Response to injury: Toward ethical construction of the other

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RESPONSE TO INJURY: TOWARD ETHICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER

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This article offers a compassionate exploration of the discourse of retaliation as the authors seek alternatives to cycles of violence. The article distinguishes monologic and dialogic discourse, and articulates the relationship between trauma and monologic discourse. Retaliation is seen as a monologic form of discourse, in contrast to the dialogic forms of discourse that are necessary for healing and reconciliation. The article proposes two paths to restoration of dialogue: emotional reconnection between victim and victimizer, and connection of victims with witnessing audiences. Restorative justice is offered as one vehicle for restoration of dialogue. The authors derive ethical principles from their exploration, principles that can apply to peacebuilding, psychotherapy, and participation in community.

The events, losses, and aftermath of September 11 raise important questions for psychotherapists as they ponder their contributions to peacebuilding. How do people come to terms with atrocity, terror, and trauma? How can wounds caused by division and conflict be healed? How can therapists begin to facilitate conversations that help people recover from collective trauma? How do societies,
communities, and individuals move on? Can therapists frame an ethical imperative to understand the discourses of retaliation while striving to restore human connection? Out of our struggles with these questions emerged a commitment to compassionate understanding of retaliatory discourse, particularly as it manifests in personal experience, with which we are most familiar as psychotherapists.

We have come to understand retaliatory discourse as a monologic mode of constructing experience that, while serving psychologically protective functions for victims of traumatic violence, interferes with the dialogic consciousness necessary for psychological and relational health and peaceful relations between groups. This distinction between monologic and dialogic modes of experience has helped us appreciate restorative justice as an alternative to retaliatory forms of punitive and retributive justice.

PERSONAL SOURCES OF COMPASSION

Recognizing September 11 as but a single moment in a global cycle of violence, we decided to explore retaliatory discourse that obstructs efforts for peace. Each of our lives has been strongly influenced by discourses of retaliation, and each of us has chosen an alternative response to injury.

Growing up in a postcolonial country, I, Hugo, struggled to understand the “benevolence” of Uganda’s colonial masters and their sanitized oppression. For my country, colonialism found other names that justified it. Uganda was not a “colony” of Britain; it was a “protectorate.” It is not surprising that when repressive regimes succeeded colonial imperialism, there was little incentive to resist those who claimed to be our protectors. Religion and strong cultural traditions of harmony and preservation of life grounded me in the need to build understanding. A member of the largest tribe in my country, I felt a sense of power that was checked by the helplessness I felt throughout postcolonial Uganda. This enabled me to understand the powerlessness embedded in retaliatory discourses. Perhaps even more pressing for me was the anger I intensely felt as I struggled to construct the other in those who oppressed my family. Although this anger gave me a way to deal with my pain, I could not live, and chose not to be, consumed by anger. The path through restorative justice became one way out I chose to embrace.

I, David, brought my mixed heritage of Protestant ministry and Marxism into youthful struggles against racism and colonialism. Although I subscribed to the retaliatory discourse of revolutionary justice, my identity as a white man kept me from completely objectifying the white supremacist enemy. Confronting my own replications of white domination and privilege planted in me the seed of compassion for my adversary. Spiritual development led me further away from belief in retaliation. Lessons from an espiritista started me on a path that led
me through Islamic mystical practice to living as a Jew. Painful identification with both sides in the bloody struggles in Palestine and Israel brought me to a wholehearted renunciation of retaliatory discourse.

**TRAUMA AND THE MONOLOGIC-DIALOGIC DISTINCTION**

The emerging discourses around the events of September 11 are embedded in trauma and its effects. Traumatic experience involves floods of intense negative emotion, cognitive confusion, perceived threats to the integrity of the self, loss of control, and experiences of unpredictability (Allen, 2001; Herman, 1997). In what follows, we make a distinction between monologic and dialogic discourses, and describe how shifting to monologic discourse can be a response to trauma. We propose the path of restorative justice as one way out of the monologic stance of retaliation.

We understand individual experience, thought, action, and language to originate in relationships (Vygotsky, 1934/1962). Mind emerges from the interaction of embodied human beings (Bakhtin, 1981; Siegel, 1999). No matter how “internal” human experience may seem, its form and process are inescapably interpersonal, relational, and social. Action and experience constantly traverse the psychological spaces within individuals and the relational spaces between them. The relationship between caregiver and infant, the developmental source of mind and action, is intrinsically a dialogue (Trevarthen & Hubley, 1978). As the child develops, he or she becomes capable of “inner” psychological dialogue with internal others (Bråten, 1988; Watkins, 1986).

