More Similar than Different? A study on the effects of trauma on intra and inter-group relations in Israeli and Palestinian informal groups.

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Abstract

We present here an analysis of a qualitative research that took place in Ramallah, West Bank and Jerusalem, Israel, from October 2011 to June 2012. The research consisted of semi-structured interviews with university students from West Bank and Israel. The students belonged to small informal groups formed through personal choice and based to an assignment. The aim of the research was primarily centralized in the exploration of the different ways collective trauma has been incorporated in the national identity as well the individual identity of the interviewees. It was conceived as a central key in the formation of everyday life through influencing the intra- and inter-group relationships within the two ethnic groups. In the content analysis of the interviews, we trace similarities in the two ethnic groups that occurred in the process of group formation and the elements that bring young people together. In this content analysis we take into consideration the existing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the historical/collective trauma transferred through memory from one generation to the next as well as the personal experiences connected to conflict and trauma. Finally, we argue that, the socio-economic background of the individual/member of the informal groups defines (a) the proximity and the personal involvement in the ethnic conflict and thus the possibility of experiencing traumatic events and (b) the level of internalization and incorporation of the collective trauma in the individual identity. Based on these parameters the ideas of belongingness of the individual to the group is discussed.

Keywords: Israel, Palestine, conflict, trauma, identity, groups.

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1. Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict goes on unresolved with the two sides using a narrative of national trauma that is supposed to legitimize political

decisions and everyday practices. The events of the Holocaust and of the Al-Nakba, positioned in the center of narratives of Israelis and Palestinians respectively, dominate the lives of youth both in Israel and the West Bank.[1].

According to Volkan's argument, the use of an event that is perceived as traumatic for the national group is common for all nations and as he says,

> 'Every large-group (e.g. nation) has at its history a representation of a traumatic event that the members of the group share and during which the large-group suffered loss and/or experienced weakness, shame and humiliation in a conflict with another large-group'[2].

He calls these, "chosen traumas" and he supports that they are transferred from one generation to the next, are re-activated during periods that the group and its members feel "an existential threat"[3], in order to gain in-group coherence and solidarity, usually against a threating out-group. "Chosen trauma" with its powerful effect on the members of the in-group can be reactivated and used by leadership and political propaganda in order to achieve political goals and combined with the entitlement ideology[4] can lead to the use of violence against the "enemy" group[5].

"Cultural trauma", a term used by cultural sociologists like Alexander[6], can be seen as complementary to the term "chosen trauma", because it refers to the process of constructing an event as traumatic, and its outcome. This process includes the formation of a claim for an event to be defined as traumatic, expressed by carrier groups in the public sphere. Regardless of the event, the members of the collectivity must believe that an event is traumatic to the entire group, affecting the identity of the group, in order to define it as traumatic.

In this view, trauma in its collective form is constructed following a very specific procedure and, if successful, when activated can provoke feelings of anger, resentment, shame. It can also form group beliefs and influence collective and individual actions.

Within the framework of trauma, and in cases of conflict such the one studied here, group members hold beliefs of victimization and justness of their own group, delegitimizing at the same time the out-group, adding up to the intractability of the conflict[7] especially when these beliefs become group beliefs[8]. Delegitimizing group beliefs that downgrade another group in such level as to exclude it from human groups[9], can lead to the use of extreme violence.

For the two studied ethnic groups, Israeli and Palestinian, the narrative of trauma together with the group beliefs attached to it, can be incorporated in the personal narrative, leading to reproduction of the conflict. At the same time they (the narrative and the group beliefs) provide the individual with meaning and thus, enable the individual to be resilient to trauma[10].

The engagement of the individuals to the national narrative of trauma in their personal lives is connected to the social ecology in which the individuals belong to and the personal experiences and beliefs deriving from this environment. While on inter-ethnic relations the two sides appear to hold strong, solid identities, we can trace different tendencies within the two groups. These tendencies are linked to the different social groups, as well as the personal experiences of their members. The strong influence of the group on the individual and the personal histories is due to the fact that both ethnic groups are thought to be collectivistic. This means, that in contrast to other individual-based societies (Western European, North American), individual life is based largely on group beliefs. Therefore, while national identity and the national narrative of trauma are of great importance, the small communities in which the individuals are raised in form their personal and social identity. The significance of the small group or community lies on the fact that they offer the necessary knowledge of rules, norms and values, which function as frames of reference for the individual to interpret the world around him/her[11]. Within this reference frame, norms and values define the scope of acceptable attitudes and offer the individual with the necessary security and certainty[12].

