Effects of Domestic Violence and/or Forced Migration on Psychosocial Developmental Systems

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This paper proposes an interdependency among three different Psycho-Social Developmental Models: Bronfenbrenner’s Nested or Ecological Systems, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, and Erikson’s Developmental Stages, and that, when activated, this link may trigger a psychosocial regression in the person escaping domestic violence and/or forced to migrate.

This proposition stems from a qualitative research project that I designed and developed in 2003. The purpose at that time was to explore the social and psychological effects of escaping domestic violence. The findings then suggested a possible regression in psychosocial development. Based on my present practice as a psychotherapist/counsellor at ASeTTS (Association of Services for Torture and Trauma Survivors) I propose that the outcome might also apply to asylum seekers, refugees and forced migrants.

This work invites the reader to participate in an exploratory journey to discover the proposed link of theories and the effects on a person, who at some point in time might have enjoyed emotional, financial, psychological and health stability, but has shed this stability as he/she escapes home and/or country due to violence. Before we approach the developmental theories, I would like you to write down in a piece of paper: 1) your name, your profession and position at work, 2) one thing you would like to be remembered for, 3) and one thing you would like to be loved for. Once you have done it, please add three more things: a) your favourite corner at home; b) your favourite place in your city, state, or country; and finally, c) a dream you would love to see realized. Now that you have written down these things read them to yourself aloud, then put them aside, while thinking, that possibly, just like you and I, every person who is forced by domestic violence or by persecution and war to migrate, once had a profession, a job, a name, family, friends, as well as reasons and actions which made them be loved and remembered; and that also they had places they enjoyed, hopes and dreams... but suddenly... violence destroyed or put them out of reach.

Let’s begin our journey by approaching the potential parallels between domestic violence, torture and war violence, so we may understand how they can render similar effects on a person’s emotional and psychological health.

The Parallels of Violence

Domestic violence is a state of war at home, sometimes subtle, sometimes evident. Like torture and war violence, domestic violence is: unpredictable, aggressive, intimidating, hostile, life threatening, frightening to the point of madness and the victim has no control over it.
The abuse committed at home, in war or by torture can present one or all of the following forms: social, economic or financial, as well as physical, psychological, emotional, sexual abuse. Abuse, no matter how it presents it will always produce in the victim: fear, anger, confusion, shame, sadness, isolation, guilt, grief, despair, doubt, silence, feelings of inferiority, and loss of identity.

For someone escaping domestic violence or forced to migrate, these feeling might be the only personal belongings and constant company along the journey “to safety”. Though “safety” can be an ambiguous term, since, for asylum seekers and refugees the acculturation process, in the new and “safe” country, may prove to be, at times, more challenging than the circumstances they have left behind, due to the lack of language, the shock of a culture which might be in opposition to their own traditions, morals and values; migrants might as well feel bombarded by racism, ostracized, desperately unable to communicate or find their way due to the lack of spoken and written language, and treated as second class citizens because they look different. Everything is set to continue the psychological destruction of an individual who is already highly vulnerable, as we may find exploring the proposed link among the following psycho-social theories.

**Linking Bronfenbrenner’s, Maslow’s and Erikson’s Developmental Models**

This proposed link will help us to better understand the journey of the person escaping violence, so we will begin with:

**Bronfenbrenner’s Nested Systems & Personal Convoy**

![Diagram of Bronfenbrenner’s Nested Systems & Personal Convoy]

The Nested or Ecological theories are based on the idea that individuals are not isolated neither shaped exclusively by nature or nurture but pervasively influenced by their environment. For the purpose of this study Kahn’s & Antonucci’s *Personal Convoy* has been merged with Bronfenbrenner’s *Nested Systems*.

Bronfenbrenner proposes 4 concentric circles or levels within which exist systems that influence not only each other but at the same time other levels and each individual in them as well.

In the first circle (major circle – from the exterior) or *Macro Level* we find those systems on a larger scale which determine globally, regionally, or nationally: ideologies, social structures, economy, fashions and trends, and sometimes even who is friend or foe.

In the second concentric circle we find the *Exo Level*, in this place are those systems that directly influence the Micro, Meso, and Personal Convoy levels, e.g. within the Australian context: Department of Immigration and Border Protection DIBP, Department of Human Services DHS, Centrelink, Department of Health, Justice System, Banks, etc.

