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# The Unspeakable: Narratives of Trauma



## Introduction: We need to Talk about Trauma

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Just like any one of the generations before us believed of their era, we believe we live in interesting, fast-changing and often unpredictable times. What makes our generation different from the past ones is that we can observe in real time what is happening in the world through the various media. For some, the attributes ‘interesting’ and ‘unpredictable’ may carry with them a sense of threat to their (comfortable) lives and from this situation to a diminished sense of security is only a very short step. Feelings of insecurity, mistrust of others, and fear of the unknown are often triggered by having experienced some traumatic event on an individual or national scale. It is no wonder then that the words *trauma* and *traumatic* are used so often in everyday discourse, both in the media and also in private conversations. Many have been affected either by political upheavals (i.e., war, revolution, riots, ethnic or religious cleansing), natural disasters, personal tragedies or the consequences of economic downturns. We use the word *trauma* so often that it is at risk of losing the force of its meaning, its semantic impact.

On the other hand, in psychology, *trauma* is very particularly defined as an individual’s response to an event or a series of events that completely overwhelm that individual’s ability to cope with the experience and, subsequently, to integrate it into their life’s narrative. Prototypically, the event that triggers trauma is some kind of threat to life (including serious injury or a threat to physical integrity) of the subject or others, and engenders feelings of intense fear, helplessness and horror (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, DSM-IV).

A natural reaction to a terrible event is to banish it from awareness. There are no words to describe a traumatic experience. On the individual and collective levels, trauma is purged from consciousness; it is (as psychologists call it) *dissociated*. The paradox lies in the fact that a ritual of healing cannot take place unless a trauma story is told. The silence and secrecy that often surround the event that triggered the trauma need to be broken so that the processes of meaning making and recovery can begin. To witness a trauma narrative is to give the victim the presence and supportive context in which they can express the unspeakable. The act of witnessing these testimonies creates a connection between an individual and the community, between past, present and future.

The origin of *trauma* is the Greek word τραῦμα meaning “a wound” which may be literal or metaphorical. The emotional pain of a traumatic experience is

disorganizing and overwhelming for an individual, creating - in the words of Arthur W. Frank (1995) - a “wounded storyteller.” This can often result in the psychological symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD’s clusters of intrusion, constriction and hypervigilance leave the victim oscillating between remembering the traumatic event (flashbacks) and forgetting it (numbness), a conflict that is intrinsic to trauma. This trauma dialectic is not confined to PTSD sufferers (for whom these responses are involuntary). A majority of trauma victims also have these characteristic responses to their situation and struggle with the need to deny - both to themselves and to others - what has happened to them, and with the need to speak about and remember the traumatic experience. On the social level, the ambivalence of knowing and not knowing about horrible events, of talking and being silent about them, is also quite common. Our collective memory does not retain traumatic experiences for a long period of time.

However, it is only when a trauma story becomes a testimonial, when it is being spoken about and witnessed by others, that a healing of the wound can take place. Often, unless a trauma victim reclaims the horror of the event in narrative form, the shattered self cannot recover. In order to understand and integrate the traumatic event into their life narrative, a survivor needs to reconstruct the experience and to find language capable of recounting it, so that a path towards the future could be opened and, for some survivors, personal growth might even take place. Otherwise the dark shadow of victimization may remain permanently cast over the course of one’s life. At a societal level, we also need to reconstruct our traumatic pasts so the future can be reclaimed. As Judith Herman (1992: 2) so poignantly put it, “...an understanding of psychological trauma begins with rediscovering history”.

Regardless of the substantial interest in the trauma experience among mental health professionals, there are many controversies that surround the concept of traumatization. For example, psychologists and psychiatrists continue to argue over the definition of what constitutes trauma. Should it be defined by the diagnostic criteria as delineated in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV, and the 2013 revised version DSM-5), thus applying a medical model to its formulation, or should the definition be revised to include more psychological criteria reflecting the experiences and reports of the trauma victims themselves? What constitutes a process of traumatization? To what extent do culture and identity influence a traumatic experience? How does the process of trauma recovery unfold? This volume attempts to address some of these controversies and offer insights into the nature of traumatic experience and its narration.

