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Shattered worlds: political trauma amongst young activists in post-revolutionary Egypt

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ABSTRACT

Based on qualitative testimonial research with Egyptian youth activists, this article argues that Egypt's post-revolutionary aftermath has been profoundly traumatic. Trauma shatters one's assumptive world as it confronts one with the fragility of existence and the possibility of immediate death. Activists experienced automatic psychological coping mechanisms of intrusion (e.g. dreams and nightmares) and numbing, but Egypt's post-revolutionary social and political context inhibited the operationalisation of non-automatic, socially embedded, coping mechanisms of reintegration and reinterpretation. The former entails the reintegration of one's experiences into an adjusted assumptive world through a shared holding space and the latter the reinterpretation of the suffered traumas through a positive outcome. In the absence of socially embedded coping mechanisms, due to political polarisation and a lack of positive revolutionary outcomes, Egypt's social trauma deepened as is illustrated by the depoliticisation of activists as they tried to mend their shattered assumptive worlds.

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KEYWORDS Egypt; trauma; activism; emotions; revolution; mobilisation

Introduction

This article provides a micro-level analysis of the emotional impact of Egypt's post-revolutionary political developments on 40 young activists, consisting of 25 males and 15 females between the age of 18 and 35 years from Cairo. The focus is on youth activism, not because the 25th of January revolution was exclusively a youth movement (Beissinger, Amaney, and Mazur 2013), but because in Egypt's hierarchically structured society the destruction of their hopes and aspirations has been marginalised from internal political debates.¹ Using a snowball approach, interviewees were selected on having

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been politically active in a broad sense rather than having experienced 'trauma'. This broader political activity meant that some were engaged formally in political movements such as the 6th of April, NGOs or political parties. Others were active informally through online platforms, participation in demonstrations or local committees. None of them were, however, personally affiliated with industry-related social movements. Politically, interviewees covered the spectrum in Egypt, and included liberals, socialists, Islamists (both Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist) and military regime supporters. It was during the interviews, which explored the emotional and personal impact of Egypt's revolutionary aftermath, that its traumatising effect on interviewees became transparent.

The activists were interviewed between October 2013 and February 2014: the period when Mohammed Morsi – the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated president – had just been deposed by the army, the Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins of Rabaa and Ennahda had been violently dispersed and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi rose to power. There was increasing political polarisation and dehumanisation of the Muslim Brotherhood 'Other' as well as other activists. The violence experienced by these activists was grave, leading 26 out of 40 to comment on the pervasiveness of death in their lives. Between 2011 and 2014, 12 interviewees were teargassed, 11 were directly injured, 7 were detained (and beaten), 4 were tortured, 4 were sexually abused and 3 experienced near-death. Furthermore, 12 had friends who died, 12 had friends who were injured, 9 had friends who were detained and 7 had friends who were tortured. Also, seven had family members who were injured, three had family member who were detained, two had family members who died, two had family members who were tortured and one had a family member who nearly died.

In order to understand the existential impact of this violence, interviews were conducted using a testimonial life-story method. In this approach, the personal narrative has analytical priority over any qualitative interview questions, thus allowing for multifaceted and contradictory reactions to be included as the interviewee elaborates on his or her experiences at length (Benezir 2009). This also makes it possible to pay attention to what Benezir (2009) calls trauma markers: silences, self-report, a change in voice and intonation, a loss of emotional control and a change in body language. All such markers have been included in the *verbatim* quotations from the interviews, which were conducted in a mixture of English and Egyptian Arabic. Interviews conducted in Arabic have been translated into English as literally as possible. It is important to include trauma markers since trauma is disorientating: as one's assumptive world collapses, one's ability to accurately express oneself linguistically often collapses too, making it critical to identify that which may or may not find linguistic expression (Edkins 2003, 8; Andrews 2010). Through its close attention to personal narratives, the life-story method furthermore facilitates a culturally sensitive account of subjective experiences of trauma. Such a

phenomenological account prioritises individual experiences of trauma over macro-level social and political analyses, whilst firmly embedding these experiences in social contexts. It thereby provides a rich, nuanced articulation of individual and social traumata that answers to important critiques of universalistic accounts of trauma, particularly the application of the concept Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to non-western contexts (Bracken 2002; Afana 2012; Craps 2014).

Hence, focusing on interviewees' experiences, this article develops a distinctly intersubjective phenomenological account of trauma. It proposes that the violent revolutionary aftermath in Egypt has been deeply traumatic on an individual and social level: it ripped apart activists' assumptive world, namely, their everyday working assumptions about themselves, others and the world. The argument is that whilst activists experienced common automatic psychological coping mechanisms such as intrusions (dreams and nightmares) and numbing or dissociation, socially embedded non-automatic coping mechanisms of 'reintegration' and 'reinterpretation' were not available due to increased social and political polarisation and the lack of positive revolutionary outcomes. The former entails the reintegration of traumatic experiences into an adjusted assumptive world through a safe, socially shared holding space. The latter constitutes the intersubjective reinterpretation of the suffered traumas through positive outcomes. Such socially embedded mechanisms are important since automatic, psychological mechanisms of numbing and intrusions are insufficient to mend a socially constituted assumptive world. Due to their unavailability, social trauma deepened and expressed itself through the depoliticisation of interviewees as they tried to mend their assumptive world. For, when no positive outcomes are available and the social community does not function as a 'cushion of care', the potential for collective agency and creative social becoming is slowly destroyed (Sztompka 2000).