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4. Idem
Next is the Meso Level, where those systems are closely linked to the person’s everyday life and environment exist e.g.: schools, hospitals, church, Centrelink local office, shops and services, entertainment, familiar streets, buildings, roads, etc.

Next is Micro Level where we find closer and more face to face connections: relatives, friends, neighbours, GP, minister/priest/iman, colleagues, workmates, kid’s teachers, familiar faces and acquaintances.

For the purpose of this study we have added, as the most inner and personal level, Kahn’s and Antonucci’s “Personal Convoy”.

Finally, the smallest and most intimate level, the Personal Convoy, as the concentric nucleus of the nested systems, where the person resides and shares life with partner, children, siblings, parents, best mate.

Imaging for a moment, that you have to run away from home because your partner, after constant bashings, has decided to kill you; or that war has destroyed your home and your city, and/or that you have been tortured and persecuted, hence you have to find a way for you and you children to go into hiding, escape, and/or migrate to a women’s refuge, a refugee camp or even another country, ant that you will have to do this journey walking, by bus, boat, or plane. What will happen to the nested levels and the systems you were part of? To the places you love? To the faces you used to see on your way to work? To the people you care for? To your job, house, car, etc. Well, most likely they will be all gone and along with them your –Personal Convoy, Micro & Meso Levels-, leaving you in a vacuum of cold and impersonal institutions at the Exo Level if your are able to reach a “safe” place.

Eventually, as the person begins to settle, let’s say in Australia, the Meso, Micro and Personal Convoy will be replaced by one new Meso level made of agencies and services (Centrelink office, Counselling services, schools, women’s refuge, refugee camp, Red Cross office, Police station, GP, Migration office, etc) which might fill up some but not all of the person’s psychosocial needs. Maslow’s pyramid of needs might help us understand this.

**Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs**

- Self-Actualization
- Self-Esteem
- Love & Belonging
- Safety & Security
- Physiological Needs

Maslow’s Human Motivation Theory proposes 5 different levels of needs which must be satisfied, one after the other, in order to develop socially and psychologically.

**These needs are:**

1. *At the base of the pyramid: the basic PHYSIOLOGICAL: Breathing, food, water, sleep, homeostasis, bodily functions.*

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5 Idem
6 Idem
8 Maslow, A. H. (1943) *A Theory of Human Motivation,* in *Psychological Review,* 50, 370-396
2. Once these are satisfied the next layer is **SAFETY & SECURITY**, entailing a safe environment, employment, resources, morality, family, health, property\(^9\).

3. Once we are safe and secure, we will need to feel **LOVE/BELONGING**, including: friendships, family, love and intimacy\(^10\).

4. The fulfilment of the prior needs will trigger our need for **ESTEEM**: self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect of others, respect from others\(^11\).

5. Once all the levels have been filled, the person will be ready **SELF ACTUALIZATION**, which involves internal growth through the development of our true potential, to achieve high levels of ethics and morals, adaptability, understanding, compassion, generosity, increased creativity, spontaneity integrity, skills in problem solving, empathy, lack of prejudice and judgemental attitudes, as an acceptance of facts. Maslow, mentions Jesus Christ as the best example of a self-actualized individual. People who achieve this level also show very low to non levels of depression and anxiety and a true and deep enjoyment of life as it is. This level involves a peeling-off ego needs and, with it, the ability to compromise with self and others\(^12\).

I invite you to think of the people and things in your own Nested Systems which help you satisfy the needs in your Pyramid. Who in your Personal Convoy contribute to make you feel safe, loved, esteem. How does a job or a Centrelink payment help you fill your physiological needs like shelter, food, clothes, etc.? How does your job, colleagues, friends, and even enemies help you to feel esteem and self-esteem? And what will happen to your Pyramid if your Personal Convoy, Micro and Meso Levels disappear?

Yes, chances are your Pyramid of Needs will be depleted thus impacting your financial, social, emotional and psychological stability and personal development, as Erikson’s Developmental Stages model will help us understand.

