



Maynooth University Edward M Kennedy Institute

**COLLECTIVE TRAUMA IN CONFLICT SCENARIOS:
A SCOPING STUDY**

Collective trauma in conflict scenarios, its impact and relevance for conflict intervention practitioners and communities affected by it

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3.4 Art Therapy: Seeing the Elephant¹ By Lisa Fliegel (US, Israel/ Palestine)

The personal is political (Hanisch, 1969) was both caveat and mantra as I came of age on the East Coast of the United States in the 1970's. It was around this time that leaders of the Viet Nam Veterans' Movement (WinterSoldier, 2017), reached out to renowned social psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton (1973) in their efforts to "...put an end to veterans' nightmares..." The professionals (clinicians) and Veterans co-led Rap groups on the veteran's turf, in their community. It was a revolutionary/collaborative approach to therapy.

The Viet Nam war was the purveyor of collective trauma that rallied a unique coalition of political, personal and clinical (Haley, 1974: 191-6) efforts: propelling the Sisyphean challenge to have Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD) accepted into the canon of psychiatric diagnosis. The fact that forging a new diagnostic category posed a political threat to proponents of the Viet Nam war, is a rarely told story— but one that exemplifies how the very personal experience of Veterans' trauma was inextricably linked to the political anxieties of the times.

While the stated purpose of the Viet Nam war was the defeat of an illusory enemy (McNamara, 1995), the human spirit was its collateral damage. The establishment of the PTSD diagnosis acknowledged the toxicity of trauma while providing a framework for the soldiers' humanity to rebound from the horrors of war, unvanquished.

What follows are deeply personal narratives emerging from my work with trauma survivors. As I continue to evolve and grow as a therapist; my clinical experiences proffer a distilled wisdom, that dramatically reshapes how I interpret violence and form partnerships for resolution. These narratives of healing describe my work in three disparate places that have faced seemingly intractable pain and conflict: Israel/Palestine, inner-city Boston, and Northern Ireland.

Israel/Palestine

In 1993, as Israel's Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin shook hands with Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat on the White House lawn (The signing of the Oslo Peace Accords, 13 Sept. 1993) - the city of Tel-Aviv became one big open window: taking in the sea breeze and emitting a singular broadcast winding its way through the streets of the city. It was an unprecedented joy and hope that we felt, my friends and I, as we ran to the sea to watch the waves relinquish our nation's fate of endless war, and tragedy; trauma transcended Seven months later I was doing an art-therapy internship at a middle school in the Israeli town of Azor – an underserved town you passed on the way to Ben-Gurion Airport. I worked with Eytan Galim: a 14-year old stalker who believed he always got the short end of the stick. In elementary school he'd been bullied in the school-yard and was transferred to a special education programme. We assigned Eytan a therapeutic mentor to help him remain in

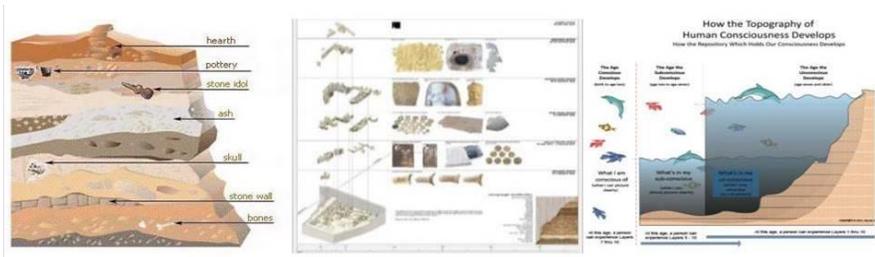
¹ In some military quarters, having "seen the elephant" has been used as shorthand for having experienced combat (Dalzell, 2014).

the classroom with the additional supervision he needed to stay safe and productive. I asked him to write about the problems he hoped to overcome:

Can I get over this loneliness? Why do I isolate? Why can't I connect to other people? Well, I'm a nerd. A super-nerd. I'm not in style, I'm just weird. I want to be friends with people but I don't know how. I want to stop stalking but I don't know how and now I have this Tracker following me around and that's just causing me more trouble because everyone is all like-'why's he always have that guy with him'. Of course, Lisa and the Tracker did get me into the Scouts and I do like it there...maybe I'll make some friends...

When Baruch Goldstein a Jewish settler shot dead 29 unarmed Palestinian men who were bent over in prayer in Hebron's Ibrahimi Mosque; Eytan said: "Baruch Goldstein was a hero. He avenged the evil enemies of the Jews. I honor him." Hate did not come as a surprise. Naysayers fought the Oslo Peace Accords tooth and nail. Politicians called each other traitors, well-spoilers, and printed up posters of their opponents made to look like terrorists or Nazis. That was when I began to perceive that war itself might be a form of mental illness.

Individual acts of terror, on both sides, meant to avenge, or meant to alter the course of history, were nothing more than psychosis attaching itself to its host of nationalism and extremism. In search of an antidote, I took Eytan to a Tel-Aviv museum where we viewed an archaeological excavation. Eytan and I explored the links between unearthed archaeological layers and the conscious and unconscious mind.