**Dialogic Discourse**

In Finland, Seikkula (1993, 1995), drawing from sources including Bakhtin (1981), Bråten (1988), Vološinov (1929/1973), and Vygotsky (1934/1962), developed the “open dialogue” in work with families and networks. In the U.S., Penn and Frankfurt (1994) and Anderson (1997) developed similar dialogic approaches. Inger and Inger (Inger, 1993; Inger & Inger, 1994) and Fishbane (1998) offered dialogic approaches informed by Buber (1923/1970, 1947/1965). The Public Conversations Project (Becker, Chasin, Chasin, Herzig, & Roth, 1995) developed a dialogic approach to transcend the rigidity of polarized political/ideological debates. In dialogue, relational partners engage openly with each other, respond authentically to each other’s actions and utterances, and take responsibility for the impact on the other of one’s own actions and utterances. Each accepts and acknowledges the other’s agency and subjective experience. One strives to understand the other, including the other’s experience of oneself. Understanding involves maintaining collaborative, hopeful, rehumanizing, receptive, and inquiring stances toward the other. Emotion is as important as intel-
lect; every utterance embodies values grounded in emotions (Bakhtin, 1981). Meanings emerge in the space between actors. Words borrow meaning from their prior use by prior users, but make sense only in the listener’s current responses to the speaker. This creates an uncertainty that Bakhtin calls “unfinalizability”: Every answer awaits the listener’s response for its sense to emerge. The listener’s answering response in turn awaits an answering response from the speaker, and so on (Linell, 1998). The intrinsic unpredictability of dialogue supports an emergent, creative process.

Through the recursive functioning of the human nervous system (Maturana, 1978), the social, relational process of dialogue between persons becomes an internal dialogic consciousness, in which the individual constructs the self, the other, and their interaction. In Watkins’ (1986) rich description of internal dialogue with “imaginal others,” the extent to which inner life is dialogical depends on the complexity of the internalized other and on its autonomy in relation to the self.

**Monologic Discourse**

In monologic discourse, one privileged voice silences all others; “passivated” listeners (Bråten, 1988) lose their ability to respond. Monologic discourse manifests in a variety of forms. One dominant individual may demand and receive allegiance to his or her constructions. In “model monopoly” (Bråten, 1988), the group as a whole may impose a single view of reality, ignoring or preventing the emergence of alternative perspectives. Debates or arguments may be monological, despite the apparent airing of alternative points of view, if the participants are single-mindedly committed to defending and advancing their own points of view, attending to other voices solely with the intent of defeating them. Monologue can only consolidate its already-chosen position; it is incapable of creating new ideas or possibilities for action. Monologues have lost the vitality of collaborative construction; Volosˇinov (1929/1973) metaphorically characterizes monologic utterances as “monuments.” Experience becomes thin and lifeless as possibilities for creativity and collaboration disappear. Institutional processes of domination foster monologue in public conversation and in the psychological experiences of the oppressor and the oppressed (Memmi, 1965). It is difficult to maintain domination in the face of dialogue, which by its nature introduces novel, unpredictable ideas that threaten to subvert monolithic social control. There is some utility and attraction to monologic discourse; it offers predictability, certainty, and constancy as alternatives to the risks, unpredictability, and uncontrollability of unfinalizable dialogue.

Risk, unpredictability, and uncontrollability are particularly relevant to traumatic stress, which has profound impacts at neurological, intrapsychic, relational, and cultural levels. Herman (1997) observed that “traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control,
connection, and meaning” (p. 33). Allen (2001) cited lack of control and unpredictability as critical features of traumatic stress. Traumatized people have little tolerance for the unpredictability and unfinalizability of dialogic discourse. We believe that trauma can dispose its sufferers to the monologic discourse of retaliation.

RETALIATORY DISCOURSE AS MONOLOGIC DISCOURSE

We distinguish two forms of retaliatory discourse. Both are monologic in that the voice of the other is silenced. In one form, the self tries to annihilate or immobilize the other. There is no concern for the mental life of the other; the intent is to kill or disable the other, thus preventing the other from acting to further harm the self. In the second form, the self “mentalizes” the other, that is, imagines that the other has ideas, feelings, and intentions (Fonagy, 1991). The mental life of the other, however, is not dialogically independent. It is constructed as under control of the self, who strives to influence the other’s mind or heart. Thus, in an effort to control the other’s mind, the self uses punishment to induce the other to choose to refrain from aggression—the other is deterred, “taught a lesson.” The victim may seek to influence the heart of the offending other by creating pain. It is important that the other know the source and reason for the pain.

