

Culture, Context and Resilience After Traumatic Events

Cultura, Contexto y Resiliencia Tras Eventos Traumáticos



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Abstract

Trauma and crisis are considered and reviewed within the context of the cultural subjectivity, current and historical, within which these events occur. Meaning of and importance of boundaries will be explored, in particular with today's use of cell phones and the internet. Examples of how we listen to both 'words and music' in our groups and to their members will be examined. To paraphrase Aristotle, a keynote must educate both the heart and the mind, or it is not a keynote at all.

Keywords

Culture, resilience, trauma, music, spirituality

Resumen

Se consideran y revisan los conceptos de trauma y crisis en el contexto de la subjetividad cultural, actual e histórica, en cuyo marco se producen dichos eventos. Se explorará el significado y la importancia de los límites, en particular con el uso actual de teléfonos móviles e Internet. Se examinarán ejemplos de cómo escuchamos las "la letra y la música" de nuestros grupos y las de sus miembros. Parafraseando a Aristóteles, una nota magistral debe educar tanto el corazón como la mente, o no es una nota clave en absoluto.

Palabras clave

Cultura, resiliencia, trauma, música, espiritualidad

Let me Express my deepest gratitude for the privilege of giving this keynote. I'm honored as your President to have the opportunity to share my thoughts and experiences about culture, context and resilience after traumatic events. Many thanks for the invitation to give this talk.

IAGP is an organization that was created into a reality by two brilliant men, Drs. Moreno and Foulkes. Congratulations Dr. Catherine Mela, and to everyone involved in making this conference come alive! The theme of this conference, "Trauma and crisis" is a very timely choice of topics, isn't it? I hope to do justice to the concepts of culture, context and resilience - in a way that is understandable, meaningful and digestible for everyone, in the time that I have to present it. On behalf of IAGP, thank you to all who are here in attendance as we all learn from each other.

My parents were simple people, and as you know, both of them were holocaust survivors. I shared their story with the late, Raymond Battegay, a former President of IAGP. They escaped from Austria to Switzerland by walking across a bridge in front of guards with machine guns, pretending to be drunken lovers... Quite resilient. What I learned from my aunt and uncle in Melbourne, Australia, who were both filmed in Steven Spielberg's Shoah project, was that everyone who tried to escape under that bridge on foot was machine gunned and killed. That is the randomness and arbitrariness of trauma and of life.

Me being born in the United States represented a dream for them - representing their dream of freedom - their dream of life after the persecution they lived through - as Jews living in Vienna in the 1930's. My parents struggled as survivors. And how my father could not find work in Jersey City, New Jersey, because he was a Jew. Until a German man hired him to work for his company... the culture of being an immigrant. They weren't wealthy but you don't have to be rich to achieve your potential in life... Both are gone - both died well before I became a therapist. Their dreams carry on today with my leadership of IAGP.

We affirm the greatness of IAGP with this Congress, as colleagues from around the globe offer keynotes and workshops for everyone here - speakers from Canada, the USA, Japan, Sweden and Greece. We honor the wisdom and vision of our founders. Their faith and belief were in the power of groups to help heal people.

Their insistence on integrity, putting the needs of our members first just as clinicians we put the best interest of our patients first.

Our technology will continue to help IAGP grow the vision of our founders, just as we have expanded membership around the world following their vision. Webinars will unite us, regardless of one theoretical orientation.

IAGP will continue to respect differences of theories, respecting all approaches, just as our letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations expressed our values - that we as an organization condemn hate crimes wherever they occur around the world, be they Hate Crimes because of race, religion or sexual orientation. A person in Greece can now participate in a webinar offered by someone anywhere in the world. Our Forum and Globeletter are being resurrected from the ashes like the phoenix rose from its ashes. We know we can do better for our members and we know we will. IAGP is resilient and filled with good, talented and caring people. Having taught termination in group therapy for 16 years at an analytic institute in NYC, I'm keenly aware of the meaning of ending in groups.

Now, as we are at the very beginning of this wonderful Congress, please allow me to share some hopes - working backwards, for the end of my keynote and for your experience here at our congress. Imagine all that you will learn here in Thessaloniki at this congress. I want everyone to take away a greater appreciation of the impact of culture on your work after traumatic events, that IAGP is alive and well, helping people, educating people around the world in the area of trauma, using many different modalities.