Commented [J1]: Me parece que la figura debería ser replanteada. Es demasiado pequeña y no explica el contenido o la relación con lo que la persona está explicando. Además no tiene fuente o pie leyenda.

In his next journal entry, Eytan made the connection between his family's trauma story and his own aggression.

I decided to become a stalker because I realized that I did not enjoy my childhood in the way other children do. Because I'm an odd-ball. I think being an odd-ball is a good enough reason for the things I will describe here. When my disabled brother lived with us, my entire parent's money went to help him and I lost out on a lot of things my good friends all had. My parents are good parents but my sister and I were deprived. My mother always talks about the fabulous life she had back in Morocco, how rich they

were, and respected. How they came to Israel to be part of a Jewish Homeland, were looked down upon by the Eastern European Jews who always think they are better than us. I'm trying to get that back- what I missed out on as a kid, because of my brother, and what my parents lost when they came to Israel. I know they didn't intend to deprive us but it still hurts.

Inspired by our trip to the museum, Eytan's new-found insight offered the possibility that he could grow into a critical thinker, subverting perhaps a destiny to become the next Baruch Goldstein.

In 1996, I returned to the United States and began my work as an art therapist specializing in the treatment of adolescents with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). While PTSD and Complex Trauma are psychiatric diagnoses, the treatment of PTSD, as Eytan's predicament taught me; is not the sole purview of Mental Health professionals. In this paper, I offer that implementing a trauma-informed approach is essential for peace-making in conflict zones, whether they are in our inner cities or on the world stage.

I developed the Arts Incentives Programme (AIP) to serve young people whose social, academic or legal difficulties stemmed from the multi-layered challenges of immigration/dislocation; poverty; abuse; disability; and racial disparity. The young people and their families lived in the Greater Boston Metropolitan Area- in some of the most culturally diverse, yet economically poor communities in Massachusetts. AIP youth lived on the cusp of trauma and disregard: facing challenges in daily living at school, at home, and in the street. In AIP improved mental health was linked to opportunities for social mobility, self-expression and advocacy.

The Arts Incentives Programme (AIP) helped young people be successful in all areas of their lives through skill-building in the arts, arts-based mentorship, art-making, performance, and exhibition of their work. By linking AIP members to community arts organizations, mentors, and youth development programmes throughout Greater Boston, AIP provided a consistent and stable place for young women especially to navigate difficult transitions and specific life challenges. Our mission was to utilize the arts to provide an incentive toward health and hope for a positive future.

Like the marriage of the Vietnam Veterans with Social Psychiatrists in developing Rap groups; AIP developed an unorthodox, community-based approach to trauma treatment. Stepping out of the clinic into the homes, bus stops, schools, police stations, courtrooms, hospitals, etc. I became an "embedded therapist" with a street-level view of the young women's lives, and the conditions that are created whereby violence begets trauma – and trauma, untreated, begets violence once again.

While psychiatric diagnosis is feared as a trap – to stigmatize and disempower vulnerable populations; the following vignette illustrates how the diagnosis of (PTSD), and Complex Trauma can be utilized as a tool to decipher behaviour, de-escalate conflict, and empower individuals and communities.

Frida was from El Salvador. She lived with her mother and stepfather in a town that was connected to Downtown Boston by a bridge that blew flakes of lead paint on to the town centre whenever there was a strong gust of wind. When they first immigrated to the United States they had gone to California. Now that they'd moved to this Greater Boston Central American enclave, Frida missed her aunts, uncles, and cousins left behind in California. One time, after getting in trouble at school, she tried to run away- back to California, which was the incident that led her to us.

It was March and we were going to a play called: "No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs," and while I found the title of the play irksome, the story line promised to elicit some good group discussions.

During the play's intermission, we circled-up to talk about the play's protagonist, a Jewish man who'd survived the Holocaust.

"I admire Adolph Hitler. I want to be like Adolph Hitler," Frida said.

Frida who was a bright 15-year-old, knew I was Jewish, and knew that Hitler had perpetrated the murder of 6 million Jews. Frida wasn't a mean-spirited kid, she was hungry. She'd said she needed to eat before we left for the theatre, but in the hub bub I'd lost track. "People listened to Adolph Hitler. They did what he told them to do. I know that he killed all those people. I don't care. I admire him."

Bessel van der Kolk, a world-renowned clinician, educator and researcher in the trauma field says (Van der Kolk, 2014):

"We now know that trauma compromises the brain area that communicates the physical, embodied feeling of being alive. These changes explain why traumatized individuals become hypervigilant to threat... We now know that their behaviours are not the result of moral failings or signs of lack of willpower or bad character—they are caused by actual changes in the brain" (p. 2).

As tempted as I was to be thrust into a state of moral panic (Cohen, 1973), my duty was to view Frida's statement through a trauma lens. Stepping back from the discussion to take a breath (Van der Kolk, 2014: 207), I realized that Frida felt completely powerless, she was hungry and had no way to get food. By failing to respond to her need I had intensified her sense of helplessness. It was only natural for her to want some power in that situation. Sklarew, Twemlow, and Wilkinson describe how mental health practitioners engaging in community healing and development are reconstructing tolerance:

“They are addressing the problems and the emotional sequelae of violence, sexual, and physical abuse, traumatic loss, learning inhibitions, scapegoating of classes and groups, teenage pregnancy, homelessness, and variations in family structure” (p. xviii).

