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Beyond Victimology? Approaches and Techniques for broadening up coping alternatives

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We want to start off and finish our contribution with two quotes from research interviews with refugee families: The first one is from an Afghani family asked to discuss possible solutions for central issues in the past, the present and the future.

Daughter: Well, we have talked only about problems. Now we are supposed to find solutions, how to improve things, how to improve life.

Mother: Yes, somebody should help us.

Daughter: Yes, what shall we do? What else could we do? (long silence). Yes, that we read and study, learn a lot, attend courses.

Mother: Yes attend courses

Daughter: That somebody helps us!

Mother: Yes that somebody helps us.

Son: Stop talking, the doctor should return now!

This example is typical for a family who has lost the capacity for meaningful conversation, for relational coping, for symbolic and concrete thinking. There is no distinction between past present and future, no concrete apprehension of problems, no mentioning of affects. The mentally handicapped son is the only one thinking of concrete help and asking for action. He shows apprehension of the family's utter helplessness.

Our model of traumatic experience is one of disruption. Disruption of the continuity of development, i.e. destruction of a feeling of the self and its history, of everyday life and disruption of attachment-relations. These disruptions exceed hitherto existing coping capacities. Disruption is reflected in

- neurobiological processes (effects on the basal brain structures organising experience, relating cognitive and affective areas, regulating arousal and memory)
- individual processes (psychomotor development, linguistic and affective expression, autobiographical memory,)
- relational processes (loss & attachment, reflectivity, sense of coherence, trust, forced helpfulness, forced helplessness) and
- sociocultural and political processes (social splitting and atomisation, reconstruction of ethnical identities, cultural changes during the process of war, civil war or political persecution, loss of traditionally useful rituals and modes of healing).

If we try to understand adaptive or maladaptive processes triggered by social violence and their effects on children and families we have to keep in mind these layers and their intersections.

All these processes are intimately linked to the process of construction of private and shared meaning which in itself influences the construction of history, the interpretation of the presence and perspectives of a future. Posttraumatic symptoms can be regarded as effects of the incapacity to integrate experiences, to reflect about them and to symbolise them. The three parts of PTSD-Symptomatology can be interpreted this way:

1. Avoidance means not being able to perceive, reflect and express. This, within families, often causes uncertainty and free-floating, often mistaken fantasies of the offspring about the inner world of the parents, the surrounding world and the culture of origin or exile. Transposition of the parent's world into the children and concretization of the unshared fantasies in the acting out behaviour of the children may then be the consequence.
2. Intrusion means not being able to distinguish presence and past, to live in a - developmental, timeless world.
3. Hypervigilance is necessary, when one is not able to order chaotic and therefore frightening experiences.

Person as object of the experience

1. **reflectivity**
2. **metacognition**
3. **experience of conflict and resolution**

4. empathy
5. corrective (relational) experiences
6. match between coping requirements and coping capacities
7. private & shared meaning
8. power of expressed narratives (legends)
9. capacity to symbolize

Experience as object of the person

The way in which families cope with traumatogenic stresses influences the further development of the individual, the family, and the social networks involved. The family coins the reflective, affective, relational and conflict-solving capacities of future generations. The environment is constantly being influenced by the changed socialisation of children and the lasting effects of open or concealed conflicts and strains. If we look for determinants of coping we can describe many internal and representational aspects of it, which are depicted in the following diagram:

By the inclusive term coping mechanisms we understand - following Lazarus and Launier (1978) all intrapsychic and behavioural efforts of an individual or a social network, to master external and internal demands and the conflicts between them, which tax or exceed the existing resources. The aim of coping efforts lies in the achievement of situationally appropriate self-regulation and the balancing of man and environment.

Basic Capacities needed to achieve this are:

1. The capacity to perceive problems and connected affects (level of perception);
2. the capacity to find a connection of sense and meaning, which builds the frame for integration into the life-cycle and further working through (level of Integration);
3. the capacity to find (multiple) solutions, to reflect them and select them in a suitable way adapted to the problems (level of reflection);
4. The capacity to realise them and integrate the results in a further perspective of life (level of action).

Defence serves as an unconscious mechanism protecting against internal and external stimuli, which exceed the capacity to work through and integrate experiences cognitively, physically and affectively. It protects through filtering the perception of stimuli, but may hamper the consecutive possibilities of perception, reflection, integration and action.

We see coping as a transactional process (see Aldwyn, 1994) including multiple ego-capacities and containing cognitive and affective aspects. Different from defence, coping can be taught and learned as Anthony (1987) has pointed out. It is intimately related to creative and cognitive competence.

