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Shared Trauma, Transgenerational Transmission and Societal Well-Being

VAMIK D. VOLKAN, MD, DLFAPA, FACPsa

The author hopes that this presentation may contribute toward the understanding of some societal problems in present-day Lebanon and the establishing of constructive relations between its various communities. When large groups (i.e., tribal, ethnic, national, religious, and political ideological groups) are in conflict, psychological issues contaminate most of their political, economic, legal, or military concerns. People assigned to deal with these conflicts on an official level establish short- and long-term strategies and mobilize resources to implement them. In so doing they develop assumptions that support psychological advantages for their own group over that of the "other." At this meeting my focus will be on another type of psychology, more hidden, mostly unconscious, that addresses obstacles that thwart peaceful, adaptive solutions to large-group conflicts.

For over 35 years I have worked in many traumatized areas of the world, but did not directly study societal problems in Lebanon. However, examples from my observations in other traumatized locations, I believe, will be useful in thinking about how to deal with some of Lebanon's societal issues that follow many major traumatic events during recent decades and how to maintain the well-being of its people. My focus will be on societal responses, not individual reactions to massive trauma. When

thousands, tens of thousands or millions of members of a large group share a psychological journey (such as going through a complicated mourning process after a massive trauma) what we see are societal/political processes that are typical, even while they are specific, for the large group.

Shared traumas are of various types. Some are from natural causes, such as earthquakes or famine. Some are accidental man-made disasters, like the 1986 Chernobyl accident. Sometimes, the death of a leader, or of a person who functions as a “transference figure” for many members of the society, provokes societal responses. Other shared experiences of disaster are due to the *deliberate actions* of an “enemy” group, as in tribal, ethnic, national, religious or ideological conflicts.

In this presentation my focus will be on this last type of massive trauma. Deliberate actions of an “enemy” group directly influence large-group identity issues, which are articulated in terms of commonality such as “we are Polish; we are Arab; we are Muslim; we are communist” and/or “you are French; you are Slav; you are Christian; you are capitalist.”

Large-group identity issues:

Large-group identities are the end-result of myths and realities of common beginnings, historical continuities, geographical realities, and other shared linguistic, societal, religious and cultural factors. Large-group identity can be defined as a subjective feeling of sameness shared among thousands or millions of people, most of whom will never know or see each other. Yet, a simple definition of this *abstract* concept is not sufficient to explain the power it has to influence political, economic, legal, and military initiatives and to induce seemingly irrational resistances to change. This presentation will examine the concept of large-group identity, its relationship to massive traumas at the hand of the “other,” its role in national or international affairs, and how it raises substantial barriers to peaceful co-existence between former “enemies.”

Think in terms of how we learn to wear two layers, like fabric, from the time we are children. The first layer, the individual layer, fits each of us snugly, like clothing. It is one's core personal identity that provides an inner sense of persistent sameness for the individual. The second layer is like the canvas of a tent, which is loose fitting, but allows us to share a sense of sameness with others under the same large-group tent. Some common threads, such as identifications with intimate others in one's childhood environment, are used in the construction of the both layers. Thus, the core individual identity and the core large-group identity, psychologically speaking, are interconnected. While it is the tent pole—the political leader—that holds the tent erect, the tent's canvas psychologically protects both the leader and the group. From an individual psychology point of view, a person may perceive the canvas as a nurturing mother. From a large-group psychology point of view it represents the large-group identity that is shared by thousands or millions of people.

In our routine lives we are not keenly aware of our large-group identity, the canvas of the tent, just as we are not usually aware of our constant breathing. If we develop pneumonia or if we are in a burning building, we quickly notice each breath we take. Likewise, if our huge tent's canvas shakes or parts of it are torn apart by "others," we become preoccupied with the canvas of our huge tent and will do anything to stabilize, repair, maintain, and protect it, and when we do, we are willing to tolerate extreme sadism or masochism if we think that what we are doing will help to maintain and protect our large-group identity. What I described here is easily observable in refugee or internally displaced persons' camps or settlements.

Under a huge large-group tent there are subgroups and subgroup identities, such as professional identities. My focus is not on such subgroups. Before going any further I must explain that here I am speaking of large-group processes shared by the majority of persons under the metaphorical tent, leaving out certain people such as immigrants or those who may be products of parents from more than one ethnic group. Furthermore, dissenters in a large group do not modify the basic elements of a

large-group identity unless they have a huge following and thus they start an influential subgroup and become involved in a new large-group identity. History tells us that very seldom does a large group evolve a new large-group identity through the influence of some decades or centuries-long historical events alone.