The devastating genocide of the Rwandan situation in 1994 shows the operation of a monologic discourse of retaliation. The population was decimated by about 11%. Most of the dead were the Tutsi ethnic minority at the hands of the Hutu ethnic majority, who identified the Tutsi minority as the embodiment of evil. As such, the Tutsi’s existence was inconceivable; the Hutu saw the need to annihilate the Tutsi as their utmost responsibility. How could the Hutu, who themselves had been victimized in the past by the Tutsi, be safe if they allowed the embodiment of evil to exist? The Hutu, acting from a monologic discourse, invisibilized the mental life of the Tutsi and construed them as the evil one. They took ownership of, and dismissed, the other’s subjectivity.

THE DILEMMA OF MONOLOGIC RESPONSE TO INJURY

We find compassion for human impulses to retaliation when we see them as efforts to repair shattered relationships among self, other, and community by immobilizing the offending other or imposing changes in the other’s heart and mind. Wounded and fearful, the person who has been injured cannot tolerate the uncertainty, unpredictability, and potential confusion of the dialogical position. Yet the predictability and certainty of the monologic position do not offer the security of confidence in human relationships. Laing (1959, 1969) poi-
gnantly evoked the painful experience of the person whose fear of engaging authentically with others creates disengagement that ultimately disintegrates the self. This is the dilemma of the person who responds to injury with retaliation. On the one hand, the person cannot risk an open position out of fear of disintegration from further attack. On the other, by clinging to monologic silencing and control of the other, the person loses the vitality of human connection necessary for coherence of self.

RESTORATION OF DIALOGUE BY EMOTIONAL CONNECTION BETWEEN VICTIM AND VICTIMIZER

The work of some therapists who are interested in dialogue suggests one possible way out of this dilemma. Trimble (2000) saw breakthrough into dialogue among members of highly polarized networks facilitated by collective expression of sorrow. In clinical illustrations of dialogue emerging from collaboration in “participant text,” Penn and Frankfurt (1994) described clients weeping as they read their own words directed to others from whom they had become (monologically) distant. It may be that shared expression of sorrow facilitates restoration of dialogical connection. We believe that this is so, and that the challenge is to create safe settings that provide sufficient security for renewed exploration of human dialogue.

In retaliation, the desire to hurt another in return for injury offers an illusion of satisfaction. In seeking the embrace of an earlier moment of pain, retaliation returns to the past. It embodies the language of reaction rather than action. We believe that the emerging practice of restorative justice offers an active present- and future-oriented means of restoring human connection between those who injure and those who injured them, thus healing the human community.

To recognize the injury a victim suffers is to recognize his or her dignity. Taking responsibility for perpetrating that injury restores the offender to the human community. In Gobodo-Madikizela’s (2002) exploration of the intersection of remorse and forgiveness, we find support for our own thesis that dialogue can be restored in shared expression of sorrow. In her role on South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Gobodo-Madikizela witnessed dramatic moments when an offender empathized with the suffering of the victim, thereby feeling the pain of remorse. Recognizing the pain of the offender’s remorse moved the victim to forgive: “Empathy is what enables us to recognize another’s pain, even in the midst of tragedy, because pain cannot be evil. Empathy deepens our humanity. Its absence, whether at a collective level or in interpersonal relationships, signals the separation of human beings from one another . . . ” (p. 20). These observations are consistent with the idea of dialogic discourse that values the other and seeks to honor the other’s subjectivity, restoring dignity to the humanity of the other. It provides a road to “humanization of the victim,”
“rehumanization of the perpetrator,” and offers voice to “the cry to rejoin the ranks of moral human beings” (pp. 25–27).

Restorative justice (Consedine, 1999; Rigby, 2001; Zehr, 1995) offers richer possibilities for healing human injuries than the more familiar traditions of retributive and distributive justice. Restorative justice vindicates the victim and restores community without punishing the offender. It emphasizes rebuilding or restoring the just order, which has been breached by the legal offense; it moves “from alienation and harshness to community and wholeness, from negativity and destructiveness to healing, forgiveness, and mercy” (Consedine, p. 10). Recognition of the injury done, support for the victim, and committed search for the truth offer important launch pads for restorative justice. Victim and offender share and acknowledge each other’s subjectivity. Support for the victim repairs and rebuilds fragmented relationships. Commitment to the search for the truth acknowledges a shared human bond, connecting people as they begin to understand, integrate, and create new meanings for themselves. Restorative justice is also reparative justice. Central to restorative justice is the concept of making whole. Several truth commissions have documented the experience of many victims who simply requested to be seen by their victimizers for who they are. As victims come to terms with their fragmentation and as offenders confront their own brokenness, the invitation to dialogue emerges.