This article makes a novel phenomenological contribution to scholarship on trauma in the Middle East, which predominantly consists of 'technical' survey research that applies the diagnostic concept of PTSD to people within or from the region (Abdelmonem et al. 2015; Moussa et al. 2015). Furthermore, Palestinian case studies notwithstanding (Abbott 2009; Ghnadre-Naser and Somer 2016; Taha Asma and Cheryl 2016), current phenomenological research focuses on either refugees from or soldiers deployed in the region rather than resident political activists.² This article also makes an innovative contribution to scholarship on the Egyptian revolution through its focus on the subjective *experiential* worlds of political activists, whilst speaking to issues of political mobilisation.³ It highlights not only the interconnection between individual and social trauma, but also its social and political consequences, such as depoliticisation. And whilst any general claim regarding the theoretical framework and the consequences of social upheavals needs to be subjected to further contextual empirical research, this article provides

a novel input to trauma studies, which have highlighted the depoliticising effects of the individualised and medicalised *concept* of PTSD (Craps 2014; Bistoën 2016) but sidelined the depoliticising effects of traumatic experiences themselves.

The following sections will firstly outline the theoretical underpinnings of an intersubjective phenomenological account of trauma, before focusing on torture as a traumatic experience which breaks an individual's assumptive world; secondly, the automatic coping mechanisms (numbing and intrusion) already recognised by mainstream studies of trauma and PTSD and, lastly, the absence of reintegration and reinterpretation mechanisms and its impact on the social realm in Cairo.

Theorising trauma: rupturing the assumptive world

This article proposes a phenomenological intersubjective conception of trauma (see Bracken 2002; Stolorow 2013a). It is phenomenological as it elucidates a person's *experience* of a shattering worldview and the existential anxiety and meaninglessness that this evokes. It is intersubjective as it insists on the *social foundations* of this worldview and meaning-making processes – and hence that healing (or the lack of healing) from traumatic experiences takes place within social contexts and has social and political consequences. Such an intersubjective framing of trauma contains the potential for both individual and social trauma, wherein each has the capacity to contribute towards the constitution of the other. Thus, the consequences of individual trauma on wider social relations are such that in situations of mass social upheaval, they cannot be limited to the private sphere. Similarly, the fracturing of social relations and political polarisation also, in turn, has negative consequences on individuals' well-being.

This conception differs somewhat from the diagnostic concept PTSD. Its current definition (DSM 5⁴) is as follows: trauma entails a confrontation with actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violation, either directly or indirectly through relatives and friends. The symptoms of PTSD are characterised by intrusion (including flashbacks, dreams and nightmares), avoidance (of thoughts and places related to the trauma), negative moods and thoughts (including anger, depression, guilt, shame as well as negative thoughts about the self, others and the world – including feeling alienated from others and the inability to trust others), arousal and hyperactivity (such as anger, carelessness, annoyance, concentration- and sleeping problems) (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Though PTSD makes reference to self, others and the world, it does so from a cognitivist intra-psychical perspective that takes the mind and its thoughts as the primary analytical unit. It thereby replaces philosophical questions of meaning with questions of cognitive brain science (Hacking 1995; Bracken 2002).

There are two notable difficulties with this concept of PTSD and much of mainstream trauma theory for social and political application. Firstly, wedded as they are to biological neuroscience, they offer more of a diagnostic aid of intra-psychical processes rather than an account of the victim's *existential experience* of a collapsing worldview that is intersubjectively constituted (see Janoff-Bulman 1992). This is not to dismiss potential useful neuroscientific insights on trauma, but to suggest that these should be complemented by phenomenological accounts providing insight into the *experiences* of trauma. For what is at stake in the victim's experience of trauma is not the overflowing of the brain, but a breakdown of meaning (Bracken 2002).

Secondly, there is an inbuilt assumption that trauma constitutes a *single overwhelming life-threatening event*, whose maladaptive symptoms are addressed in a therapeutic setting within a relatively safe social and political context. This might hold true for much of the global North, yet in the global South trauma – in the sense of a threat of life and bodily integrity – is structural, continuous and ongoing, as encapsulated by the term continuous traumatic stress (CTS). CTS was developed by psychologists in apartheid South Africa and refers to ongoing traumatic experiences in contexts of structural violence, including repressive state violence or pervasive community violence (Straker 2013). Rather than perceiving expressions of trauma – such as anxiety, fear, withdrawal, somatisation, aggression, sleeping problems and nightmares – through the medicalised lens of pathology, CTS regards them as normal human reactions to severe traumatic stress resulting from dangerous political contexts (Eagle and Kaminer 2013; Stevens et al. 2013). CTS thus places the roots of traumatic stress not within the malfunctioning of the brain, but firmly within violent social and political contexts that shatter the safety of one's world, rendering trauma both an individual and a social phenomenon.

An intersubjective phenomenological understanding of trauma elucidates this breakdown of safety as an experience of profound tearing or alienation from the world as one knew it. What trauma breaks are the basic everyday assumptions about how 'the world works', namely, one's relation to the self, to others and to the objective world. With only a few exceptions, humans are socialised from an early age into believing that the self is worthy, that social relations are meaningful and that the world is benevolent (Janoff-Bulman 1992). Though perhaps illusionary, these are necessary assumptions for a positive functioning in daily life and – more importantly – are firmly rooted in our consciousness since they are generalisations based on our earliest intersubjective experiences with 'good enough childcarers' (Janoff-Bulman 1992, 21).

Insofar as there are bad events, these basic assumptions make us believe that such events are not entirely random – that there is some order to our existence, that the world is meaningful. Whether supported by a belief in God or not, we are socialised into believing that there is a self-outcome

contingency – that is, that there is a direct correlation between a person's character and actions and the outcome of events (i.e. bad things happen to bad people, and a bad thing 'y' happens because a person did or did not do 'x') (Janoff-Bulman 1992, 8). Such reasoning reduces the randomness and meaninglessness of life, and instils the idea that we have some control over what we do. Thus, rooted in our earliest socialisations, we emotionally create a safe predictable environment around us.