Each large-group identity includes “identity markers” that only belong to its members. Let us go to the huge tent analogy and look closely at the canvas. Each canvas has its own specific design. On occasion, a design on a canvas, such as certain religious or linguistic elements, may appear similar to a design on another huge tent’s canvas. However, even under these circumstances we note “minor differences” in such elements. When conflicts arise between the two large groups, such minor differences become major concerns.

Transgenerational transmissions and “time collapse”:

What is crucial is the existence of certain markers that are very specific for a particular large-group identity. Among such markers the most significant ones are the shared mental representations (mental doubles) of the large group’s real and even fantasized past historical events. When a conflict appears with the “other,” such mental doubles are inflamed within the society, usually through political manipulation. This creates a “time collapse”: shared anxieties, expectations, fantasies, and mental defenses associated with the past magnify the image of the current conflict and help perpetuate a destructive-type relatedness to the current “other,” the present “enemy.”

Transgenerational transmissions are the causes making some past historical events most significant large-group markers. After a massive trauma at the hands of the “other,” members of a society (and also “perpetrators”) will face difficult tasks taming and rendering harmless the following psychological features:

- 1- A sense of victimization and feeling dehumanized

- 2- A sense of humiliation due to being helpless [or (hidden) shame for hurting others]
- 3- A sense of survival guilt: staying alive while family members, friends and others die
- 4- Difficulty to be assertive without facing humiliation [or without (hidden) guilt]
- 5- An Increase in externalizations/projections
- 6- Exaggeration of “bad” prejudice
- 7- An increase in narcissistic investment in large-group identity
- 8- Envy toward the victimizer and (defensive) identification with the oppressor [or (hidden) guilt for being the oppressor and (hidden) fear of losing power]
- 9- A sense of unending mourning due to significant losses

Attempts to complete unfinished psychological tasks associated with the previous generation’s or ancestor’s trauma are handed down from generation to generation. All these tasks are associated with the shared mental double of the same event and eventually this mental double evolves as a most significant large-group identity marker (a *chosen trauma*).

Transgenerational transmissions primarily occur through the psychological mechanism called “depositing.” Memories belonging to one person cannot be transmitted to another person, but an adult can deposit traumatized or unwanted images into a child’s developing mind and give the child certain tasks associated with such images, such as “experience my mourning,” “take my revenge.” Depositing is closely related to “identification” in childhood, but it is in some ways significantly different from identification. In identification, the child is the primary active partner in taking in and assimilating images and related functions from another person. In depositing, the other, the adult person, more actively (and unconsciously) pushes his or her specific images into the developing mind of the child and gives the child specific tasks. Depositing in the large-group psychology refers to a process shared by

thousands or millions of people, starts in childhood and becomes like a “*psychological DNA*,” creating a sense of belonging.

Perennial societal mourning and “entitlement ideologies”:

The inability to mourn significant losses (people, homes, prestige, honor) throughout generations also may create “entitlement ideologies” in the society. When images of past historical events are reactivated they are associated with entitlement ideologies. An entitlement ideology refers to the society’s sharing consciously or unconsciously the idea that it is the large-group’s right to recover what has been lost and that the society is entitled to do whatever it can to stop—often in hidden ways—the unending mourning.

What can be done to promote peaceful co-existence between former “enemy” groups within one state or between states and maintain societal well-being?

Expressions of apology and corresponding feelings of forgiveness have not always been followed by positive outcomes. Some such apologies were experienced as genuine, while others were perceived as empty gestures. The arts of apology and forgiveness should not be considered as having magical diplomatic and political consequences. Furthermore, the concepts of apology and forgiveness cannot be fully understood without considering involuntary human conditions: mourning over losing people, possessions, land, prestige, honor, and so on. This presentation will examine the relationship of societal mourning to apology and forgiveness.

The mourning process means going over the images of lost persons and things, with associated feelings, hundreds of times until the reality of the loss is genuinely accepted and emotions—ranging from sadness to fury to survival guilt—are tamed. Forgiveness and societal well-being will be possible

when societal mourning takes place or is tamed and “mental doubles” of lost persons and things become futureless but valued memories.

Arts, movies, poems, or conferences like this one help to open the societal mourning process. Another typical way that a large group deals with mourning is to build monuments or memorials related to the massive trauma or to their ancestors’ massive trauma at the hands of others. Some monuments are designed to keep wounds open. Others help the traumatized society to mourn. I will provide examples of destructive and reparative types of monuments and memorials.

