
*Breaking the Cycle of Genocidal Violence:
Healing and Reconciliation*

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**THE EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE
ON GROUPS AND THEIR MEMBERS**

Groups of people who have been victims of intense persecution, violence, mass killings, and genocide are deeply affected. This is true, of course, of individual survivors of mass killings or genocides, who were in camps or in territories where the violence occurred and who were personally targeted as victims. But it is also true of members of the victim group who were not in direct danger. They are also deeply affected by the persecution and the attempt to eliminate all or part of their group.

For most people, individual identity is deeply rooted in their group identity (Bar-Tal & Staub, 1997; Staub, 1997a), especially in the case of racial, ethnic, and to some extent religious groups, when membership in the group is not a matter of choice. The deaths of many others belonging to the group, the knowledge that, except for circumstances (often accidental ones like geography), one would have been killed, and the effects of the genocide on the whole group have deep impact on individuals, ranging from survivor guilt, to devaluation of oneself and one's group, to insecurity and the perception of the world as hostile.

Past victimization affects people's assumptions about the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). It deeply frustrates basic human needs like the need for security, for a positive identity, for a sense of effectiveness and control, for positive connections to others, and for a usable, meaningful comprehension of reality, including one's own place and role in the world (Staub, 1989, 1996b). It creates schemas or beliefs about what the world is like and what other people are like that make the constructive fulfillment of these needs more difficult. These include a negative view of human beings, of the world, and of one's ability to protect oneself and fulfill important goals in life (Staub, 1989).

This is a greatly expanded version of an article in the *Journal of Personal and Interpersonal Loss* (Staub, 1996a). The original article focused only on healing. Here, healing, reconciliation, and their relationship are discussed.

For these reasons, members of a victim group have diminished capacity for leading satisfying, happy lives. In addition, a group that was the victim of violence has an increased potential for violence. The victims' intense insecurity in the world diminishes their capacity to consider others' perspective or needs, especially at a time of threat to the self. The capacity of groups of people to see their own role in hostile relations with other groups is limited even under the best circumstances and will be diminished by past victimization. People in the group may come to believe that violence is necessary to protect themselves and will respond with violence to conflict, threat, or hostility.

Victimization can also be part of a history that creates an "ideology of antagonism" (Staub, 1989; 1997b). This concept refers to a view of the other group as the enemy, bent on damaging or destroying one's own group, and a view or conception of one's group as an enemy of the other. Such ideologies are usually the result of a history of mutual hostility and violence. But in line with the limited perspective taken by groups of people already noted, even when harming has been mutual and a victimized group has also victimized the other, groups and their individual members tend to focus on their own pain. They rarely take in the pain of the other or consider their own responsibility for it.

HEALING FROM VIOLENCE AGAINST ONE'S GROUP

Healing deep-seated antagonism or changing ideologies of antagonism through various types of interactive conflict resolution procedures (Volkan, 1988; Rouhana & Kelman, 1994) can contribute to healing the self as well. In one such procedure, often referred to as a dialogue group, a few members of each group are brought together. People who are willing to enter such a situation usually feel less hostility or realize the destructive impact of the history of mutual violence on their own group. Members of each group can describe the pain and suffering of their group at the hands of the other. They can grieve for themselves in the company of the other, and as they open up to the pain of the other, they can begin to grieve for the other as well. Members of each group can acknowledge the role of their own group in harming the other. Mutual acknowledgment of responsibility can lead to mutual forgiving (Volkan, 1988).

Healing from trauma, which reduces pain, enables people to live constructive lives, and reduces the likelihood of violence by victims and thus a continuing cycle of violence, has several requirements. First, it is important for the world outside the group to acknowledge the group's suffering and to show caring and empathy. In the type of dialogue group I just described, when the process happens as planned, each group acknowledges the pain and suffering of the other and shows empathy.

In the case of the Holocaust, the world's acknowledgment of the victims' suffering has helped with the difficult process of healing. The absence of this acknowledgment by much of the world of the genocide of the Armenians has interfered with healing by Armenians. Turkey has denied that the genocide occurred. Turkish historians described the genocide as consisting mainly of the evacuation of Armenians from the war zone in World War I, where they lived, which was

necessary because of Armenian hostility and rebellions that interfered with the war effort. In the course of this, some people died. Other nations, partly due to the difficulty individuals and nations have in taking in and responding to others' suffering, partly due to diplomatic efforts by Turkey, also have not acknowledged that the genocide has occurred (Smith, 1986).