Trauma directly challenges and ruptures this safe and predictable order. It flings us into an unpredictable (violent) environment, wherein the world is malevolent, social relations are meaningless and the self is deemed unworthy. It leads to 'a catastrophic loss of innocence that permanently alters one's sense of being in the world' (Stolorow 2007, 16). In Heideggerian terms, it removes the distraction of the 'They' – or, what one normally does – and exposes the true ontological nature of our Being: our authentic loneliness and anxiety in face of our (impending) mortality. Through trauma we confront the possibility of the impossibility of our Being (Heidegger 2010; Stolorow 2013b). The symbolic order of our daily existence is destroyed as the contingency of existence in a random and unpredictable universe is exposed (Kirschner 1994). No matter that we know it rationally, the confrontation with our death entails a surprise that gives rise to an existential crisis of meaning and purpose (Howie 2016). Hence, trauma survivors frequently talk of living in a different world: the interpretative horizons of their experiential world are experienced as fundamentally incommensurable with the worlds of those who have not been traumatised (Stolorow 2007, 15).

In face of this altered existential reality, one commonly experiences episodes of 'zoning out' or numbing during which the profoundly alienating or 'dreamlike' nature of this new reality is exposed. Victims also frequently endure involuntary intrusions, such as dreams, flashbacks and nightmares. Whilst often experienced as painful, alternations between intrusions and numbing – or confrontation and evasion – are automatic psychological mechanisms by which we gradually face this altered traumatic reality (Janoff-Bulman 1992, 95).

However, such intra-psychical mechanisms are insufficient to come to terms with the trauma suffered, since repairing a broken assumptive world requires the socially embedded coping mechanisms of reintegration and reinterpretation. Though victims might never fully 'recover' and an incommensurability of interpretative horizons might remain, with the help of empathetic others in the context of a safe shared holding space trauma could be *reintegrated* into a new assumptive world. To 'hold space' means to walk alongside another person 'without judging them, making them feel inadequate, trying to fix them, or trying to impact the outcome. When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgement and control' (Plett 2016). The availability of a social holding space is

crucial for the potential re-articulation of broken assumptive worlds, since it recognises the (often inexpressible) reality of anxiety and loneliness in which the victim now lives. Particularly relating to others who suffered similar experiences renders trauma more bearable as it establishes 'existential-kinship-in-the-same-darkness' (Stolorow 2007, 49). Thus, supportive relational contexts provide the possibility for devastating emotional pain to be held and rendered more tolerable, whilst recognising the victim's world has been fundamentally altered (Stolorow 2011, 149).

Another non-automatic coping mechanism that helps to reintegrate traumatic experiences into a new adjusted assumptive world is the process of *reinterpretation*. Reinterpreting a traumatic experience in light of positive outcomes means one can say that 'it has been worth it', which makes the world appear less random and hostile. Reinterpretation does not occur in isolation but in an intersubjective relation to others, and takes two forms: the personal lessons learnt and the structural benefits for self and others (Janoff-Bulman 1992, 135; also Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun 2009). The latter, which is more likely to occur than the former after human-inflicted trauma entails the reinterpretation of traumatic experiences as having served a purpose such as better labour conditions or greater political freedoms (Janoff-Bulman 1992, 137). Through such perceived positive outcomes, 'trauma survivors are able to establish some meaning and benevolence even in the midst of meaninglessness and malevolence' (Janoff-Bulman 1992, 139).

Whilst tumultuous and violent, the 25th of January revolution briefly allowed for both reinterpretation and reintegration of violent traumatic events since the new-found revolutionary social solidarity and a belief in positive revolutionary outcomes cushioned the effects of the traumatic experiences somewhat. Interviewees explained that the revolution gave them hope as they experienced the possibility of a better Egypt, where people were united beyond class, race or gender divisions in their fight against regime injustices (see Sholkamy 2011; Keraitim and Mehrez 2012). They felt connected to people around them and 'truly human' for the first time in their life (Interview 31). During the 18 days, they also believed the overthrow of Mubarak would lead to an Egypt without poverty, social inequality and police brutality. However, in Egypt's revolutionary aftermath, this solidarity and belief in positive outcomes dissipated with the polarisation of the public sphere and perceived betrayals by political actors (including the Muslim Brotherhood, the military and formal political parties) (see Matthies-Boon and Head [under review](#); Bassiouni 2016; Hellyer 2016; Trager 2016). As a result, reintegration and reinterpretation were no longer available tools to mend their assumptive worlds, leading to a deepening social trauma with depoliticising effects. The remainder of this article hence focuses on the individual and social traumas endured after the 18 days of the revolution in 2011.

Torture in (post-)revolutionary Egypt: breaking the assumptive world

One of the most intense traumatic experiences some interviewees experienced is torture. Torture fundamentally shatters one's trust in the world, since its whole aim is to break a person – to destroy one's assumptive world, to break one's idea of self and faith in one's surroundings. Being physically at the mercy of a violent Other with no expectation of help means 'part of our life ends and it can never be revived again' (Amery 1980, 29). Torture takes one's future away. It entails a confrontation with the threat of one's impending mortality, and a deep understanding that this confrontation is a direct result of the volition of another human being. The existential helplessness and loneliness experienced in torture shatter one's conception of others and self.

Torture was frequently inflicted by Egypt's state security both prior to and after the 25 January revolution (see also Abdel Aziz 2007; El-Dawla 2009). Four out of the 40 interviewees had been personally tortured at the hands of Egypt's security services in the aftermath of the revolution. This is one such story, which occurred during the rule of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) on 9 March 2011:

What happened is that they arrested about 200, about 20 girls and 180 men and tortured us in front of the Egyptian museum outside the garden and the torturing takes about 5 hours. They treated me very specially, because they knew me when I was arrested and they take all of them after torturing to the jail but for me they left me in the end of the 5 hours because my case, my situation was very bad, and I could not move. They put me in a taxi and left me. [...] After 10 minutes, they started smashing my head on a column, then they take off my clothes except underwear and then tied a rope on my leg and they pull me to inside the garden and they started the torturing by wooden sticks, metal sticks. Some officers jumping a lot on my back on my head, and in the end they electrocuted me, they burnt me – and they cut my hair with broken glass. And during the torturing they try and use words to break your spirit and to break you inside. I was lucky too, because I was from the first group who realised that the military is not completely good. They have no mercy, they don't know this word. (Interview 37)

His torture at the hands of the army – namely, those who were supposed to protect him, and whom many in Egypt still support – entailed a loss of innocence that altered his mode of being in the world. They tried to break his sense of self through both physical and verbal violence.