Here are two of our upcoming congresses - in Italy and in Egypt. I want everyone to be curious and motivated to learn more about culture, want everyone to be motivated to join IAGP, want you to be curious about upcoming keynotes and workshops, as you appreciate the cultural dimension of working with trauma - want everyone to understand human resilience and how important it is for us to have both hope and faith in each other. This is what I know in my bones!

During my talk, listen and reflect on your experiences, your own culture, as relate to what I've shared and lived through as well.

After decades of working with trauma, I'm come to deeply appreciate the meaning of music from each culture, and how important and healing are the sounds and songs from each country, especially religious and spiritual songs. (Mimmo played John Lennon's IMAGINE before I continued.)

Imagine how much, at the end of this Congress we all will have learned from each other; imagine how much we will have shared with each other during workshops,

small and large groups; imagine learning about the different ways that trauma can be understood and worked with; imagine how different large groups can be, when led by experts with different theoretical orientations, that we are so privileged to have with us here at this Congress.

Allow me to thank Catherine, thank the organizing Committee, thank everyone who traveled to Greece - both to teach and learn from each other. Each keynote will touch us in different ways. Molyn's will help us appreciate the help that we need as mental health providers. Gary's will help us appreciate the research being studied regarding the efficacy of the group modality, a topic that I will go over slightly differently in my talk with respect to appreciation of culture in which the groups are run. Hide will highlight from his Japanese cultural understanding of hope. Judith, from Sweden will help us become more aware of non-verbal ways to help people. Magda from Greece will share her experience with non-psychopharmacological interventions. This Congress is a cultural buffet of ideas from international perspectives for us to incorporate.

(Here I invited people to help me maintain my frame.) Time is a boundary that is so important to respect, especially after a traumatic event, when boundaries are disrupted, and violated, within the culture in which that event took place - so, rather than have someone on the stage show me a piece of paper indicating that I have five minutes left, may I invite you, the audience, to find a way to let me know that I'm approaching this time boundary.

Speaking of time, may I invite people with:

0 years of experience working with trauma to stand,

Up to 10 years of trauma experience to stand,

Over 10 years of trauma experience to stand-

See, we have a wealth of knowledge and experience to share and learn from each other...

My talk won't focus on one particular theory with respect to culture or resilience but rather on the use of groups to help after a disaster or trauma. Every day for ten years, as chair of the IAGP task force for trauma and disaster management, and three years before that as chair of the AGPA community outreach committee, I read about and saw disasters from around the world in order to see how to respond. There is a toll that this work takes, too. And I'm glad that self care is becoming more talked about in our field. Our bodies, and our minds, hold the memories of events. In the context of today's electronic age, images of traumas appear rapidly, spreading the impact of the event exponentially. We see and hear about events around the world in real time. It's today's culture! Children, whose brains haven't fully developed, observe images of disasters over and over on the tv and on their computers but don't understand that this event happened only once, right? To that end, I hope that my presentation will be well received by both hemispheres

of your adult brains, your creative, intuitive side and your analytic organizing side.

Did I mention something about your cell phones during my presentation? Please keep them on! Trauma disrupts attachments! Having a cell phone in today's society keeps us attached to loved one's, especially during and after traumatic events.

Shame is a pervasive and toxic result after disasters or traumas. How shame is metabolized is up to the human being in the context of the culture that he or she lives. The psychiatrist Judith Herman states that the number one mistake clinicians make is not talking about the disaster/trauma but the second and equally important mistake, Judith states, is probing for and discussing traumatic material before an atmosphere of safety has been established - before trust and a solid working alliance has been established.

Very important to remember. There is something about being a human among humans in a group, especially after traumatic events. Anna Freud wrote that traumatized people need an authentic human experience and not an interpretation. To paraphrase Aristotle, who wrote that an education that educates only the mind but not the heart is not an education at all... Also true for keynote addresses... so to in our experience in this Conference - may everyone be educated in both your hearts and minds. My hope is that for everyone here you have authentic experiences, and learn much, making both Anna Freud and Aristotle smile...

"The primary focus in doing trauma work is to create a safe space for the work of the group - this is true regardless of the nature of the trauma, i.e., natural disaster, industrial accident, intentional act of interpersonal terrorism" regardless of one's theoretical orientation.

Allow me to tell a story about a bee sting. One my colleague's son was stung by a bee at 10am but didn't tell him about it until 2pm. After my colleague removed the bee stinger, he asked his son how come he only tells him now at 2pm about the bee sting. His son replied, "But dad, sometimes you have to be in a safe place to talk about scary things!" Out of the mouths of children...