The concepts of coping and defence describe processes but not their result. The metaphorical expression resilience, however, is being used describing a process relating to results and future. It describes how past experience is being used to positively overcome future strains. Fonagy, (1994: 233) describes resilience as „normal development under adverse circumstances“ Anthony (1987) mentions as central factors of resilience a basal, however realistic trust in relationships and cognitive, affective and reflective capacities that help in

estimating own and other's resources correctly. Relational experiences of resilient children are characterised by unconditional availability of caretakers, their capacity to serve as models, helping their children to understand problems and to confront them. Parents of resilient children can set limits without destroying autonomy, and serve a balancing function when confronted to loss. Of especial importance is not harmony but rather continuous experience of conflict, dyssynchrony and resolution (Biringen 1997).

The articles of this book talk about aspects of coping and resilience. My task is dealing „opening up techniques and of broadening coping alternatives. Implicit in the title is the view of the editors of this book that our work is made up of understanding individually and culturally influenced coping styles over time, but also the available scope of coping possibilities within an individual, a family or culture.

Our basic assumptions are:

- there is no „one fits all coping style“ that is adaptive to all situations;
- there is no „one fits all coping style“ for different developmental stages;
- there is no „one fits all coping style“ for all environments;
- as coping is a process over time a coping style useful at the beginning of a traumatic experience may be hampering human development in the long run. Maintaining a „coping behaviour“ in a normalised environment may be detrimental. An example would be the relational style of overprotection, the „kangaroo style of coping“ (Roer-Strier, 1996) that is sheltering the offspring from the environment, which may lead to pseudo-invulnerability (Anthony, Cohen, 1987) that is seemingly being unaffected until exposed to a second stressor;
- traditional“ coping mechanisms may not be useful any more in a changing environment;
- the range of coping alternatives represented in an individual or network like the family is helpful if perception of stressors is adequate. Reflected orientations following coping models then may make sense;
- in refugee-families some ways of coping may be occupied by other members not leaving the room for others to follow the same style or process. Modelling is but one way of relational coping.

If we talk about opening up new spaces we should start off by questioning our own restricted views of the concerned issues. To take up the metaphor used by Frayberg: Which ghosts haunt our own nurseries?

Therapist aspects of broadening up coping alternatives:

- Do we acknowledge not only victim-identities but also active parts, possibly violent and perpetrating aspects of our clients? Neither „victimology“ (Finkelhor) nor mere focussing on coping open up enough spaces.
- Which pathogenetical narratives do we tell to ourselves? What are experiences outside the normal human range? Do we think that we treat traumatical experiences? Or do we think we treat long-term interactive effects of those experiences on meaning of life, self, and relations?
- How much does our own dependency on „Tear-money“ influence our perception of clients as victims, forgetting about possibly helpful active parts, including aspects of perpetrators?
- Who is a good victim?
- How much does a scientific view of the world as inherently ordered and only waiting to be examined influence our vision of life, therapy and coping and our capacity to open, „radical“ listening?
- How much does our political understanding lead to focusing too much on the external facts instead of the inner and relational representations of the outer „facts. But also other way round: Can we really understand socially caused problems from a purely constructivist view?

Sociocultural aspects of broadening up coping alternatives:

- Reconstruction of the own “ethnical“ history has long been described as one way politics and nationalist movements try to prescribe coping. Help to critically question these externally described interpretations and legends is extremely important in treatment of families, not only of mixed ethnicity as we often find in families coming from the states of the former Yugoslavia, but also for mono-cultural refugee groups. Fixed interpretations may successfully help to overcome the loss of identity after political or military defeat (Eastmond, 1998, Laub, 1994), however, they most often lead to secondary crises a long time after, when these pro to not valid any more..
- Rituals have been described as possible social ways of coping. However rituals as the construction of ethnical identities often in the long run close down on coping alternatives. It is not surprising that the use of ritual in therapy has originated in therapeutic practice of military organisations. Traditional religious and cultural rituals are often being idealised in Western therapists mistakenly thinking that „autochthonous“ ways of coping necessarily are preferable, not taking into account the changed

circumstances and the reflections of power relations in these rituals. (see: Ephraime, 1996, Shapiro, 1997).

- What, however, in the own perception of refugee children and their families has opened up ways of coping are the provision of space for „licking the wounds“, the provision of possibilities to become active anew, i.e. employment and possibilities for contact with the surrounding society and certainly - at least in exile - the possibility to learn the language of the host society.