One very effective tool the Egyptian state security and army systematically employs to this end is sexual torture of both females and males. The excruciating humiliation and the existential loneliness inscribed in the experience of sexual torture are especially effective for political demobilisation. This young man described his experience in September 2011:

We went to protest and it was the second time I was put in jail because of protest. The army ... get us under the bridge after they caught us, our eyes are covered, our hands are tied on our back ... and ... eh ... yeany ... It was the first time that I was feeling ... [He sighs. Tears come from his eyes] ... That someone can break me, I did not have this feeling before. I felt like I was nothing ... eh ... when we was with the prison of the army, they electrocuted us, they burnt us, hit us under our feet, and I was one of the last people who received the beating ... yeany ... Some person, I did not meet him again, it was ... eh ... he ... do you know the sound of a woman who is pregnant with a baby and gives birth and screams? He was screaming like her ... because of ... some son of a bitch ... soldier ... was fucking him. So ... like ... him ... [breathing heavily and crying] ... after the fourth day, or something like this, when they found that we did not do nothing they let us free. But ... eh ... Something inside of me was broken. (Interview 12)

His rape shattered his sense of self and altered his mode of being in the world. Sexual torture in the form of male anal rape is particularly traumatic since it is stigmatised within Egyptian society. Victims are not only often accused of 'homosexual immoral depravity'⁵ – a notion reinforced during the act itself as victims are verbally 'feminised' by the perpetrators – but also their experience is not even formally recognised by Egyptian law. According to Egyptian law, rape entails vaginal penetration of a woman by someone other than her husband.⁶ Thus, legally, anal-, male-on-male and domestic rapes do not exist, and any road towards accountability (however unlikely its success within Egypt's corrupted political and judicial system) is foreclosed.

Traumatic experiences of torture are difficult to put into language, since language refers to and is constituted by a shared social and assumptive world. Once this world breaks down, our capability to express our experiences in language breaks also since there are no shared interpretative horizons. The interviewee tortured at the museum pointed towards this incommensurability of interpretative horizons:

You cannot describe what you lived in these moments. You cannot put it in words. You live in different world than other people. Once you have experienced what I have experienced, you have experienced the worst and you live with death inside of you every day. (Interview 37)

As he indicated, his torture severed his experiential world from the shared social world, revealing a gaping hole between his reality and that of the non-traumatised. It instils a complete existential helplessness and uncanny loneliness at the hands of the other, and thus severs our trust in our shared social world. All interviewees who experienced torture expressed how it changed their sense of being in the world, which they described as a 'death' of their previous self. One interviewee tortured by the Egyptian Ministry of Interior during the Mohamed Mahmoud street battles in November 2011 put it as follows:

If my past self of 2010 or 2011 met my present self right now I believe I would not have known me to be the same person. I mean, even my ... Even my looks changed from this. Everyone used to tell me how cheerful and positive I was and until two years ago really. Ehm ... But now I feel like I am radiating negative energy to the people around me. Ehm ... [...] (silence) I have been mentally changed quite a lot. I don't think the same way. I don't look the same way. I actually have been, I left my family, about a year ago because I cannot live with anyone anymore ... And I actually lost many of my friends. (Interview 1)

Automatic coping mechanisms: intrusion and numbing

Nearly half (19) of the interviewees experienced intrusions, a common automatic psychological reaction to trauma entailing dreams and nightmares. Respondents' nightmares frequently consisted of personally being shot or assassinated by the military or police. Other nightmares included betraying friends or relatives by telling the police or military where they are hiding. One person was haunted by a returning nightmare of the eyes of her friend who was sexually tortured right in front of her by a mob on Tahrir Square in June 2012. Some people also kept hearing gunshots in their sleep, and others dreamt of losing body parts – such as limbs – in street battles. And many reported that their sleep was more fragmented and that they often screamed out loud during sleep. One person also experienced the following reoccurring nightmare:

The main nightmare I have is that I have my teeth in my hand, you know. I find that I am losing all my teeth like sand, and I have them all in my hand and I don't know what to do. Yeah. It is like every now and then I have this dream, when I am very frustrated. It is a horrible feeling. It is difficult to imagine it. (Interview 7)

Dreams that include the falling out of teeth, or teeth turning into sand, are clear expressions of traumatic anxiety. Whereas, in Heideggerian terms, fear has a concrete object in the world (such as a tank or a police officer), anxiety is generalised fear without a concrete object in the world (Stolorow 2011, 146). Nearly half (18) of the interviewees experienced episodes of severe anxiety due to political violence and uncertainty in Egypt. Respondents relayed a sense of general anxiety that they found difficult to describe precisely because it did not have a concrete object in the world. As this young man remarked:

For reasons ... I cannot really determine why. If someone would say what is up with you? I would say nothing and everything you know. Yeah it happens all the time. I would be restless for no particular reason for no particular reason but for all the reasons. Yeah, it happens a lot. (Interview 27)

For many (15 respondents), this altered mode of being also had a numbing effect. As the traumatic experiences shattered their preconceptions of how

the world works, the existential shock associated with this was so overwhelming that they 'closed off'. As this interviewee narrated:

Now my problem is that I don't feel at all, I don't fear death, I am not afraid. Right now I am not afraid to lose anybody. My family, my friends right now I don't have any feelings, I just don't care. I have never had this feeling before but now ... just ... Like when I cross the street I don't look. I look sometimes to my destiny of dying. (Interview 12)