Being clinically informed means viewing community and individual aggression as a communication of unmet needs. Though essential, being clinically attuned in and of itself is not enough. AIP was staffed by artists who “do the most good by concentrating on the empowering qualities of the creative processes” and thereby laying the ground-work for both youth and community development (Cleveland, 2000).

As far-fetched as it might seem for a child’s after-school hunger to ignite the veneration of evil, I had to understand that Frida’s traumatic memories had been triggered. As her family fled El Salvador, she’d been fearful, helpless and hungry. She re-experienced, those feelings, triggered by my neglect. She was compelled to amplify her need with a statement I could not ignore.

Exhausted, frustrated and helpless to respond to Frida, I recalled my training at McLean Hospital² when trauma specialist Dr. Maxine Alcheck, taught me about the Victim-Perpetrator Triangle³. Dr. Alcheck explained that in order to feel truly understood, traumatized individuals re-enact one of two positions: that of the perpetrator, or that of the victim. The idea being that the only way this individual can believe you truly understand them is to cause you to feel what they have felt. The survivor will cause you to feel victimized to guarantee your empathy for that position of powerlessness, or they will make you into their perpetrator because that is their template for relationships. Remembering this lesson helped me to understand that what appeared to be an irrational escalation of aggression, actually stemmed from a legitimate perception of threat.

“Frida,” I said, “I understand how awful it is when you feel like I’m ignoring the fact that you are hungry. Let’s get you something to eat, and I promise to try my best to pay close attention in the future. But you cannot ever, ever say something like that to me again. I want you to have power, everyone needs to have power-just not the kind of power that leads to genocide.”

We devised a treatment plan for Frida to have some power without having to become Adolph Hitler. We got Frida a job so that she would have her own money to purchase food when she was hungry. We helped Frida transfer to a school that was more suited to her academic needs. We collaborated with the StoryCenter (Stephens, n.d.) for a workshop in Digital Storytelling, to help Frida develop critical thinking skills and insight. Frida made a film. In her film, Frida talked about how our arts programme provided her with an alternative to gang involvement:

“The best memory I have of AIP...would be one summer that we went to the cemetery...we saw...a beautiful pond with a swan in it. It is very strange to find something as beautiful as a swan in a cemetery. It does not fit the picture, but dead

² Founded in 1811, McLean is a leader in psychiatric care, research, and education and is the largest psychiatric care, research, and education and is the largest psychiatric teaching hospital of Harvard Medical School, and is located in Belmont Massachusetts.

³ The Karpman Triangle, which was developed by psychiatrist Steven Karpman in the early 1970’s.

people need love too. When I was in the cemetery, it made me think that I did not want to die so soon and if I did, that I would want to be buried in a place like this. It also made me remember that you have to live life to the fullest and love living it no matter how hard it gets. Life is the biggest test that you have to pass and it is the hardest.... In a very strange way our Arts Programme is like a cemetery... The programme brings you from a bad place into a better one where you are safe because nothing bad can happen to you... You have choices so you can live a better life. It made me see things in different ways- that the street can't."

Art therapist Elinor Ulman's description of the role art can in healing echoes the sentiment of Frida's film:

"It's motive power comes from within the personality; it is a way of bringing order out of chaos— chaotic feelings and impulses within, the bewildering mass of impressions from without. It is a means to discover both the self and the world, and to establish a relation between the two. In the complete creative process, inner and outer realities are fused into a new entity." (p.13)

Powerlessness is the square root of shame: to be helpless is to be humiliated. A trauma-informed approach can turn a moment of crisis into a moment of opportunity, if we understand that shame and humiliation lead to aggression. James Gilligan said:

"I have yet to see a serious act of violence that was not provoked by the experience of feeling shamed and humiliated, disrespected and ridiculed, and that did not represent the attempt to prevent or undo this 'loss of face'—no matter how severe the punishment, even if it includes death" (Williams, 2011: 89).

While Frida's case is a story of interpersonal conflict transformation, the scenario has broader implications for global peace-making.

In January 1998, the peace talks in Northern Ireland teetered on the brink. Protestant paramilitary prisoners felt marginalized in the negotiations and withdrew their support for the peace process. Their communities would surely follow suit. Gary McMichael, the leader of the Ulster Democratic Party persuaded British Northern Ireland Secretary Mo Mowlam to meet with the prisoners in the Maze Prison (BBC News, n.d.).

In his 1999 documentary, *The Loyalists*, Peter Taylor asked Ulster Defence Association (UDA) leader Bobby Philpott what it was about Mowlam's visit that persuaded them to reverse their opposition. Philpott said:

"It was her straight way of talking to us, and the way she put her case over to us... If she hadn't come to speak with us in the prison, we would have seen it as another slap in the