Support and affirmation by the world can contribute to processes within the group that help members to grieve and to feel empathy with themselves. This is another important condition for healing. This, as well as psychological education, can help victims overcome the self-devaluation that is a natural result of victimization. Self-devaluation may be unarticulated, and outside conscious awareness. But victims often feel that something must be wrong with them or they would not have been treated so cruelly and violently. Self-devaluation is partly due to just-world thinking (Lerner, 1980), the belief that the world is a just place and therefore people who suffer must deserve their suffering, due either to their actions or to their character.

The behavior of bystander nations—both their punishment of perpetrators and their guarantees of active future response—can help victims feel innocent. It also has the potential of creating a feeling of security, based on confidence that the group will be protected and victimization will not be repeated. Unfortunately, bystander nations usually do not do what is required for this.

Tribunals and truth commissions have an important role. They accomplish many things. First, they clearly communicate to the victims that the world considers what was done to them as wrong, immoral, and unacceptable by the community of nations. They tell the victims that what was done to them was not their fault. The punishment of perpetrators can enhance the victims' feelings of security and satisfy, to some degree, their need for justice. It can lead victims to feel connected to, rather than isolated from, the rest of the world.

But truth commissions and tribunals also have another important function. Most members of perpetrator groups tend to feel innocent. Direct perpetrators, people involved in supporting roles, and the rest of the group, the bystanders, all tend to see the actions of their group as justified. They see it either as self-defense or as a way of dealing with a group that stood in the way of important, legitimate goals, possibly embodied in a "higher" ideological vision like communism, Nazism, or nationalism.

This was also evident to me as a host of a forum on "Healing and Reconciliation," which took place as part of a New York Times Internet "conference" called "Bosnia: Uncertain Path to Peace," a month-long series of forums in June and July 1996. Many members of the ethnic groups in Bosnia, mostly living now in the U.S., entered into the discussion. All of them pointed fingers at the other groups and claimed they were at fault. They were not able and willing to look at the role and responsibility of their own group, whether historical or current.

The public examination of what has happened can bring home to members of perpetrator groups what actually happened and the horrors of their groups' actions. Gunther Grass, the great German author who has written much about the culpability of Germans, was profoundly affected when as a young man the American troops marched him, together with other local Germans, through one of the concentrations camps.

It may be reasonable to regard the important process of public examination of the Hitler regime and the Holocaust in the Nuremberg trials as laying the groundwork for the democratic Germany of today. In the course of the Nuremberg trials the history and actions of Germany during the Hitler era were laid bare in great detail, using to a large extent materials created by the Nazis and the German bureaucracy. Without this, it is likely that the Germans, once again, would have felt like victims.

The way the perpetrator group behaves can help or hinder healing by victims. Truth commissions and tribunals, when they are conducted in a serious and lawful manner, can affect the awareness and consciousness of the perpetrators as well as their attitudes towards their actions and towards the victims. They make compensatory actions by the perpetrator group, like assuming responsibility, expressions of guilt and regret, and monetary compensation, more likely. A period of initial healing is probably required before victims can take in such compensatory actions, rather than reject them together with everything that has to do with the perpetrators. But once such actions are taken in and acquire psychological meaning, they can contribute to healing.

SELF-HEALING

In the absence of support, concern, and empathy by much of the world, victims may remain deeply affected. This has been true, for example, of the Armenians. After the collapse of the Soviet Union they created a nation, which affirms their identity. They built a genocide museum. At the opening of the museum in April 1995, hundreds of thousands of people stood in line, waiting to go through the museum, with many children. One of the major political issues in Armenia, and one of the major psychological issues for the people is the need for and demand of Turkey's acknowledgment that the genocide has occurred.

