village. I virtually could see the

dead bodies lying alongside the dusty streets, leading out of the village. It was an almost unbearable image. My strongest motion at that moment was to flee, just to get out and get away, far away and back home to Germany.

Then I suddenly thought, well, that is exactly what this girl's family did, flee and go to Mexico. Now I could see this girl coming to life in my mind, seeing her as a young indigenous girl standing in the crowd of the villagers, dressed in her brightly colored indigenous wear, forced to watch her father being tortured and seeing him die. I could barely imagine what she must have felt at that time: agony, excruciating pain and infinite suffering, but also shame, feeling so utterly helpless, not being able to save her father and being left alone with these feelings in the midst of this crowd of people, all of them paralyzed in utmost fear and terror. Nobody did anything to save her father, not her mother, not her relatives nor her neighbors.

Even though these images were almost unbearably painful, they helped me to think again. Now I understood why the daughter insisted on having her dead father buried in the place where she now lived. She simply wanted to have his dead body close to her as a late compensation and reparation to have left him alone in his agony. At least she wanted to offer him a burial in dignity and according to Mayan indigenous, religious rituals, to save his soul and to reconcile with her own feelings of shame and guilt.

I shared these thoughts with the group. Immediately the tension left Pedro's face and some of the participants leaned back in their chairs, relaxing a bit. Yes, now they could understand the young woman's desire and her unyielding wish to have her dead father buried close to her. That was her only possibility to find some peace with the past and to maybe soothe her pain and partially resolve her trauma. Still, what about her aunt and cousins back in the village in Guatemala? Well, we now could understand their situation as well: they thought that they had done everything to get the authorization for the exhumation and now felt resentful towards the girl's family, who had fled after the massacre, whereas they had stayed. Not allowing her to have the dead body of her father seemed like a late revenge for having left the village and having left them as well—with the dead bodies lining the streets and the horrifying political conflict that separated the village. On one side, the supporters of the guerrilla and, on the other side, the supporters of the army. Exactly the conflict that was mirrored in the beginning of the supervisory process in our group, here and now.

Now we could see Pedro's smile coming back: yes, now he would know how to talk to the daughter, to her aunt and her cousins and he felt sure that now he would be able to reach an agreement between the two families. Because now he understood the trauma that both parts of the family had experienced and he realized that the trauma was still alive, having been reactivated through the exhumation process. Although both parts of the family had lived through the same traumatizing event, they had found different ways to deal with it. But in both cases, their wounds had not healed, even many years after the war. Now Pedro would help them to reconcile. He felt great relief, he would be able to fulfil his mission and he would be able to bring some peace back to this village.

He thanked the group wholeheartedly and we all headed outside, very hungry and happy to have a break with lots of coffee and sweets.

Reconstructing the process of understanding

Reconstructing this painful process of understanding is not easy. Because to be emphatic in this case meant to go on a journey, a journey into unknown emotional spaces, which turned out to be an "agony of anxiety" and finally a confrontation with trauma and death. The process of understanding did start with floating attentiveness, as Freud (1923/1975) mentioned, and the material as well as the cognitive world vanished as Bion (1967) pointed out. My command of the Spanish language disappeared and a state of mind developed that could be compared with daydreaming experiences. Blurred images allowed no rational thought and intellectual and professional orientations, aims and directions simply disintegrated. Slowly floating turned into something Kakar (2008) called "drowning". All knowledge vanished; there was no desire anymore and certainly no understanding. In contrast to Kakar's insinuations, there were, however, at least temporarily, heavy regressive motions in this process of "drowning". Feelings of emptiness, as well as overwhelming feelings of helplessness, of impotency and of shame are, without any doubt, indications of regression. These were not easy feelings to bear. Somehow, unconsciously, it was possible to persevere, instead of fighting it off. Moreover, by bearing the feeling to almost drown it became possible to transcend boundaries, to find access to the unconscious and traumatizing material of the story and to finally

identify with this girl, standing there in the midst of the crowd, being forced to watch her father suffer and die. The identification with this girl was the turning point in the process of understanding. This emphatic understanding of the girl, just experiencing trauma, opened the door to an emotionally based understanding of the whole situation: to that, what was alien to her and her people, mirrored in our supervision group and in my countertransference.