2. Research

This paper focuses on the cross-national similarities we traced in the relation of the individual with the in-group and out-group when conducting research on conflict and collective or cultural trauma and their impact on groups in Israel and the West Bank. More specifically, we found that membership and identification with specific social groups (either by choice, e.g. informal groups formed in the university, or by mere birth into a specific social group) influences the views of the national collectivity that the individual hold and its stand toward the conflict and the level of internalization of the national/collective trauma. While within each national group (Israeli and Palestinian) there are many different groups with different views, there are similarities (connected to the narrative, ideology and attitude toward the out-group) between groups across the two national entities.

Our work is based on 40 in-depth interviews that the speaker (L.M.) conducted from October 2011 to June 2012 with students in Birzeit University, Ramallah and Hebrew University, Jerusalem. The interviews were semi-structured and organized in 3 sections: (i) the background of the individual, which includes family history, origins and status. (ii) the groups in which the individual belong to and the main criteria on which they form interpersonal relationships and (iii) their views of the national group and the out-group, and their position in relation to the conflict. The interviewee was

free to concentrate on the issues and moments in his/her life that felt as most important without the interference of the interviewer.

The interviews were conducted during a relatively quiet period in terms of inter-ethnic violence.

For this short presentation, and considering the complexity and the extent of the topic we selected parts of the interviews and we discuss them according to the views of the participants in relation to the possible solutions of the conflict. Each stand represents a different aspect of the two societies as mingling with the personal experiences[13].

3. Discussion

Holocaust and Al-Nakba are considered by the youth participating in the research as forming the identity of their national groups even though the dissemination of the knowledge about those events occurs in a different way.

In Israel, in the context of a sovereign state, Holocaust is "present" in a formal way in education, museums, commemoration ceremonies, politics and art. Children become aware of it at a very young age[14]. Family is the first source of information and is followed by education where the students acquire detailed knowledge about it. At the age of 16, students have the possibility to travel to the sites of Holocaust. Alon, a 27 year-old, male Israeli student said that, *'Basically, I think in Israel, Israeli children since the day they walk they understand something about the Holocaust'*.

For Palestinians, while a formal system of remembering Al-Nakba is limited, it is clear that they learn about it at a very young age again from stories told by the members of the family or from their immediate environment. Folk art is filled with images of pre-1948 life, of resistance and the desired redemption through freedom and return to the lost land.

Even though the youth of today Israel and the Occupied Territories are far from the original traumatic events, they have built their lives around a certain fear of persecution and extermination, a feeling of shame and humiliation and isolation from the rest of the world. The experience of the past traumatic event is reactivated every time the conflict resurges and the persecutor of the past is embodied in the present "enemy".

The level of incorporation of the master narrative into the personal is heavily depended on the background of the individual (family history) as well as the way the individuals experienced the period from 1990s until today, which again is connected to the age of the individual and the geographical and social position.

With relation to age, we observed similarities between the participants on both sides that are in their late 20s. These individuals were old enough to have vivid memories of the bombing attacks during the 1990s for the part of the Israelis, and the harsh conditions of life in the Territories during the 2nd

Intifada. These participants urge for a solution to the conflict and believe that the younger generations do not realize the gravity of the problem while living in relative peace, which for our particular interviewees is only fictitious. Mustafa, a 28 year-old male master student in Birzeit university says,

> it is very strange to hear a student in Birzeit University [saying] that she does not have a stand and an opinion about the occupation. It is not about hate but you should have a stand. You are in a very important and big conflict […] they [the youth] care about their lives, internet, facebook and these stuff…you start to feel you are in France.

On the part of Israel Alon, says about the youth in Israel:

> the young generation now don't have these experiences of suicide bombings and how bad the situation can be […] most people don't really feel it [the war]. If you don't live in the settlements or near Gaza and you are a child, you don't realize what is going on.

In relation to the views of the two participants on the desirable way to solve the conflict we found differences that are connected to their position in their own societies, which in turn affects their position in the conflict itself.

The Israeli participant supports the resolution through an agreement and as he says,

> Now we have the chance to make peace with the Palestinians and then all the Arab countries will follow. Unfortunately, I don't see that happening. We will lose this opportunity and in a few years something bad will happen.

On his side, the Mustafa believes in a violent exit from the current situation. His actual words were:

> I am violent. This is a fact. I believe in violence. I believe in it. I believe in violence not because I love violence […] but because no one will fix my problem as refugee. […] I believe in violence but not against people like me, Palestinians…I believe in killing the Israelis. If you have the chance to kill one, kill him. I don't care. I don't feel sorry for anyone anymore. To be honest, I am not happy since 28 years.