Respondents experienced numbing particularly during violent clashes. They explained how during the peaks of violence, they were so 'high on the violence' that they did not feel anything and 'zoned-out' from the situation, which appeared unreal – almost dreamlike. They frequently remarked that during these times, they were not only shocked that this was happening, but also felt 'other-than-human' or even 'outside-of-human'. As this young person narrates:

In the first two or three hours, I felt like ehm ... it was a strange psychological feeling. I felt like I don't exist, like I am dreaming that something was making me stick and refusing to leave although I was scared. [...] I remember very well zoning out, watching the first life bullets in my life flying over my head and I did not run, I did not move, I was just frozen watching this. Ehm ... I was watching people bleeding and maybe some of them looked already dead. I did not engage even though that I was very close, very close to the front line, and I refuse to leave and this feeling of being out of place in this feeling of like dreaming, and this is not real, it was over after two of three hours. (Interview 25)

Along with intrusion, such numbing – also called dissociation – is a common automatic psychological reaction to severe traumatic experiences. It ensures that at least a part of the victim's personality remains functioning and is not overwhelmed by the experience, whilst dreams and nightmares make the victim relive traumatic situations and its accompanying feelings (such as anxiety). The combination of these two automatic coping mechanisms – intrusion and numbing – enables the victim to gradually come to terms with the experience (Janoff-Bulman 1992, 95). And it is thus possible to regard numbing and intrusion as normal non-pathological temporary coping responses to extreme and overwhelming traumatic stress (Janoff-Bulman 1992). However, such intra-psychical coping mechanisms are insufficient to mend a broken, socially constituted, assumptive world and thus may contribute to deeper levels of mass social trauma in the absence of sustainable social coping mechanism, as the next section will illustrate.

On reintegration: social trauma and the lack of a shared holding space

The temporary coping mechanisms described above become problematic when trauma is continuous, which leaves no time and space to come to terms

with its existential shock. In such cases, what started as a common psychological reaction slowly becomes woven into the social fabric of society. Individual traumatic experiences thus become transformed into social trauma and negatively affect interpersonal relations within the private and public spheres. Social trauma entails a disruption to 'the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of commonality' (Smelser 2004, 37; also see Erikson 1995; Sztompka 2000). Whilst there is always a potential for social trauma to occur after massive social upheavals – such as revolutions – that entail a confrontation with violence and death, its negative impacts on society are most evident in situations of CTS where the possibilities of reintegration and reinterpretation are foreclosed. For, here 'traumatic experiences work their way so thoroughly into the grain of the affected community that they come to supply its prevailing mood and temper, and dominate its imagery and its sense of self, govern the way its members relate to each other' (Erikson 1995, 191).

With regard to numbing, the continuation of trauma in Egypt post-revolution meant that many lost the ability to empathetically relate to others at all. Death and violence became the norm. As this young woman put it, 'Hearing the stories, you get bored. You just become cold. This person died, this person got raped, those words are becoming very common' (Interview 29). Or, as this male activist explained:

You know, seeing a lot of dead people ... eh ... psychologically you know ... dead people, makes you feel numb. [...] Yeah, somehow less interested in people's lives ... ehm ... when I see someone dying or I lose a friend, I am supposed to be really sad, [...] For me now, I am very ok with it. I mean if someone who I really know dies, it is like 'ok he died' or 'ok she died'. And ok move on ... which is dangerous, because I think that humans need to be sad with it. You need to be affected ... but I am not. (Interview 27)

Interviewees openly wondered what kind of humans they had become. They reproached themselves for their inability to feel empathy and regarded themselves as malfunctioning human beings; people incapable of proper social relations due to the high levels of extreme violence. As this young man noted, the violence imprinted in them that life is cheap in Egypt:

I guess that is one of the things that are missing from a lot of analyses. It's not like these people are monsters – this is how it happens [...]. You're living in this deep shit and you feel like that threatened and you feel like, you know – lives are cheap in Egypt. And people are aware of that. It's a very brutal thought. Life here is superfluous and people here are aware of that. It is a really brutal thought. (Interview 19)

The loss of empathy and connection to others made it much harder to create the kind of shared space that Plett (2016) points to as necessary for developing reintegration strategies.

Respondents explained that this lack of appreciation for life and empathy was particularly heightened during and after the Presidential Clashes in December 2012, which they stated marked a change in political violence.⁷ These clashes occurred after Morsi's presidential decree (November 2012) wherein he sought legal immunity and called for a constitutional referendum on what many deemed was an overly Islamist draft constitution (see Teti, Matthies-Boon, and Gervasion 2012). As the clashes ensued in the area of Heliopolis, protestors were not fighting the repressive state security but rather *each other* in a violent street battle along sectarian, polarised (pro-Brotherhood vs. anti-Brotherhood) lines. As this activist recalls:

I'm always used to conflict and violence from the police, from the army, but what I saw around the palace in December 2012 was traumatic, shocking, so ehm ... I mean I ... It is very hard to see one of your friends, or those who used to be your friends, like ... I won't say that they are shooting us or anything like that because very few number of them were using weapons, but almost every one of them was throwing stones, being violent with us ... so imagine that anyone of them could be your friend [...], your neighbour, your brother even. And what made me more shocked that I ... I always used to be a pacifist, peaceful ... I did not like violence or conflict or anything like that but that day I was shocked even by my reaction to that. After the Islamists were attacking us, I started attacking back, throwing stones back and I was shocked at my reaction afterwards. I went back home, wondering how I did that. How everything turns me into this, into this violent person, so ehm.. That was kind of the turning point for me. (Interview 1)

Social trauma frequently expresses itself through polarisation, dehumanisation, demonisation and a normalisation of everyday community-based violence (Smelser 2004, 53–54), all of which sharply increased after the Presidential clashes. Interviewees relayed that ensuing political clashes were particularly sectarian in nature and that unpredictable community violence between Brotherhood supporters and opponents permeated their daily lives. They narrated how friends, colleagues and family members now openly fought each other on the street, at cafés and in their homes as verbal and physical violence became normalised. All interviewees had at least one close family member or long-standing friend who belonged to the 'other' side, and they explained how heated political arguments tore (or threatened to tear) family relations and close friendships apart.