While the role of the outside world is very important for healing victim groups, the Armenian experience points to the need for internal healing. Victimized groups always have to attend to their own healing. But if the group does not focus on self-healing and affirmation and support from others is not forthcoming, then the perpetrators and bystander nations, who by their passivity have often contributed to the evolution of mass killing or genocide against the group in the first place (Staub, 1989), continue to victimize the group.

Shared remembering, building a cohesive internal community, and rituals which bring the suffering to light and in which grief and empathy with oneself and others in the group can be felt and expressed are important elements in group healing. Calling on potentially responsive allies to help with this process seems valuable. Ideally, this process, and the strength gained through it, will also lead to the creation of a constructive vision of the future.

Constructive visions are important. A victim group needs both to engage with the past, in the form of memorials, rituals, grieving, and empathy with themselves, and to look at and move towards the future. Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, and Ardo (1992) describe the Cambodians as constructively engaged with building a positive future. They believe that this is made possible by a characteristic of

Cambodian culture, holding as a basic attitude towards life, a deeply held belief and vision, that the best revenge is creating a good life. A constructive vision of the future that is inclusive, that embraces all segments of society and points to goals around which people can unite, can fulfill basic needs and bring practical fruits.

The socialization of children in the group must also attend to healing the trauma, which is inevitably transmitted to children. The psychological impact on adults that I briefly noted, their pain, feelings of insecurity, mistrust, and other negative views of people and the world, impact children. This impact can be enhanced either by silence—adults not talking about what happened to them as individuals and to the group as a whole—or by incessant focus on the past trauma. Children need to learn about the past, partly to be able to make sense of their own experience of the adults around them. Their awareness of what has happened, of how their parents have been impacted, and how they themselves have been impacted in turn, is part of a process of becoming free. It can help children lead untraumatized lives.

The developmental level of children is essential to consider in choosing ways to expose them to this history and knowledge. Exposing young children to images of horror, especially involving people in their own group, can unnecessarily traumatize them. Sensitivity to the age and personality of children is essential.

RECONCILIATION

So far, a connection between healing and reconciliation has been implicit, and at times explicit, as in the discussion of dialogue groups and of truth commissions and tribunals. This connection is especially significant when the victim group and the perpetrator group, or two groups that have mutually victimized each other, live together. When this is the case, as in Bosnia and Rwanda, genuine healing cannot take place without reconciliation. While circumstances can be created that make the victims somewhat safe, a feeling of safety must come from a combination of institutional arrangements and trust that develops through reconciliation. The danger of renewed victimization at the hands of former perpetrators interferes with healing. On the other hand, it is difficult for reconciliation to begin, when the violence is very recent, without some prior healing.

Some of the requirements for healing are also preconditions for reconciliation. The acknowledgment of responsibility by perpetrators, and mutual acknowledgment when there was a history of reciprocal harmdoing, is important. Expressions of regret and sorrow, grieving with the victims, and participation by members of the perpetrator group in shared memorials (when the victims allow this) make reconciliation more possible.

This exploration of the past is essential. It makes it possible to move beyond the past. The events in the former Yugoslavia would probably have unfolded very differently if, in the nearly 50 years of the country's existence, such exploration had taken place. In the course of it, the tremendous violence that the Croats inflicted on the Serbs during World War II, some violence by Serbs against Croats during that time, together with long standing historical antagonisms could have been aired, looked at, and discussed. Unfortunately, Tito did not allow this. Many

Serbs still blame the Muslims of the former Yugoslavia for converting to Islam hundreds of years ago, and look at them as stand-ins for the Turks who ruled Serbia for over 500 years.¹

There is no established "technology" as yet for this kind of exploration, especially on a societal rather than a small group level. Truth commissions in a number of South American countries have attempted to establish the facts of violence against particular elements of society, mostly by military regimes (see, e.g., Nunca Mas, 1986). The process in South Africa, consisting of hearings, confessions, and the accompanying descriptions of deeds of violence, torture, and murder, combined with amnesty for the perpetrators who confess, is a brave and inspired attempt at healing and reconciliation.

This raises, and may to some extent answer, questions about the importance of the experience of justice for healing and reconciliation to occur. Some perpetrators who express no regret or offer no apology, may receive amnesty. Truth and memory may be served, even if not fully, but not justice. Acknowledgment of responsibility will be partial, expressed in terms of facts, but not in emotional or moral terms. Still, the exposure of actions and actors to the public, accompanied by institutional and political changes, may go a long way toward creating constructive engagement between groups.