While the research to traumatic stress has expanded substantially in the last twenty years and the subject of trauma has generated enormous interest among scientists and the general public alike, the trauma victims themselves unfortunately

are still stigmatized. Whether it is a rape survivor, war veteran or a victim of sexual abuse, their credibility is often questioned or undermined by society. For the victim, this dialectic of knowing and not knowing, speaking and being silenced, acknowledging and denying is constantly being played out over and over again. However, it is only by bearing witness to the courage and voices of those who are not willing to be silenced that we can liberate traumatized individuals and traumatized nations from that stigma. By bringing together various voices to witness different traumatic situations, this book attempts to serve this purpose.

## **The Structure of the Volume**

The direct impetus for this volume came from the international conference *Exploring the Edge of Trauma* organized by Professor Lieve Spaas from Kingston University, London UK, at West Dean College in May, 2010. The conference was an excellent opportunity to bring together and engage trauma researchers from various disciplinary backgrounds in a common discussion. This volume includes seven of the presentations from authors who participated in the West Dean conference. Additional contributions were also solicited from scholars researching aspects of trauma and its varied forms of expression in a multitude of contexts who had not participated in the conference.

Our contributors represent different disciplines, training, and perspectives in the discussion of trauma. This interdisciplinary approach adds to the multidimensional understanding and analysis of traumatic experiences that are too often confined to a singular disciplinary perspective. We believe that the main contribution of our book to trauma research is this transdisciplinary nature of the volume.

We tried to organize these diverse papers into groups that seemed connected by an overarching theme but, in many ways, the book offers a spectrum of issues rather than addressing discrete elements within the field of trauma studies. At first glance, the rationale for the thematic organization of the various papers may seem random, but, as we demonstrate below, the content is in fact interrelated.

The experience of trauma is always individual but the traumatic event that triggers it may affect any number of people. Some traumatic events, such as illness, the death of a loved one, the threat of death to oneself, domestic or other violence, sexual abuse or assault, are events that happen in a personal space. On the other hand, wars, revolutions, political persecution or natural disasters may simultaneously affect thousands or even millions of people. They are also likely to become mediated traumas to millions of other people around the world through the coverage of these events by mass and social media.

In trying to establish a structure for the volume, we loosely grouped the papers into four major “contexts” of personal trauma: **a) the historical context** (the effects of the French Revolution – Xavier Martin; the experience of WWI in German soldiers’ diaries – Jakub Kazecki; the recounting of survival in a Nazi concentration camp – Bożena Karwowska; the experience of Australian and New Zealand soldiers during WW2 found in literary texts – Tessa Lunney; being the unwitting instrument of trauma – Lieve Spaas); **b) the socio-political historical context** (the integration of refugees into a new culture – Barbara Chettle; political oppression in Ethiopia – Kebedech Tekleab; women as political prisoners in Estonia – Leena Kurvet-Käosaar; the media’s reporting of cataclysmic natural disasters (2010 Haiti earthquake) – Irena Radišević; **c) individual trauma resulting from “singular events”** (sexual assault – Magda Stroińska and Sarah Lightman; living with siblings who suffer from mental illness – Avi Sanders & Kate Szymanski; living with a parent suffering from Alzheimer’s and the loss of a child – Sarah Lightman); and **d) the theoretical context**: the modification of the current definition of trauma to include the perspective of the victim (Avigail Gordon & Kate Szymanski); and looking beyond the damaging effects of trauma (Kate Szymanski & Nancy Rosenfeld). Although we have arbitrarily assigned papers to the particular categories, in actuality, many of them overlap one or more of these areas.