Following the ousting of Mohammed Morsi by the military in July 2013, their experiences of anti-Brotherhood violence became especially grave. One respondent, himself not an Islamist, recalled witnessing two Islamist-looking persons being beaten to death by a mob in the Dokki district of Cairo, and he later discovered a dead body lying in a main street near Agouza with no one even attending to it. Another recalled an angry mob chasing two Islamist men from Qasr Al Nile bridge ripping off their clothes,

for no reason other than their Islamist looks. For many, such violent and traumatic incidents were particularly disturbing because ordinary people were willing to hurt and kill each other simply because of political disagreement. Respondents expressed bewilderment as to how a nation they previously regarded as peaceful – and sometimes even passive – had turned into such a ‘monster’.

The socially traumatic impact of such violent polarisation is grave: it not only disturbs people’s relation to the larger community that contains them, but also they feel forsaken by those who used to succor them, thereby crushing their assumptive world (De Tubert 2006, 152). The community that used to provide a cushion against pain is corroded and now becomes the perpetrator of pain. Such violent social relations thus both forestall the possibility of reintegration and shatter one’s trust in one’s social surroundings.

For many, social trauma peaked with the dispersals of the Rabaa and Ennahda sit-ins by the army, which left at least 817 people dead (Human Rights Watch 2014). Most respondents expressed a deeply ambivalent attitude to these dispersals. On the one hand, they disagreed with the cause of these sit-ins and were still angry with the Muslim Brotherhood for its betrayal of the revolution. On the other hand, they were disturbed by the killings and bloodshed, and particularly its public celebration by both the media and people around them. They felt increasingly alienated from Egyptian society, and some drew parallels to Syria as they worried Egypt would follow its path to civil war.

Those present at the Rabaa massacre described their emotional pain resulting from the reactions of social others, including strangers, acquaintances, relatives and friends. One young man, physically trembling as he relayed his story, narrated how a taxi driver told him he wished for a repeat of the dispersal so that more Brotherhood supporters would be killed, including this young man. He also noted how his other friends and relatives would not believe his account of what happened:

They did not respect that I am the one who was there and I saw the whole picture not them. So they did not respect, they did not even sympathise. Actually they were sympathising with the other people, with the military. And they were sharing the dead people, the dead military people and I don’t know who killed them but I am sure that I am not the one who killed them. My friends that have been died are not the person who killed them. And I am sorry for them. But don’t blame me and don’t blame my dead friends of this. (Interview 15)

Such blaming is a typical expression of social trauma, which becomes characterised by ‘splitting’: the denial, negation and repression of the other side of the story, whilst elevating one side to be the whole story (Smelser 2004, 54). Communities are eroded as those not touched or affected ‘try and distance themselves from those touched as if they are escaping something spoiled, something contaminated, something polluted’ (Erikson 1995, 189). One

respondent clearly engaged in such distancing and victim-blaming: he insisted that the army was right to shoot Brotherhood supporters since this unhygienic group would not only spread stupid ideas but also disease throughout Egyptian society (Interview 24). Such grave intra-society hostilities and violence ensured that there could be little room for the development of reintegration strategies required to heal the personal and social implications of trauma.

Whilst this particular response might be rather extreme, more than half (21) of the respondents noted that they experienced unsympathetic reactions which severely inhibited the sharing – and therefore reintegration – of traumatic experiences with close family and friends. They remarked that attempts to share feelings with friends and family frequently ended up in verbal, if not physical, aggression rather than empathetic understanding – especially if the listener did not share the respondent's political point of view. Whilst feeling angry and hurt by such encounters, they admitted that they themselves were also often unwilling to listen to the stories of those who maintained a different political position. They explained that due to the stressful and disappointing political situation, they lacked empathy and patience to look beyond political differences. Hence, the solidarity of the revolution had broken down and social polarisation inhibited the creation of a shared holding space across political divides, even if people suffered similar traumatic experiences such as killings, injuries and torture.

Unfortunately, such a holding space was also largely absent within the context of professional mental health services. Except for relatively small-scale initiatives such as the Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Victims of Torture, mental health services in Egypt are substandard.⁸ Public mental health institutions are in a dire state, and frequently conjure up Foucauldian images of the asylum where 'madness' becomes associated with criminality (see Mourad 2013; Ramadan 2015). Electric shock therapy is a standard treatment; patients are frequently tied to their beds, drugged and punished for being 'disobedient'; and adherence to a code of ethics by staff is virtually absent.⁹ Moreover, patients are frequently admitted to such hospitals by their families or the state for personal or political reasons (Mourad 2013; Ramadan 2015). In Egypt, the stigma on mental illness is particularly prominent, further inhibiting the development of socially embedded reintegration strategies. With the exception of two individuals who received help at the Nadeem Centre, all other interviewees expressed great hesitancy to enlist the help of professional mental health services.