**Erikson’s Developmental and Psychosocial Stages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage &amp; Goal</th>
<th>Crisis</th>
<th>Related Events</th>
<th>Existential Q</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infancy</td>
<td>Basic Trust Vs Mistrust</td>
<td>Feeding, Nurturing Safe &amp; Caring Environment</td>
<td>Can I trust the World?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Childhood</td>
<td>Autonomy Vs Shame &amp; Doubt</td>
<td>Toilet Training, Clothing &amp; Feeding Safe &amp; Known Environment</td>
<td>Is it OK to be Me?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-School</td>
<td>Initiative Vs Guilt</td>
<td>Exploration of the World</td>
<td>Is it OK for me to do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Age</td>
<td>Industry Vs Inferiority</td>
<td>School – Sports Games</td>
<td>Can I make it in the World?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescence</td>
<td>Identity Vs Role Confusion</td>
<td>Social Relationships</td>
<td>Who am I? What can I be?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Adulthood</td>
<td>Intimacy Vs Isolation</td>
<td>Love Relationships</td>
<td>Can I love? Can I be loved?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^9\) Maslow, A. H., (1943)

\(^10\) Idem

\(^11\) Idem

\(^12\) Idem

\(^13\) Idem
Erikson proposes 8 stages of human development: INFANCY, EARLY CHILDHOOD, PRE-SCHOOL, SCHOOL, ADOLESCENCE, YOUNG ADULTHOOD, MIDDLE ADULTHOOD, AND MATURITY\textsuperscript{14}.

Each stage challenged by a Crisis and an Existential Question:

First stage, INFANCY, the Crisis is between Trust Vs Mistrust. A positive answer to the Existential Question: “Can I trust the world?” will lead the infant to TRUST\textsuperscript{15}.

Second, EARLY CHILDHOOD, the Crisis is to develop Autonomy Vs Shame & Doubt. A positive answer to: “Is it ok to be me?” will lead the toddler into AUTONOMY\textsuperscript{16}.

Third stage, PRE-SCHOOL, the Crisis is to gain Initiative against feeling Guilt. A positive answer to: “Is it ok for me to do?” will lead the young child into INITIATIVE\textsuperscript{17}.

Fourth, SCHOOL AGE, the Crisis will be Industry Vs Inferiority. A positive answer to: “Can I make it in the world?” will lead the child into INDUSTRY\textsuperscript{18}.

Fifth stage, ADOLESCENCE, the Crisis will be to find Identity Vs Role Confusion. A positive answer to “Who am I?” and “What can I be?” will help the adolescent find his/her IDENTITY, and establish solid friendships\textsuperscript{19}.

Sixth stage, YOUNG ADULTHOOD, the Crisis will be Intimacy Vs Isolation, especially within the frame of love relationships. Therefore a positive answer to: “Can I love and be loved?” will lead the young adult to INTIMACY\textsuperscript{20}.

Seventh, MIDDLE ADULTHOOD, the Crisis, Generativity Vs Stagnation. A positive answer to: “Can I make my life count?” will lead to GENERATIVITY\textsuperscript{21}.

Finally, Eighth stage, MATURITY, the Crisis will involve a recapitulation of life to establish Ego identity Vs Despair. A positive answer to the Existential Q: “Is it OK to have been me?” will allow the person to integrate his/her ego\textsuperscript{22}.

Unfortunately, for the victim of DV or the survivor of torture and trauma, things can be different. The findings of this research and practice suggest a regression in the Psychosocial Stages derived

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Middle Adulthood & Generativity Vs Stagnation & Work & Parenthood & Can I make my life count? \\
\hline (40-65 Yrs old) & & & & \\
\hline Maturity & Ego Integrity Vs Despair & Reflection on Own Life & & Is it OK to have been me? \\
\hline (65 to death) & & & & \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
from the fragmentation of the Nested Systems and depletion of the Pyramid of Needs. Let me give you an example from my counselling caseload.

**Case Analysis**

An Iraqi Muslim man, in his middle 60’s, elegant, attractive, well educated, with lots of family, friends and business relationships, wealthy, respected, and successful in his country. Who, due to war, torture, and losing everything, is forced to relocate in Australia. Normally, he would be on the last stage ... MATURITY, reflecting on life towards Ego Integration.