This step from empathy to an emotionally based understanding cannot be described only in terms of transcending boundaries. Because what is missing here is the notion of conflict.

Focusing on conflict and looking at the above-described case from the perspective of conflict, it becomes immediately clear that the contents of the case dealt with heavy conflict. Following this thought, it can be stated that the core conflict was mirrored and experienced on five different levels throughout different stages of the casework.

- The initial scene in our supervisory workshop produced a clash of two radically opposed political positions within the group, thus opening up the stage for further conflicts. This initial conflict mirrored already the core of the conflict that later on was dominating the scenery.
- Conflicts shaped my countertransference reactions when it was not possible anymore to relate or to connect to the group, neither hearing nor understanding Pedro's words. There was silence and a complete breakdown of communication, producing an enormous amount of fear.
- Finally, there was this terrible conflict in the village, eventually uncovered during our casework. It turned out to be the central political and national conflict between the supporters of the army and the supporters of the guerrilla, ending up in mutual denunciations and the brutal killing of numerous indigenous men in the village.
- This past conflict found a continuation in the present conflict of the two families, not being able to agree upon the burial place of the dead father and uncle. Polarizations and fragmentations of the war, effects of a cumulative and sequential trauma were still alive, not allowing wounds to heal.

- At last, the conflict showed in the working relationship Pedro and his colleague had established in this village as an impossibility to fulfil their mission. They were not able to find a solution to reconcile these two families and bury the dead father and uncle. The tragedy and the resulting trauma were still alive.

In this case, trauma showed itself in the group as a basic and permanent state of conflict, producing symptoms and fears of "drowning" and finally a severe crisis. In this process, resistance as well as defense structures partially broke down, allowing flexibility and—most importantly—new ideas and new perspectives to grow. Only through crisis and the loss of knowledge and memory, an empathic understanding of that, what was alien in the self of the group, became possible.

CONCLUSIONS

Psychosocial experts working in traumatized societies have to realize that "trauma will not only persist as an insistent present memory of what happened, but will affect how the world is perceived, how relationships to others are experienced, and how the person relates to self and others" (Varvin, 2003, p. 209). This, of course, is true also for the work place, therefore traces of trauma might surface in any professional environment, as well as in supervisory casework, where it might least be expected.

Psychosocial experts, working in post-conflict societies, have to be well aware of this fact and have to be prepared to bear, understand and contain traumatic phenomena. This means foremost not to be afraid of conflicts and not to fight off feelings of helplessness. To acknowledge own vulnerabilities and to accept limitations helps to relate to the needs of traumatized populations.

If experts work in cross-cultural contexts, this adds some additional considerations and expectations to their portfolio. Needed is a thorough knowledge of history, politics and living conditions of the society you work in. You have to be aware of deeply embedded individual and societal prejudices and internalized cross-cultural bias that have shaped your perception and your action, unconsciously or unknowingly and that come to life when dealing with conflictive situations in any given environment. Quite

important is also to be aware of cultural transference and countertransference processes, f.e. as a white European person to be perceived and maybe even treated as a member of a society that once came as conquerors, colonizers, imperialists and oppressors. In summary, experts need extensive cross-cultural sensitivity to deal professionally with traumatized societies and populations (Rohr, 2014).

In this case, it was a huge support for Pedro to be able to rely on a self-reflective and cross culturally organized supervision group because psychosocial support in a group of colleagues is a health-saving experience and a possibility to contain the fear of drowning. This experience helped to regain trust in professional and personal capabilities and to feel reassured, not to be alone. Feeling and experiencing the relatedness to others— beyond one's own cultural boundaries—is decisive to bear and eventually to overcome fragmentations and polarizations, always connected with trauma.

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