Ignorance is a stance that is so helpful... not stupidity... but curiously about culture... Of the culture in the context where a traumatic event took place. D.W. Winnicott's wrote there is no such thing as a baby... A baby exists only in the context of the caregiver and the baby. My contention is that there is no such thing as trauma, no trauma exists in a vacuum... a trauma occurs in the context of the culture in the place in which it occurred.

Allow me to share some examples of traumas in the context of culture: and the resilience that followed... all within the frame of working in groups.

Male sexual abuse is quite real, it happens around the world, it was the very first group i composed during my analytic training... but men rarely don't speak about it... How best in the moment to help anyone who self discloses as well as the group members? My choice is based upon my experience during my analytic training in working in groups with male survivors of childhood sexual abuse... Focusing both on keeping the group in the here and now, and by cultivating group cohesion; one of the key factors in working with trauma in groups. Processing the disclosure horizontally, both with the survivor as well as with the group members, this intervention helped reducing shame and allowed for the group to stay in the here and now, as i invite everyone to be aware of your thoughts and feelings as i speak during my keynote.

Now my first trauma training developed at home... where i learned to 'bear witness' as Judith Herman stated, as many trauma theorists do, that bearing witness is one of the fundamental, respectful and meaningful concepts in working with trauma. My mother survived the Holocaust, but her mother, her sister and her sister's baby were killed in the gas chambers... Every Friday night my mother would light the sabbath candles and weep... Weep for those who died as well as weeping because she lived... And i would silently watch her, every week, as she grieved for her murdered sister Elsa. Naming the person is so important in that it creates context.

Out or respect for everyone here in the audience, and the toll that showing photos of traumas from around the world, I've decided to spare our limbic systems and not show any pictures of the events in the world that are very well knows to all of us... Instead, allow me to show a photo of a source of my resilience and self care. (Here I showed photo of me and Cubby, my rescued black and white cat.) For those of you who are friends of mine on Facebook, or are connected with Cubby, allow me to show you all one of my sources of comfort and resilience.

During the over 1,500 hours of trauma work I did In the USA after 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, the comfort that I received from my two siamese cats, Max and Jack, were so valuable and essential to my self care. (Here I showed photo of Max and Jack.) Never underestimate the meaning and importance of pets in the lives of our patients... I know of two cases of suicide after beloved pets died.

Now for a different example of culture and resiliency. Speaking of suicide - allow me to briefly discuss my first job as a therapist in a very dangerous inner city program, where most clients were black or Hispanic, for chronically mentally ill adults, in Brooklyn, New York, where there was a murder every three days because of the drug epidemic in New York City at the time, and a day program in Manhattan of middle and upper middle class white patients. There was a huge contrast in the suicide

experience of the same population, chronically mentally ill, in the same city but a different demographic. There was not one suicide in the seven years that I worked in the inner-city program but in the white, middle and upper middle-class program, there were many suicides each year. Culture and economic variables... the holding environment of the culture of 'family' in the inner-city programs, versus the isolation of upper middle class and white men.

Allow me to highlight another cultural dimension, that of music. Highlight the cultural dimension of our work and the power of music that goes deep into our unconscious. In my experience working with the trauma of psychosis - and how listening to the 'words and music' of the group members allowed me to pick up on the meaning of the humming of one group member...

It was a monolingual Spanish speaking group of psychotic patients. The group focused on words initially, with the first intervention being - how does a baby communicate before it has learned to use words. Each week the group members shared their understanding of such possible types of communication while one member quietly was humming to herself... the intervention that transformed the group for the members lives was to ask that member to "hum louder." It turned out that the person was not humming... they were singing... And singing songs of their country and other religious songs. Group members began to sing together... One group member who hadn't spoken in three years moved their chair to the table, joined the group and sang, one time only, recompensating one time from their floridly psychotic psychic organization to join the group members and sing 'En mi viejo San Juan' with everyone else. A profound moment for the group members!

We could discuss the trauma of poverty and how that can affect, as well as race, the diagnosis and the treatment that people around the world receive. I'm not sure how diagnosis and treatment are developed in everyone's countries here, but diagnosis based on race and poverty are very real in the USA. I'll discuss some examples of my work after 9/11 later in this talk.