However, trauma, severe PTSD and emotional instability instead of helping Ego integration, may potentially cause personality disintegration through a regression towards earlier stages of psychosocial development.

For our 65 y.o. Iraqi man, the crisis to solve is:

**EGO INTEGRITY Vs DESPAIR**, and the task is to reflect on his life, however, if he does:

- Reflection on his previous life may generate grief and loss.
- Reflection on his present may generate anxiety and depression.
- Reflection on his future may generate hopelessness and fear.

Falling into DESPAIR, he will regress to:

**GENERATIVITY Vs STAGNATION**, where the task is to produce, but, in Australia, he has

- No job, nothing to do day after day.
- He is no longer head of family, clan, or tribe. Not a provider.
- No recognition of skills, values, qualities, life and professional experience, abilities, education, and/or factual knowledge.
- Therefore, his productivity, activity and generativity become paralyzed.

Falling into STAGNATION he’ll regress to:

**INTIMACY Vs ISOLATION**, where the task is to love and be loved

But how?

- If he might have lost spouse, children or close family members.
- Marriage and family are threatened by a clash of values, morals, and traditions.
- Ethical & religious beliefs are questioned by a secular & sexualized environment.
- His traditions, beliefs, self-value, professional life, social and family structures challenged by racism, feminism, ignorance, consumerism, and individualism.
- Plus the lack of community & lack of belonging

He’ll fall into ISOLATION, regressing to:

**IDENTITY Vs ROLE CONFUSION**, where the client asks himself: WHO AND WHAT AM I?

- How can I guide, protect, bring up my children?
- How can I continue to be a good husband/father/provider?
- A clash of values, morals, ethics and traditions bring loss of social and family roles
- Children become carers and interpreters of language & culture for parents
- Parents become helpless, weak and ignorant in their children’s eyes
- Individual Centrelink payments will generate conflict, division and role alterations

This ROLE CONFUSION, will regress the person to:

**INDUSTRY Vs INFERIORITY**, where the Question is CAN I MAKE IT IN THE WORLD?

But how? If he has
• No skills or education recognition.
• Low capacity to concentrate and learn due to PTSD
• Different written & spoken language, which even when highly educated make him illiterate

Putting him in a position of **INFERIORITY**, he will regress to:

**INITIATIVE Vs GUILT**, where the Q is **IS IT OK FOR ME TO DO?**
And, so, he asks himself?
• How can I do this or that?
• How can I help myself, my family?
• Were we better in our country?
• Why did I come to a place where I cannot understand: language, culture, system?

So, he’ll feel **GUILTY**, regressing to:

**AUTONOMY Vs SHAME & DOUBT**
Where the Question is: **IS IT OK TO BE ME?** But how ok is to be in:
• Financial hardship
• Highly dependent on others/strangers.
• With no decision making,
• Illiterate, and
• No freedom to earn a living.

Not free to be who and what he is, he falls into **SHAME & DOUBT**, regressing to:

**TRUST Vs MISTRUST**, where the Q is: **CAN I TRUST THE WORLD?**
Considering that the client is coming from a war torn country and has lost everything,
• Including, first and foremost, his personal identity as a productive man in society
• With little to no Personal Convoy, Micro and Meso levels and a depleted Pyramid of Needs
• Within a new and unknown country full of new faces/new features
• An environment which can be frightening, racist, and hostile
• An alien culture & an alien language (spoken and written)
• In a world where he cannot even trust his own skills & abilities …
• How can he trust the world?

And here is where we find the client, with life & identity shattered, emotionally and psychologically exhausted, and vulnerable & fragile as an infant.

By linking the above psychosocial systems we have seen how the disappearance of 3 Nested Systems levels can deplete the Pyramid of Needs, and this in turn create a psychosocial regression on Erikson’s Developmental Stages that will impact the social and psychological stability of the survivor of violence.

In conclusion, whether victim of DV and/or forced migration, the person goes through a highly destructive psycho-social path which will affect his/her identity, personality and life as a whole. Thus inviting a gamut of complex issues: from social and health problems, mental and emotional instability, to substance abuse, violence, and suicide.

We, as agencies and services, are likely to become a part of the life line which may help the client heal and rebuild his/her life in Australia. It is then our privilege and responsibility to give the best we can.

**Bibliography & References**


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