On reinterpretation and the absence of positive political outcomes

Interviewees also found it difficult to share their emotions since they deemed their experiences – such as being shot and losing limbs – as less significant compared to the fate (i.e. death) of others. As this young Muslim Brother said:

I share my stories but not my feelings or emotions. Because for me 'the shot' was little, it was too small compared to what happened to other people. I never thought of saying or sharing my feelings because there were bigger stories and deeper feelings, which I thought are more important or bigger than my own. Other people had more than that happening to them. (Interview 39)

Such downward comparison to others' fates usually enables victims to feel better about their situation, and can in some cases be empowering (Janoff-Bulman 1992, 120). However, within the context of post-revolutionary Egypt, such downward comparisons served to silence activists' experiences and aggravated the revolutionary burden they were carrying. As one young man noted:

Especially in the darkest moments when I feel that all the people have stopped thinking and that there is no hope, and then I feel that 'no, we have already paid the price'. People have paid the price, and they lost their life and they lost their eye for that. I should continue, because they were definitely better than me. (Interview 32)

The absence of concrete positive political outcomes inhibited the rationalisation of martyrs' deaths, which could not be reinterpreted and given meaning.¹⁰ Instead, these deaths added an extra emotional weight to the experienced hopelessness of the revolution:

But, when you feel that you are nothing, and all these people who had died, they died for nothing and I knew some of them and he died for nothing, and no one even was remembered then because the last 3 years since the revolution we came to the point, to point zero, because nothing changed. Actually, it is worse, it is even worse. Salaries is not that good, life is more expensive, life is more expensive, everything is more expensive and people are suffering more and more. [...] So all these people died for nothing and all these people will die also for nothing. And this gets me like no hope. [...] All the blood we have paid? It is for nothing, nothing has changed. We came back to SCAF ruling, the army's ruling, and people now are worshipping the army. It was all a play. (Interview 3)

Respondents stated they felt tricked, abused and fooled. They felt used as pawns in a cynical political game mastered by the army and the Brotherhood. They believed they had been stupid or naive to think that their protests and political activity would have ever had any political impact 'since the disease of the state has deeply infiltrated politics and into the society' (Interview 27). Politics in Egypt, they realised, was a clear case of 'plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose':

The people kept going to the streets, kept singing the same chants as the regimes changed from Mubarak to SCAF to Morsi to now to Al-Sisi or the government. But politics stayed the same, and the people kept singing and chanting but it was going nowhere. (Interview 38)

Respondents, like this young man, remarked how any hopes they held for political improvement were squashed time and again:

After the first revolution, everything was supposed to move to a good direction. People were cleaning the streets and blablabla and then boom. Everything just collapsed.[...] The military – SCAF – turned out to be a sham. [...] They just beat up people like everyone did before. And the Muslim Brotherhood was supposedly We were hoping you know for a democratic rule [...] we were hoping that he would at least have in his mind the great Muslim rulers [...] But obviously he turned out to be just inept ... idiot. And he just gave it back to SCAF on a plate of gold. And then after the June 30th revolutions, even after the SCAF took over, we were thinking 'okay maybe this is a little different'. And then it just repeated itself a month later, you know violence, killing people, demonstrations, military rule, emergency powers. Things were just repeating themselves. (Interview 2)

Disillusionment with Egypt's post-revolutionary political developments was shared by all interviewees, whose distress was a result not only of grave political violence, but also of the perceived political betrayals of their revolutionary expectations by political actors and absence of sustainable organisational structures (Abdelrahman 2013, 570), which impeded necessary reinterpretation mechanisms (see Matthies-Boon and Head [under review](#)). Hence, state repression, socio-economic deprivation and regime injustices continued unabated, whilst their voices were marginalised and excluded.

More than half (23) of the interviewees experienced periods of depression that they directly attributed to the lack of positive political outcomes and feelings of hopelessness. During these episodes, they were unable to function and would isolate themselves for days, weeks or even months from their social surroundings. Unable to face people, some broke long-standing friendships, moved out of their family homes and got fired from their jobs. During these periods, some (6) would resort to self-medication (including antidepressants and other drugs), whilst others would seek refuge in writing and artistic outlet (9). However, depression was mostly expressed through aggressive outbursts towards either significant or unknown others (12). One young man explained his depression made him tolerant of violence, as he could no longer contain his frustration and would regularly scream at his mother, brother and people on the street. One young woman described the experience of depression as internal suffocation:

I felt I was suffocating. What is this? Should I laugh? Should I cry? This is depression. I did not know until I just let it out through crying. You just ... You just feel like you want to scream, and you want to scream at people's faces too. (Interview 29)

Chaitin and Steinberg (2008) note that such manifestations of aggression are common reactions when built-up frustration cannot be successfully directed at its source – namely, the Egyptian political system – and become

displaced onto weaker targets in one's social surroundings. In Cairo, feelings of aggression now dominated daily life, with individual and social outbursts becoming mutually reinforcing, thereby further impeding reintegration and reinterpretation.

Deepening social trauma: depoliticisation

The absence of reintegration or reinterpretation led to a deepening of personal and social trauma with profound depoliticising effects on interviewees. Of course, there may be further causes for depoliticisation in Egypt: others might be depoliticised out of fear for returning Islamist rule, regime repression or a collapse of an already fragile economy. They might also just be afraid of change, or find their resources for political participation compromised by poverty. However, amongst interviewees depoliticisation was a direct result of trauma, and particularly the absence of the socially embedded coping mechanisms of reintegration and reinterpretation.

As respondents felt increasingly hopeless about Egypt's future and alienated from its polarised society, they re-evaluated the costs of political praxis on their own life. Many concluded that the personal costs were too high: it negatively influenced not only their social relations, but also personal achievements such as completing their education and finding employment. Consequently, respondents withdrew from political affairs and retreated into their personal lives: 18 activists out of 30 who commented directly on coping mechanisms noted that they had entirely withdrawn from all political activity and political conversations, even with like-minded people. Three others also remarked that they now also avoided any exposure at all to politics. As this young man explained:

I just want to be alone ... ehm ... lack of interest in the things, and in the news, [...] You feel this meaningless feeling. You just want to stay at home or to hug someone you love, that is it. You feel insecurity inside of you, even if you could not express it. Just you have a feeling of insecurity, a very unpleasant feeling, and you just need to be with someone who does not speak about politics. (Interview 32)

Politics had consumed their lives since the revolution, and the personal and social toll had been severe: it shattered their assumptive worlds, it broke their social relations, it negatively impacted their personal careers and yet failed to deliver positive political outcomes. Through the destruction of the social sphere and the lack of revolutionary change, interviewees found themselves without socially interpretative templates that provide meaning to political praxis, thereby further deepening their social and individual traumata. This deepening trauma expressed itself through the destruction of their collective agency and creative social becoming (Sztompka 2000).