When there has been a history of mutual violence, putting dialogue groups on television may help with reconciliation. Through their vicarious experiences, viewers can develop empathy for members of the other group, grieve for their own group, participate in the assumption of responsibility for the harm their group has caused, and hear and accept the regret for harm done to them expressed by members of the other group. This can only be done when there is already a public process of reconciliation, so that participation in such a process does not expose people to inordinate danger at the hands of members of their own group who consider them traitors.

An unusual kind of dialogue group is One by One, in which children of Jewish survivors and children of German perpetrators of the Holocaust talk to each other. The Germans talk about their own pain and suffering that was the result of what *their parents did*. They talk about their guilt and empathy with children of survivors. This process, that began as private dialogue, has expanded into public talks which may inspire reconciliation of many kinds.

"Understanding" the perpetrator can also help victims heal and open up to reconciliation. This does not mean forgetting, or even forgiving. It means understanding the psychological, cultural, and societal process that leads perpetrators to their violent actions. This helps victims understand how the horrible things that were done to them can and did come about and help to fulfill their need for comprehension of reality. By leading the victims to see that, horrible as it is, what the perpetrators did is a comprehensible, human process, they may also become more open to reconciliation. But even attempting such understanding can only take place after some time has passed and healing has begun.

Compensation by perpetrators can help with both healing and reconciliation.

¹This was evident from conversations I had with people in Belgrade during a visit in October 1996.

Compensation is an acknowledgment of wrongdoing and can be a form of atonement. Compensation will work less well, however, if it creates or maintains some form of superiority by perpetrators in their relationship to victims, rather than express guilt, regret, and humility.

Reconciliation must take groups and their members into the future. Deep engagement with the "other" is important, to discover the other's humanity and to overcome a history of devaluation on the part of perpetrators, and fear, anger, and other negative emotions on the part of victims. Deep engagement can best occur when it is in the service of shared goals, whether economic, cultural, psychological (such as healing and reconciliation), or structural (such as building peaceful and peace-building institutions). For deep engagement to be successful in humanizing the other, certain requirements must be fulfilled. They include equality in relations (Allport, 1954; Cook, 1970) and learning about the other's culture and ways of being so that one can understand and relate to the behavior of the other (Staub, 1989). Individual relationships and friendships that are formed in this process will help overcome devaluation of the other group (Pettigrew, 1997).

Genuine reconciliation between groups is difficult to create but is possible. There has been a transformation in the relations of the French and the Germans following World War II, as a result of wise policies by leaders. The more avenues that are created for humanizing members of the other group, the better. The role of the media in this is extremely important. The media can create or maintain devaluation, prejudice, and enemy images or can show the humanity of members of other groups. In Macedonia, journalists belonging to the different ethnic groups formed teams, interviewing and writing stories about the everyday lives of members of the different ethnic groups.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the healing of trauma can diminish self-focus, self-devaluation, fear, mistrust, and pain. It can open victims up to reconciliation. It can increase the capacity for empathy with others, effectiveness in pursuing goals, and the capacity for enjoying life. It can make violence by victim groups less likely.

Nations and the community of nations, which are often passive when violence occurs, are often passive bystanders again to the pain of victims. It requires, therefore, special effort to create a process of responding by bystanders—nations, non-governmental institutions, and individuals. An important element of this is the strengthening of international institutions, possibly within the U.N., that have the task of both activating a machinery and actually providing help and support.

This should be part of a broader effort by bystander nations to prevent genocides (Staub, 1996c, 1997b). This effort should include the use of early warning that a group of people is the object of persecution and violence, and the *activation* of the community of nations to warn perpetrators and to take steps to stop them (by withholding aid, boycotts and sanctions, and by military actions, if necessary). Genocides frequently evolve, and the earlier such responses, the more effective can be the community of nations in inhibiting this evolution without the use of military force.

Effective international institutions are needed for all these purposes. The process of creating them can also be used to work on changing the way nations define their national interest and to promote values that might guide nations to respond to the suffering of people outside their border.

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