Broadening up coping alternatives within family and individual child:

1. Coping processes within the family have mainly been described looking at the parent-child-relationship and the relationship as a couple. The modelling and differentiating role of sibling-relationships have rarely been studied, even if we know that experimenting with ways of behaviour is much easier within the horizontal relationships of siblings than in the more powerful and hierarchical relationships between children and parents. Differing perception of the same issues and the take-over of complementary roles among siblings, however, can lead to an important enlargement of the child's experiences. (Sohni 1994). Looking at the different ways siblings adapt to chronic stress we might learn a lot more about „differential coping“.
2. Narrative approaches instead of structured approaches have proven helpful in the work with unaccompanied minor refugees and with families in exile. We have learned a lot about the destructive effects of false life histories, what we call „legends“ in shaping and restricting coping alternatives. (see Walter & Adam, 1996). Fictitious life histories create their own realities and restrict access to the past. These false life-histories, created in order to get the help needed often limit the therapeutic possibilities and may damage the therapeutic alliance by creating feelings of deception on behalf of therapists and social workers. Talking about the „told life histories and the lived life histories, showing consciousness of the fact that many refugees felt compelled to invent new life histories, disconnecting the real experience from the present life and future perspective has become one of our central objectives in therapy with unaccompanied minor refugees in Germany. Narrative approaches, apart from providing us with information about the capacity of linking past and present coping and attachment experiences, help to evaluate the experience, the culture of refugee children. They show the links between old society and new ones and are less culturally imposing.
3. In our work a very conscious listening to old and new metaphors has proven as a central bridging element in relating past, present and expectations of the future as well as the way traumatic experiences are interpreted and integrated. Psychoanalytic, psycholinguistic and systemic research and therapy has increasingly been interested in metaphors. (see: Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Buchholz, & Kleist; 1997, Paré, 1996). Metaphors to our opinion are helpful in also judging the interaction of differing brain areas in working up traumatic life experience. Listening to metaphors and working with them is a powerful way of broadening up horizons of coping because they have a specially integrating function in humans mind. They tell us about self-images, body images, relational perception and affective-cognitive integration. They help to understand frames, within which experience is being structured and shared with

others (structuring function). They reflect social perceptions of human experience (evaluative function) and serve a steering function concerning mutual behavioural expectations (operative function). They join differing contexts of experience in a playful and creative way (creative function). They open up or limit the room for interpretation (selective function). They facilitate communication by resuming complex relations in one image to which each partner in the communication can add own associations (transcendent function). Shared metaphors may indicate shared internal imagery. Creative use of „alive“ metaphors, metaphors that are still being perceived as standing for something else open up room for a playful „pretend-mode“.

In the work with refugees taking up metaphors, discussing them in a pre-and post war or persecution context and - in an intercultural frame - has special opening up effects. It helps in the diagnoses of traumatic loss of the integrating symbolising function, the function to compare and legate contexts and the possibility or impossibility to use traditional schemes of understanding in a changed environment.

4. Future work on broadening up coping alternatives to our opinion will be very much centred about improving what Maine (1993) and Fonagy (1993,94,96) have called reflective functions“. Reflective functions are a prerequisite to understand own and significant others actions by the attribution of thoughts and feelings. Acts become predictable through the capacity to recognise own and other's motives and feelings, thus reducing the dependency on others. Meaningful communication depends on clear representation of the mental states of others. Reflectivity is a prerequisite for the differentiation of inner and outer world, reality and fantasy. All these capacities are often damaged through traumatising experiences (see: Fonagy et al 1996). Reflective functions may be considered as indicator for the capacity to integrate traumatising experiences internally and within the family.

We want to finish with some quotes from an interview with a Chilean girl who had to return and reflects her, and her family's ways of functioning in a very reflective and metaphorical way. In spite of extreme life stresses she managed to cope, however only in finding her own way, but with a high reflective function:

„Nothing mattered any more the moment I entered the aeroplane; I had lost everything I had in my life..... That's why I came completely empty. And full of mourning. I wept all day.

But I also came with power and desire to integrate me into politics. It was a defeat for me, but it didn't matter so much. People like my father fuse completely with politics, they let go of everything in favour of the party and the goal. They are ready to leave everything. And then, when they return and have gambled all their time, years here and in exile, and everything they find is worthless, rotten, burnt, all ugly, then it means final defeat for them. Fraud. Not so for me. I didn't know it that way. But my parents then had to go forcefully and always wanted to return into their country. Thinking of return was as common as breakfast. But in returning they noticed it wasn't their country. I think that is worst about return. Because everything has changed.

And I saw how they stumbled and fell with each step. Much went wrong. I have noticed that they approached things in the wrong way. Moreover they had a lot of problems between them. I decided not to tell them my problems; I did not want to bother them with my problems. At the same time my small brother - we are 9 years apart - stopped talking. He always was full of fear. But here he stopped talking. We never had a brother-sister relationship. I am sorry about that. It was hard for me. That my parents protected him from me, as if I could damage him. Then I decided to place my batteries and stop weeping.

It was very hard five or six years later, when I wanted to weep anew, and I couldn't. Until today it doesn't work. That's why I had to construct a big wall around me. Inside, it was mine. And nobody is to be inside. It was my only way of getting through, I didn't know if it was going to be good or bad."

Maybe you have seen how many offers for understanding and interaction my partner gave me, how there is life inside her, in spite of all hardship. She is an example of somebody who is able to bridge past and present, inside and outside, self and other, and between the generations.

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