Examining the background of the two interviewees and their experiences during the 2nd Intifada can explain this difference. The Israeli comes from a secular Ashkenazi background, which is still the hegemonic group in Israel[15], and supports the existence of a strong state of Israel and the establishment of a Palestinian state with the prerequisite that it will not threat his own country. Regarding his personal experience, he had everyday contact with Palestinians when serving in the army that gave him "a better

perspective of the Palestinians comparing to the rest of the Israelis". The Palestinians he was in contact with were educated members of the Palestinian Authority and eager to find a win-win solution to the problem. Consequently, even if he (the participant) defines the Palestinians as the enemy of his state, he does not demonize them but recognizes their need for a state.

The Palestinian participant was born and raised in a refugee camp. He described his life there as shitty, crowded, with no privacy, poor and violent. The refugees are on the lowest scale of the Palestinian society in terms of living conditions and the issue of their return to their homes is considered to be of great importance and an obstacle in the Israeli-Palestinian issue. For this reason, the participant holds a strong belief that the rest of the Palestinians see him and his group as problematic and violent and he thinks that they would be happy if they did not exist. He feels totally rejected by his "own people". At the same time, his only contact with Israelis was in the context of conflict and violence. However, just as in the case of the Israeli participant, he approaches the situation from a political perspective and views the Israelis as the "enemy" without moving on to an evaluative description of the Israelis as a whole. His very extreme support of violence is connected to the traumatic experience of death of family members and friends during the Intifada and his own imprisonment for 3 years for being involved in the Intifada.

With regards to the two-state solution as a desirable or at least possible plan, examples from the Palestinian side were given by students who come from middle-high class families from Ramallah with relations to the Palestinian Authority (parents working for the P.A. or in the public sector). Chloe, a 21 year-old female student in Birzeit University comes from a middle-class family, her mother works for the P.A. she has traveled many times to Europe and described her family as rather Western in the way her parents educate their children. She has no immediate experience of the 2nd Intifada and even though she expresses strongly on the right of the Palestinians to return to their land, on the possible solution to the conflict she said characteristically,

> I am tired of this situation. I want to live…to travel…I know it is not fair but maybe we should have two states and have finally our country even if it is too small and then we will see what happens.

Edan, a 25 year-old male student in Hebrew University who defined himself as a religious-Zionist[16] suggested that all the Palestinians "should go to Jordan". As a religious person felt many times rejected by other Israelis[17] and he had a strong belief in serving his country to protect against terrorism. During the first hour of our 2,5 hours long interview he concentrated on religion and at the second part he talked about the military,

its importance and morality. When he talked about the IDF (Israeli Defense Force), Gaza and Hamas he said, *'we have morality, we have ethics. They are doing everything they can in order to do the terror against Israel'*.

He falls in the conflict-oriented group of people who believe that,

> holding on as much as possible of Eretz Israel, whose boundaries are not precisely defined, but change with political circumstances, is seen not only as a strategic necessity, but mainly as a moral sacred, and religious-nationalistic imperative[18].

Identity-wise the two cases of the Palestinian refugee and the religious-Zionist share some similarities. They both come from groups that are not considered to be the hegemonic in their respective societies. They have experienced discrimination and rejection and in addition to this they both had traumatic experiences. The Palestinian in the Intifada and the Israeli during the war in Gaza in 2009. They both felt very dissociated from their current friends whereas they expressed very strong feelings for the friends they lost in the conflict. Both these cases, show symptoms of psychic trauma and are closer to Erikson's definition of trauma which in his words is,

> something alien [that] breaks in on you, smashing whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense. It invades you, takes you over, becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape…[19].

The personal traumatic events experienced by the two interviewees lose their meaning at the current political situation. The Palestinian says, he feels useless and he will start living again when the 3rd Intifada starts, and the Israeli is still a reserve officer and he wants to go back to the army. The personal traumatic experiences that are not recognized by the two societies[20] bring the individual in isolation and only in the context of the national struggle for security or freedom they become meaningful again.

Participants who held multiple identities or found themselves in-between places had undergone a more complex process of identity formation in order to reconcile, sometimes contradicting identities (e.g. an Israeli female student with a Nazi background from her mother's side). In two cases, of a Palestinian of '48 (which would be Arab-Israeli but she defined herself in this way and Russian from her mother's side) coming from a wealthy family and an Israeli with mixed origins (Ashkenazi and Mizrahi), leftist ideology and contact with people from the "other" side led them support the far-leftist proposal for one-state solution including Israelis and Palestinians. As the Palestinian participant said manifesting her communistic ideology, *'we are all humans! It is the system we have to fight, not each other!'*.

4. Conclusion

In addition to the conflict, all the participants pointed out or even expressed a fear that their communities lose their character, the bonds are looser than in the past and they become more individualistic. This change is evaluated as negative because both societies are considered by its members to be community-based, which is the mean to survive through persecutions and conflict. The Israelis believe that as Jewish people they would not have survived in exile if their community did not have strong ties while the Palestinians believe that they can survive the conflict only if they support each other but also connect to the Arab culture which is based on extended family ties and kinship. The community and the bonds created among the members are considered as the way to survival not only on the individual level, through the help and support that they offer to each other but also on ethnic and national level through continuity. For example, Ohad, a 26 year-old, Israeli, student said,

> I think that once we lose our communal identity will become
> more and more individual we will lose what makes us strong. We
> will lose the fact that we are here together.