Allow me to discuss the intra- and interpersonally loneliness after a trauma and how groups can help ameliorate that. An example of the photographer entering the room in Cairo before the workshops on loneliness and the desire to connect and how the first intervention was to ask those in attendance if it was OK for the photographer to stay... a group as a whole intervention fostering cohesion and allowing for everyone to cultivate the concept of 'micro mastery' a term I developed to describe the most subtle but nascent moment when a human being can begin to assume control over something after having potentially been overwhelmed with an enormous life altering, life threatening situation. Anyone who has

been traumatized needs to assume a sense of mastery of their world, both outer or inner, then the concept of micro mastery, one that developed over the years of teaching 'the treatment of childhood sexual abuse'.

The concept of micro aggressions is one that is getting lots of attention these days. But the concept of micro mastery is, in my humble opinion, as valid and important. Recognizing both dimensions of human relatedness is essential to help heal the splits that develop, after a traumatic event.

Loneliness is for many people's, including me, a major sequela of traumatic events. As someone who works a lot with trauma, people identify us with such events and keep us at a distance, not wanting to go close to such painful affects that can get stirred up in their lives. Our belief in human resilience ... and our belief in hope is one of the most important factors to cultivating in a group, along with cohesion...

Allow me now to share some thoughts and experiences on the concept of loneliness, language, context and culture as it unfolds after traumatic events. At an IAGP congress in Rome, after listening to my presentation - on a panel on group supervision of a group I led in New York City, chaired by the late Fern Cramer Azima from Canada, with panelists Sabar Rastomjee from Australia, Felix de Mendelson, from Austria and Kate Bradshaw Tauvon from Sweden and myself, a colleague from Croatia said, "Richard, this group reminds me of the Elvis Presley song, 'Only the Lonely.'" (Correction: It was a Roy Orbison Song). (Here, I invited Mimmo to play Roy Orbison's 'Only the lonely.')

I was Chair of the IAGP Task Force for Disaster/Trauma Management, and the only American invited to give a lecture and lead a small group at a conference in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. To understand different cultural perspectives, I asked colleagues on the task force, "What would you inform people about if you had a minute to speak?" I incorporated the following suggestions into my lecture and group leadership. An IAGP member from Kiev, offered, "There is sadness, hurt, depression, anger, fear, but most of all loneliness."

A colleague from Spain said, "I will emphasize the presence of silence in the communications in families and societies with those conflicts. I will describe how silence is an efficient mechanism of transmission of trauma, and also indiscriminate transmission to children, to offspring, by traumatized people without taking in account their capacity of assimilating."

A colleague from the USA said, "I would convey that I cannot truly know what they have suffered because I was not there, but I am present now to listen, learn, understand and help in whatever way I can."

Another colleague from Spain said, "I would add to see/listen and share with those who have suffered,

to recognize their pain, their despair and their stories in order to remember and to learn what could be done in the future to restore what has been destroyed if ever possible.”

Another colleague from the USA said, “With dedication and persistence, our Japanese colleagues relentlessly continue their outreach work to help the victims and families that were/are affected by the tsunami and nuclear fallout - the support they have asked of us is ‘to walk with them.’”

A colleague from the UK said, “When you feel overwhelmed with helplessness, when you haven’t a clue what words, method or strategy could possibly address the amount of unspeakable pain in front of you, get up off your chair, stand in front of the speaker and open your arms. Hold the person. Say nothing.”

A colleague from Israel said, “When pain is overwhelming holding, using words, is a comforting solution.”

This was from a dear departed colleague, Felix de Mendelson, from Austria, “I might say that it is very deeply shattering when we experience just how terribly human beings can behave toward each other, killing, raping and maiming for life, without any apparent reasons or qualms of conscience - that this not only traumatizes individuals, but can also disrupt the whole fabric of society, so that it is not only necessary to be there for the suffering victims, in the way that has been eloquently described here, but also to work toward repairing a sense of justice and of the requirements of human dignity in the whole society at large - something that can often take many years, even generations, but that it is a fight that we must not give up on.”

Another colleague from Spain said, “Those of us raised and educated as Catholics are instructed to grow with a sense of guilt due to what was explained as the ORIGINAL SIN. Never understood why, or what it was about. As I grew older, understood that guilt makes us accept punishment without even asking why since punishment is the only way to erase guilt and the uncomfortable feelings related to it.”

