

The Elephant in the Room:- A Northern Ireland Counselling Perspective

“Collective violence changes the perpetrators, the victims, and the societies in which it occurs. It targets the body, the psyche, and the sociocultural order.”¹

According to official British statistics, between 1969 and 1998 there were some 35,669 shooting incidents, 10,412 explosions, 11,483 firearms and 115,427 kilos of explosives were seized during 359,699 searches, from 1972 some 18,258 were charged with scheduled offences, and some 3,289 people were killed and another 42,216 injured as a result of the conflict in the north. (Sydney Elliott & W.D. Flackes, Northern Ireland: A Political Directory 1968-1999, Belfast, The Blackstaff Press, fifth revised and updated edition, 1999, pp.681-687).

Van der Kolk et al (1996)² defined traumatic stressors under three categories:-

- 1) time limited events characterised by intensity and unpreparedness of the victim
- 2) sequential stressors with a cumulative effect
- 3) long lasting exposure to danger

Northern Ireland suffered from “the Troubles” for 40yrs, with atrocities committed by all sides of the conflict. It has large numbers of people who have experienced all three traumatic stressors cited above. It currently still has communities separated by the ironically named “Peace Walls,” because the different religious communities do not feel safe enough living in close proximity to one another, without a 20ft wall between them. Northern Ireland of course, is not unique in experiencing intercommunity and interreligious violence. It is, I suggest, unique within the United Kingdom and Ireland in this context, how the working class population (whose communities were/are the most impacted) experience the current and past consequences of the conflict.

Some of “the justice for so called anti-social crimes” the paramilitaries imposed onto their own community included:-

- a) being shot through the kneecaps, elbows and ankles (some people all three at one time) and some victims on more than one occasion.
- b) having a high powered drill used to drill through ones’ kneecaps. One can only begin to imagine the damage a drill would do to sinews, tendons, bones etc as the drill goes through the kneecap.
- c) having one’s hands held on the ground and then a pickaxe being violently smashed into same. Another variation on this theme was having one’s hands smashed with a sledgehammer.

These were all done to people who were, initially at least, conscious. The levels of terror, fear, dread, helplessness, hopelessness, despair and pain experienced by these victims, is difficult to over-estimate. The barbarity inflicted by one human being on another is frightening to recollect. On occasions, these victims of paramilitary violence would be given a future date/time to be at a specific place for this “justice” to be carried out. So the victim and their families, could have a week to contemplate the horror about to be imposed on them. To some people the solution may seem

obvious, just don't be at the predetermined "punishment" location at the time set. But the victim knows that if they do not attend, then their brother, sister, father or mother will have the punishment done to them, *someone's having their kneecaps blown off on that date/time*. In a particularly sickening twist, the ambulance service of Northern Ireland have received phone calls about a shooting at a location, and when they ask the caller where and when, the caller says it's happening now and then the emergency service operator hears the screams and gunshots down the phone line.

Throughout "the Troubles" one of the most dangerous places, is in one's own home or within one's local neighbourhood. The victims will often know who the perpetrator/perpetrators are, and pass them every day in their local area/street. They also know if they report these perpetrator(s) to the police, they will be shot dead. The weapons may not be as visible thankfully; but everyone knows who the local paramilitaries are and if one of them tells someone to not stand at a certain street corner, it would be a very foolhardy act for this to be ignored. Numerous people within Northern Ireland have experienced prolonged, repeated traumatic events, including those carried out by the Security Services. The direct/intergenerational and transgenerational residue of these events over a prolonged period (40 years) is both chronic, deeply ingrained and not likely to be ameliorated easily.

Judith Herman³ outlines three stages of recovery from trauma:- a) attaining a sense of safety, b) remembering the details of the trauma and mourning the loss it has brought, c) and finally re-establishing a normal life. Given the factors outlined above, a sense of safety and re-establishing a normal life may be, I suggest problematic, if not impossible.

The diagnostic term "post traumatic" is problematic in itself, as it inevitably means relying on retrospective data retrieval, from longitudinally distant events. **This is the elephant (I suggest) in the therapy room.**

For counsellors in Northern Ireland these traumatic experiences are not only post traumatic, but also current and ongoing trauma. I also suggest that literature in the field of traumatology would suggest recovery may be long and challenging, if at all possible.

The bomb that devastated Omagh in August 1998, was the biggest single atrocity in the history of The Troubles, with twenty-nine people and two unborn babies killed. This atrocity occurred after the Good Friday Agreement was signed on 10th April 1998. Since August 1998 there have been numerous paramilitary incidents (attributed to both sides) and currently, counsellors still meet clients who have recently been threatened, subject to "paramilitary justice", told to leave their homes under penalty of a death threat. At the time of writing (24/11/15) the N.I. radio news reported on a young male shot in both femurs, with what was described as "life threatening and life altering" injuries. The Police attributed this attack to "dissident paramilitaries."

People tend to relive rather than remember traumatic memories in state specific form, with no linear time (i.e. it is not past, present, future, but an ever recurring

present) Van der Kolk and Fislir 1994. **“If elements of the trauma are replayed again and again, the accompanying stress hormones engrave those memories ever more deeply in the mind”** The Body Keeps The Score, Van der Kolk 2014.

The suggestion that this (chronic, prolonged trauma) could be ameliorated by any theoretical model via a short session model, stretches credibility to excess, and is not supported by researchers/experts in the field of traumatology. Particularly, when we add the components of the perpetrators often being known to the victims and they (the victims) are most under threat in their own home/local neighbourhood.

In response to the past/current/ongoing trauma experiences of large numbers of the population of Northern Ireland, what should be our response?

Perhaps an initial point of reference, for counselling or mental health services within Northern Ireland, may be to acknowledge the “elephant in the room” (past, current and ongoing paramilitary violence) and then looking for evidence based ways of addressing same, within an academically and experientially informed manner. Also acknowledging what others are saying from all over the world i.e. this will not be easy or short term, but long term complicated work.

¹ Robben and Suarez-Orozco 2000 Cultures under Siege, Cambridge University Press

² Van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth (1996) Traumatic Stress: The effects of overwhelming experience on mind, Body and Society. New York, Guildford Press

³ Judith Lewis Herman 1994 Trauma and Recovery Pandora London