In an effort to reinsert some meaning into their lives, activists refocused their attention away from the social and political terrain to their private lives. As this young woman put it, 'I don't want to discuss all of this now. [...] I live in my own lala-land because that is where I see some change [laughs]' (Interview 29). Or, as this young man remarked:

Politics is a very bad investment in Egypt, as it carries severe repercussions on money, time and effort. You cannot get even a 5% return on the emotional investment you have made into politics. So now I am trying to move away from my addiction, and listen to music, talk about different stuff, and develop a new discourse with those around me. [...] Now I am gaining more control over my life again, despite these circumstances, I have to focus on my life. (Interview 38)

Respondents refocused on smaller (achievable) personal gratifications of obtaining one's bachelor's degree, getting married and finding an apartment in a context where their political hopes were dashed. Such refocusing allowed for at least some sense of control: a reintegration of meaning into their everyday life where meaning appeared to have fallen apart. In this context of deepening social trauma, and the absence of suitable coping mechanisms, such an increased focus on one's personal life is an avoidant coping mechanism for suffered traumatic stresses.

The sad irony of this depoliticisation is that many of the interviewees precisely blamed their parents' generation of retreating into their personal lives. They blamed their parents for having been depoliticised under Mubarak, and having merely focused on their everyday existence. As a young man stated:

It is my father's generations, because those people they remained silent for 30 years. So they wasted the best years of their lives when they were young people, just to eat, marry and to have a normal life. They did not have any aspirations to change the country so they remained silent, and this generation let us down. They will never support us. I don't think that this country has hope, has any, any, any hope, unless young people are in power. After the revolution those people were very resistant to the idea of change. (Interview 7)

Now the question is whether these activists will repeat the patterns of their parents' generation? Will the current processes of depoliticisation persist over time? Or will they enter the political terrain again? Respondents themselves did not know the answers: some insisted that by focusing on education or employment, they hoped to contribute to Egypt's political and economic future in a broader sense. Others sought to leave Egypt altogether in the hope that they might be able to provide a better future for their (unborn) children. Many felt increasingly unwilling to risk their lives for the 'game' of politics. The short-term prospects for their political mobilisation and regrouping are bleak; however, the long-term prospects for political mobilisation in Egypt, of course, remain an open question.

Furthermore, whether other risks attached to social trauma, such as its intergenerational transmission (Prager 2015) and the further hardening of group identities (Chaitin and Steinberg 2008), will manifest itself in Egypt is subject to further empirical research. What this phenomenological account has shown is that amongst interviewees, the absence of social coping mechanisms has directly negatively affected their capacity of collective agency, and led to their withdrawal from the political public sphere.

Conclusion

Through an intersubjective phenomenological account of trauma, this article elucidated the deeply traumatic impact of the revolutionary aftermath in Egypt on 40 young Caireen activists. This article argued that the experience of overwhelming violence ripped apart their assumptive world – it shattered their conceptions of themselves, others and the world. Whilst many activists experienced common automatic psychological coping mechanisms of intrusions and numbing, these were insufficient to mend their socially constituted assumptive world. Yet the necessary non-automatic coping mechanisms of reintegration and reinterpretation, which could reinsert meaning into their lives, were unavailable due to the polarisation of social relations and the disappointing post-revolutionary aftermath in Egypt. Whereas polarisation hindered the construction of safe holding spaces through which traumatic experiences could be reintegrated into a new adjusted assumptive world, the lack of revolutionary outcomes hampered the reinterpretation of suffered traumas as ‘worthwhile sacrifice’. The absence of these socially embedded mechanisms resulted in a depoliticisation as many activists largely withdrew from the political sphere and focused on their personal lives in an effort to mend their broken worlds. Indicative of deepening social trauma, they largely avoided political discussions and political activities, and instead focused on their private affairs. Whilst the short-term prospects for political mobilisation in Egypt look bleak, whether this depoliticisation will continue over a longer period of time or whether other outlets for political expression and participation are found remains an open question subject to further research. Similarly, whether additional risks associated with social trauma – such as intergenerational transmission, and a hardening of group identities will persist is subject to further empirical analysis.

Notes

1. For other studies on youth mobilisation in Egypt, see Shahine (2011), Herrera (2012), Sika (2012), Laiq (2013), Sawaf (2013), Abdalla (2016) and El Tohamy (2016).

2. See Farid (2009), Ismael (2013), Meari (2015), and Gorst-Unsworth and Goldenberg (1998).
3. On youth political mobilisation in Egypt, particularly see Abdelrahman (2013, 2015) and Abdalla (2016).
4. DSM refers to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association.
5. Also, see Long (2004).
6. Article 267 of Egypt's penal code criminalises vaginal penetration without consent. However, article 60 of the penal code overrides the application of the penal code on those who committed a criminalised act out of 'good intention', and the marriage certificate provides sufficient proof in the Egyptian judicial system that the man did not intend any harm to his wife. Rape is restricted to the penetration of female genitalia, since this is the highest violation of 'honour', and male anal penetration is merely a case of indecent assault, making male *rape* legally impossible (see Egypt Penal Code 1973; information also based on personal communication with an anonymised Egyptian lawyer (19 January 2017)). Also see Salama (2015) and EIPR (2015).
7. For an analysis of these and subsequent political developments, see Trager (2016).
8. Nadeem Centre has suffered from extreme governmental pressure, with repeated threats of closure. In February 2016 the Egyptian police closed the Nadeem Centre due to "breaching license conditions", after the Nadeem Centre published critical reports on the Ministry of Health (see El-Sheikh, 2017).
9. This information is also based on previously conducted (and anonymised) interviews with three mental health specialists in Cairo in 2012.
10. On narratives of martyrs and mourning, see Abaza (2013).

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