Attempting to understand large groups is a daunting task, perhaps a grandiose effort to manage the unmanageable. As I have learned more and more about various aspects of large-group psychology during the last three decades, I have come to a conclusion that the above statement is correct. Nonetheless, I also realize that some seemingly very difficult large-group conflicts can be managed in a peaceful way if we apply psychoanalytically informed diplomatic strategies to them. My colleagues and I from the University of Virginia’s Center for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction (CSMHI) (closed in 2005) developed such strategies. Among them is an unofficial diplomatic methodology that we named the *Tree Model*. The root, trunk, and branches of a tree represent the three phases of this model.

During the *first phase*, which includes in-depth psychoanalytically informed interviews with a wide range of the two opposing large groups’ members, the facilitating team (composed of psychoanalysts, historians, political scientists, others from different disciplines and former high-level diplomats) begins to understand the main conscious as well as unconscious aspects of the relationship between opposing large groups and the surrounding situation to be addressed.

During the *second phase*, psychopolitical dialogues between the same 15 to 20 influential representatives (legislators, ambassadors, government officials, well-known scholars, or other public figures) of opposing large groups under the direction of the psychoanalytically informed facilitating team take place in a series of multi-day meetings over several years. There are plenary sessions, but most of

the work is done in small groups led by members of the facilitating team. The participants from the opposing large groups become spokespersons for their tribal, ethnic, national, religious or ideological large groups.

When two large groups are in conflict, the enemy is obviously real, but it is also fantasized. If participants can differentiate their fantasized dangers from the current issues, then negotiations and steps towards peace can become more realistic. Psychopolitical dialogues become a process in which historical grievances are aired; perceptions, fears, and attitudes are articulated; and previously hidden psychological obstacles to reconciliation or change rise to the surface. Their aim is not to erase the images of past historical events and differences in large-group identity and culture, but rather to detoxify the relationship so that differences do not lead to renewed violence.

Political and diplomatic efforts to find peaceful co-existence between enemies provoke shared, felt or hidden anxiety, and therefore shared psychological obstacles against peaceful solutions because they threaten existing large-group identities, despite the fact that at times the population may appear to favor such changes. As a way of handling the opposing large groups' anxiety, the facilitating team pays attention to two basic principles that govern the interactions between enemies in acute conflict:

1. Two opposing large groups need to maintain their identities as distinct from each other (principle of non-sameness) and;
2. Two opposing large groups need to maintain an unambiguous psychological border between them. If a political border exists between the enemies, it becomes highly psychological.

Both principles relate to the fact that people in one large group have a tendency to externalize, project, and displace certain unwanted elements onto the other. Imagine "mud" is thrown onto the "other's" huge tent's canvas, and it sometimes leaves a "stain." There is, however, also anxiety that the

“mud” could be hurled right back at the sender. The two principles exist to prevent the “mud” from coming back, thus helping each side’s identity remain cohesive.

The act of paying attention to differences, including minor ones, between two large groups in conflict can be seen as a way of shoring up the psychological border between the two large groups’ identities. This differentiation helps lessen each group’s anxiety, since, with the psychological border in place, a clear distinction between the two large groups is maintained, diminishing the anxiety that one large group’s identity will become diluted or lost in the “other’s” identity. This emphasis differentiates this facilitating team’s strategy from many other peacemaking persons’ or teams’ insistence that in order to make peace the opposing groups are required to be friendly and that enemies need to “love” each other in order to make peace.

During psychopolitical dialogues the participants from the opposing large groups may suddenly experience a rapprochement. This closeness is then followed by a sudden withdrawal from one another and then again by closeness—coming together and then pulling apart like an accordion. Denying and accepting derivatives of aggression within the participants toward the “enemy” large group, even when they are hidden, and attempts to protect large-group identities underlie this behavior. Effective discussion of real-world issues cannot take place unless one allows the “accordion playing” to continue for a while so that the swing in sentiments can be replaced by more secure feelings about participants’ large-group identities.

It will be sufficient to state that during the psychopolitical dialogues, the facilitating team pays full attention to large-group issues mentioned earlier in this summary. It takes into consideration the importance of threats against large-group identity, it notices the importance of the shared mental doubles of the large-groups’ histories, and includes the impact of transgenerational transmission of trauma, images of past historical events, as well as time collapse. One crucial aim of the psychopolitical dialogues is to establish a “*time expansion*” between the more recent problems and the past ones

belonging to the ancestors so that more realistic negotiations about current issues can take place. This is done by not forgetting or denying ancestors' traumas, but by understanding and feeling how the mental doubles of such traumas have become large-group identity markers

The facilitating team seeks to spread the insights gained to the broader population through concrete programs that promote peaceful strategies and co-existence. In order for the gained insights to have an impact on social and political policy as well as on the populace at large, the *final phase* requires the collaborative development of concrete actions, programs, legal changes and institutions. What is learned is operationalized so that more peaceful co-existence can be achieved.

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