Nevertheless, both sides hold on to the belief that "when the time comes, the people will rise to the occasion and fight".

The major similarity among the youth in Israel and Palestine was the constant preoccupation with the conflict invested with feelings of fear, resentment, anger and frustration but at the same time with some hope for the future. For as long as the conflict persists, life on all levels is organized according to the needs and restrains produced by it and trauma, whether individual, collective or cultural will dominate the lives of youth, and people in general, on both sides.

Notes

[1] We do not wish to compare Holocaust and Al-Nakba. We believe that the two events are perceived as national traumas for the two ethnic groups and in this way we discuss them.

[2] p. 87, Volkan, V. (2001). Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity. *Group Analysis*, 34, 79-97.

[3] p.224, Hammack, Ph. L. (2008). Narrative and the Cultural Psychology of Identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 12, 222-248

By existential threat, Hammack, means the concern over the loss of the collective identity of a group and he argues that when the members of the group feel that their

collective identity is under threat motivates a strong connection between master narratives and personal narratives of identity. Hammack, Ph. L. (2008). Narrative and the Cultural Psychology of Identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review.* Vol. 12, pp. 222

[4] For more on Volkan's entitlement ideology theory please see http://www.vamikvolkan.com/Chosen-Trauma,-the-Political-Ideology-of-Entitlement-and-Violence.php

[5] Volkan, V. (2004). Chosen Trauma, the Political Ideology of Entitlement and Violence. Berlin Meeting. http://www.vamikvolkan.com/Chosen-Trauma,-the-Political-Ideology-of-Entitlement-and-Violence.php

[6] Alexander, J. (2004). Toward a theory of Cultural Trauma, in Alexander, J.C., Eyerman, R., Giesen, B., Smelser, N.L., Sztompka, P. (2004). *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

[7] p.179, Hammack, Ph. L. (2010). Identity as Burden or Benefit? Youth, Historical Narrative, and the Legacy of Political Conflict. *Human Development*, 53, 173–201

[8] According to Bar-Tal (1990), beliefs become group beliefs when group members (a) are aware that they share the specific beliefs and (b) consider them as defining their 'groupness' (p. 36).

[9] p. 93-104, Bar-Tal, D. (1990). *Group Beliefs. A conception for analyzing group structure, processes and behavior*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

[10] p. 182, 188, Hammack, Ph. L. (2010). Identity as Burden or Benefit? Youth, Historical Narrative, and the Legacy of Political Conflict. *Human Development*, 53, 173–201

[11] Brown, R., (2000 [1988]). *Group Processes: dynamics between and within groups.* Oxford: Blackkwell Publishing

[12] Hogg, M.A., Vaughan, G.M. (2010). *Social Psychology* (greek edition). Athens: Gutenberg.

[13] All the names of the interviewees used in this paper are fictional.

[14] Most of the interviewees used the example the siren sound marking the Holocaust day when "the whole country stops for one moment" raises questions in early age, which are answered with the story of the Holocaust

[15] p.3, Bar-On, D. (2008). *The Others Within Us. Constructing Jewish-Israeli Identity.* U.S.A.: Cambridge University Press.

[16] On religious-Zionists see Kimmerling, B. (2008). *Clash of Identities. Explorations in Israeli and Palestinian Societies*. Columbia University Press, New York

[17] For example he couldn't enter some clubs in Tel Aviv because of his kippa. Many participants pointed out that there is not much contact between different social groups.

[18] p.221, Kimmerling, B. (2001). *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness. State, Society and the Military.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press. Kimmerling identifies three sociopolitical orientations of social groups within Israel, (a) the security orientation, which perceives the Israeli state as the ultimate authority and for as long as the state is in danger in any way, all other social and private goals are subordinated, (b) the conflict orientation, which views the Arab-Israeli conflict as anti-Semitism and the most important goal is to win the war, and (c) the compromise orientation, which supports the peaceful resolution to the Jewish-Arab conflict. p.215-226.

[19] p.183, Erikson, K., (1995). Notes on Trauma and Community. In Caruth, C. (ed.), Trauma: Explorations in Memory. U.S.A.: the Johns Hopkins University Press.

[20] The image of the strong man is very strong in both societies. Especially for the Palestinians it is considered to be shame to consult a therapist. One of the male participants explained it as follows, "If we appear weak and afraid then the young people will be afraid".

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