Our ethical position as family therapists compels us to examine the kind of questions we ask. We need to move from questions that ask who the perpetrator is and how we can punish that person to questions that ask about who has been hurt and how can we facilitate that person’s healing. Our commitment to healing is an invitation for all involved, for the prevention of further harm, and for inclusion of victim and offender. In a word, it is about building and sustaining relationships. Such a view unfolds restorative justice into transformative justice, with opportunities to build more caring, more inclusive, more just communities. Our role is to offer opportunities where people and communities can dream a future with possibilities. Retaliation is a form of retributive justice that focuses on the self at the expense of the other, in conversations that preclude creative dreaming.

RESTORATION OF DIALOGUE BY WITNESSING

Violent circumstances do not always allow the self to construct an other. In Uganda under Amin’s regime, my (Hugo’s) family, among many others, was terrorized simply for our ethnicity. Our crime was one of belonging. We lived with stories of men and women pulled away from their loved ones to disappear with no accounting. The men who terrorized us differed little from the rest of the population, except for the guns that embodied their power over us. Although gun-toting men pervaded my world, the terror they unleashed veiled them from
our recognition. Denied the relief of identifying our villains, we lived in anger without relationship to a specific constructed other. The absence of an object for our anger created tremendous confusion in our lives. Our existence as participants in human relationships was challenged by the lack of a discernible path from monologic to dialogic consciousness. With death and survival depending on a nonspecific other, we struggled in an impasse out of which only story and restorying—telling stories to ourselves, our families, and members of our personal communities—could offer deliverance. In our desperate search to construct an other, we told stories of our pain to each other. In the telling and retelling of these stories, we found comfort and solace, creating witnesses of ourselves to ourselves and to each other. We reached beyond the simple dichotomy of victim and victimizer to find healing in dialogue with witnesses and audience (Weingarten, 2000). This fits with Weingarten’s analysis of the ways that witnessing can restore dialogue and heal trauma for individuals, families, communities, and even nations (Weingarten, in press).

IMPLICATIONS FOR MAKING AND BUILDING PEACE

Our exploration has led us to an ethical position on the construction of the other. However much we may feel compassion for monologic discourse as a refuge from the terror and confusion of trauma, we must search for a way out of monologic isolation into dialogic connection. Dialogue, whether between victim and oppressor or between victim or oppressor and witness, offers the possibility of healing reconciliation.

Our exploration offers a lens through which we can envision alternatives to retaliation in response to September 11. We see the acts of the terrorists as retaliation for generations of injuries by colonialism (which disproportionately subjugated the Muslim world) and its exploitive successors, neocolonialism and globalization. The terrorists sought to influence the hearts and minds of the monologically constructed Western other, causing pain and seeking to force the U.S. to decide to remove troops occupying the land of Islam’s holiest shrines. President Bush’s speech before the joint session of Congress, which set the stage for military action in Afghanistan, expressed explicit intent to change the minds of the monologically constructed “evil” terrorists and their national sponsors. Its emotional tone and the audience response embodied desire to make the aggressor feel pain and fear.

From our perspective, the way out of this retaliatory cycle requires that Westerners acknowledge and experience the pain caused by generations of colonialism, recognizing and taking responsibility for the material benefits that Western hegemony continues to afford them. The way out requires that those who have chosen terror experience remorseful appreciation of the pain they have caused
others, perhaps by drawing on ideas of restorative justice embodied in their religious traditions (Hadley, 2001).

The ethical position we have proposed applies as well in our daily lives. It provides a way of understanding couples we treat, who are locked in destructive monologic struggles to force each other into feelings and thoughts rather than open to the possibilities of creative change embodied in intersubjectivity (Benjamin, 1988). When we can support couples to empathize with each other’s sorrow and loss (Johnson & Whiffen, 1999), dialogue is restored. As parents, and as therapists for children and their families, we have an ethical position from which to approach the schoolyard bullying and interpersonal emotional terrorism that plant in children lifetime discourses of retaliation.

Our explorations through complex theory yield an empathic breakthrough that has the simplicity of core teachings from many religions: In your actions toward another, imagine yourself in the other’s position. You cannot heal your injuries alone; healing is impossible outside of relationships with others. The alternative is to continue in destructive cycles of retaliation and revenge, spiraling into greater and greater danger. The futility of monologic efforts to control the heart and mind of the other through violence and the threat of violence is nowhere more apparent than in the escalating cycles of revenge and retaliation in Israel and Palestine. Our exploration of relational psychology offers another perspective on the proposition that a world committed to the discourse of retaliation is headed for self-destruction: Given the interpenetration of psychological and social phenomena in construction of the other, we can understand the “Westerner” as a construct embodied in the terrorist, as the “evil one” is a construct embodied in the Westerner. In trying to destroy the other, we are literally destroying ourselves.

REFERENCES


Response to Injury