From a timeline perspective, the French Revolution is the earliest traumatic event discussed in this volume. Its profound impact on French society and on the psyche of individual victims, witnesses and spectators is discussed by accessing the epistolary writings of the period by an expert in the field, Xavier Martin. At the other end of the timeline, the most recent traumatic event we reference is the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Irena Radišević explores modern media coverage in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy to show what aspects of suffering received the most attention in the mediation of the trauma. But as we all well know, trauma knows no geographical or temporal boundaries and suffering is hard to quantify.

## A Look Beyond this Volume

As editors, we have tried to at least touch upon the main areas of trauma studies but, as the volume took its final shape, we realized that there is so much more that we were unable to cover.

We realize that the majority of the contributions in this volume look at trauma from a Western perspective. The problem with this single point of view is that it is not representative of other cultural perspectives on trauma and suffering. We often only experience “second-hand” the modern horrors that happen outside of our

direct environment. We are witnesses to the mediated trauma of people in other parts of the world, people who often have no opportunity to contribute their voices to the discussion of trauma theorists. To add the voices of people native to Africa, Asia, South America and the Middle East, whether living in their home countries or in diaspora in the West, would have been an advantage.

There can be no exhaustive list of all traumas but we know that more could have been said about the problems of those who live with disease, poverty or homelessness or who are care-givers to people who suffer from mental and physical illnesses (some of these problems are discussed by Avi Sanders, Kate Szymanski, and Sarah Lightman). While we talk about the trauma of refugees who, having escaped from turmoil in their native countries have to start new lives in new cultures and languages, we do not even mention the dire situation of people who are homeless or live in extreme poverty, either in the West or elsewhere. This could be tied to the recent global financial meltdown that left many people struggling to make ends meet, to keep their homes and secure an existence for their families. We only mention in passing veterans of the most recent wars, many of whom return home suffering from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. This is being recognized as a serious problem in the West but we can only speculate on the enormity of the problem in the war torn nations in the Middle East, in Africa or elsewhere. Whole nations suffer the effects of the trauma of war or of oppressive regimes, often with no recourse to any form of help. We talk about the persecution of women in post-war communist Estonia (Leena Kurvet-Käosaar) and in Ethiopia in the 1970s (Kebedeh Tekleab), but this still leaves most of those who have suffered or are suffering political oppression world-wide unmentioned. While we talk about sexual assault (Magda Stroinska and Sarah Lightman), we only mention that rape and sexual violence as weapons of war destroy hundreds of thousands of lives in various parts of the world. However, sexual abuse happens not only during wars. The horrors of the abuse of the most vulnerable – orphaned children in care facilities, First Nations children in residential schools, among others – are finally being brought to light. The scandal of child abuse by clergy, teachers, coaches, and other persons in authority make headlines in the media but the psychological effects of such abuse often remain unspeakable and unspoken. In addition, there is the trauma of domestic violence, and that of psychological abuse, e.g. bullying or serious work place harassment. Nor have we made mention of terrorist attacks and the psychological impact of these acts.

We believe that what is being said about the types of trauma selected in our volume is applicable to all kinds of traumatic experience: if what happens to a person is incomprehensible and impossible to integrate into their life narrative, then someone needs to bear witness to a victim's story in whatever language it is told for healing to take place. This is the rationale behind the structure of this

volume and the selection of topics covered. Sometimes the unspeakable *can* be put into words but often it may be communicated through silences and omissions. It can be represented in pictures or in a composition of colours or textures. It may be said through music or expressed through laughter. The act of witnessing requires an honest effort to *listen* to a story that may be disturbing beyond our imagination. But it is a story that has to be told in order for healing to begin.

We very much hope that people dealing with their personal trauma or helping those affected by any traumatic experience, will find here something that they can use in their own work and struggle. Our intention is to inspire people to find a way to *express the unspeakable*, to communicate their story, to bring it to the surface by whatever means are available to them. This volume is meant as an attempt to help those who live or work with the traumatized to become better at recognizing the importance of listening to the testimony of “the wounded storyteller” and to give them voice.

*The Editors*