Another colleague from the UK said, “Where there is life, there is hope, and where there is hope, there is life. By hope, I mean the ability and willingness to exercise the transcendent imagination. However, I think that it is important to understand the symbolism of the conception of Jesus by God’s word through Mary’s ear. Relational listening and hearing, and conveying that the traumatized have been heard, are vital for our work. It is hard not to sound trivial and pretentious in the context of so much despair in while in the comfort of one’s home within fairly stable democratic societies.”

Our small group consisted of members from Sarajevo and Tuzla. Most were Muslim, and most were psychiatrists. English was their second or third language. Some group members knew each other, and others did not. During the

conference, our small group met six times and attended presentations. The concept of loneliness was introduced when the group and its members would be open to it.

I waited patiently throughout the sessions, allowing the group to go where they needed to, allowing the group to supervise me. In the fourth meeting, after a heated interaction between members, it felt like the right time to formally introduce the concept of loneliness.

I took a deep breath and asked, “How do each of you experience loneliness, both in this group and in life?” There was silence, and I felt a wave of sadness. The members looked at me for guidance. Finally, one woman spoke. She described being a teenager during the Siege of Sarajevo, described playing the piano by candlelight as a way to soothe herself from harsh conditions, no food, no electricity, and no water. Group members followed suit, speaking about love lost, lives lost and life alone. After each person shared, I asked how it felt to express those feelings with the group. The following poem, shared in a large group, describes those feelings:

“Silence”

*Silence speaks louder than words
Silence screams louder than noise
Opens windows and doors*

Breaks

Jazz

Blues

The bass

The base of the world.

Silence is poetry

And it says:

“I don’t know what to say,

All is said,

But we can pray.”

Jasmina Mulaosmanovic

In general, the group members expressed their feelings about loneliness when given the opportunity. For group members to express these feelings, the leader needed to establish trust and safety before an intervention could take place. To establish trust, the leader must listen patiently during preliminary sessions, allowing each member to go where they needed to go, not where the leader wanted them to go. Thus, an intervention needs to be timed when the group is cohesive and ready.

There were two interventions demonstrated in this example of culture, context and resilience. The first, asking trusted colleagues how they would intervene; the second, allowing for responses to unfold as the group saw fit.

Loneliness is a universal phenomenon, a profound sequela to traumatic events, as demonstrated by the group members in Sarajevo. If group leaders are present, we can melt away the loneliness in the moment, perhaps as you, the listeners to my talk here in Thessaloniki, connect and relate to this and other experience I've shared with all of you.

As I was preparing for this keynote, I found it difficult to organize my thoughts about this talk. I found myself distracted by the enormity of the disasters and traumas that I had listened to and responded to around the United States and around the world.

Three days ago, there was a months' worth of flooding in a town in the USA that had been effected by Hurricane Katrina in the United States. I reached out to a friend and colleague, who lived through the hurricane and floods when they occurred, and now all the memories are flooding back to her and everyone who lives near her, where a local man drowned in the flood waters. We spoke on the phone for over an hour, as I listened to her share her fears, her reactions to the flooding near her home. Again, being with someone, listening, bearing witness and having an authentic human interpersonal experience was what my friend needed. She didn't need any psychoeducation. She needed an attuned and attentive ear, someone listening with interest, curiosity and caring, with no agenda other than letting her know she was loved and so very glad she was alive and well. As the psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan stated, "It takes people to make people ill and it takes people to make people well..."

In September 2001 in New York City, after being invited to help a company situated in one of the towers of the World Trade Center that had lost hundreds of employees after the terror attack, several people asked me, "how are you going to help us?" I looked them in the eye and said, "I don't know... we will have to figure this out together..." Too often, there is a pull, a Traumatic Countertransference that impedes the good intentions of people interventions after events. Without an awareness of culture, our interventions can be iatrogenic, causing more harm with misdirected caring.

My hope for all of us at this wonderful Congress, is that we all have authentic moments during our workshops and groups, large and small.

May we all experience the curiosity to understand each other in the context of our different cultures, as well as the different modalities within which we help people around the world who have experienced, witnessed, endured and survived traumatic events in their lives.

My hope, as you all listened to my talk, filling in the experiences that I've described with the theories that resonate with each of you, that you have developed an appreciation for the meaning of culture in the work you do, of the importance of context in the groups you lead anywhere in the world, and have a greater appreciation for the resilience of your patients as well as your own resilience as people working with traumatized people anywhere in the world. We help people organize their experiences to help make meaning of it.

As we listen and as we bear witness to the members of our groups, we being to help reduce the interpersonal and intrapersonal loneliness within us all.

Thank you.

