

REVIEW ARTICLE

UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE: THE THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

Acts of violence by individuals and terrorist groups have increased and continue to shock us. A better understanding is required to break the cycle of crime and punishment. A psychoanalytic perspective offers a window into the human psyche behind these atrocious acts. More recent treatment models reflect a more empathic understanding beyond the more aloof traditional Freudian perspective.

An International Conference in Belfast, Ireland met to discuss the origins and treatment of aggression and violence from a psychoanalytic perspective. The challenge was to overcome simplistic notions of good and evil with a better understanding. An important emphasis was to encourage the ability to think, to develop thought in place of action. Treatment of violent individuals is difficult and lengthy.

The social and political aspects of terrorism were discussed in the context of group psychology in which a regression to an earlier stage of development occurs. The individuals identify with the leader with dehumanization of the other. The group demands justice and retaliation to deal with feelings of shame and humiliation.

We have been confronted by acts of violence by individuals who act on their own or who belong to terror organizations and attack random groups. Often they include children. They use gunfire or other

means. The goal of these attacks is to kill as many people as possible. Often the killers take their own lives or are shot down. These acts are unexpected and shock us. They are atrocious and “un-

thinkable “crimes. By necessity we need to defend ourselves and seek explanations. We get caught up in the social culture of crime and punishment.

A better solution is called for that breaks this cycle. As members of the helping professions we need to better understand these crimes. They reflect both the psyche of the individual as well as the group mentality of the terrorist organization which promises special membership and often spiritual rewards.

Psychiatrist James Gilligan¹ describes these “unthinkable” crimes as meaningful. They can be understood. They provide a mirror into the human psyche. Moreover, symbolic logic for such behavior can be found both in the bible and in Greek mythology. Gilligan asks us to develop an empathic understanding of the person behind the crime. Often violent behavior is an attempt to ward off a pervasive feeling of deadness. The danger and the urgency, the planning of the attack can sustain a feeling of being alive to ward off the deadness. When this fails suicide is often the only solution. Gilligan suggests that In order to break the cycle of crime and punishment we develop an understanding that will lead us to more effective treatment interventions.

Gillian was one of the presenters at an international conference in May, 2010 in Belfast, Ireland to discuss the origins and

treatment of violence from a psychoanalytic perspective.² Therapists from correctional institutions and outpatient settings were challenged to overcome notions of good and evil and to look at the complex problem using psychoanalytic understanding and a humane approach. Paul Williams has edited the presentations.³

Freud’s scientific writings were concerned with the unconscious and psychic processes such as repression and fantasy life. His focus was the study of the human mind⁴. As he applied these ideas to patients he found that they projected onto him feelings and wishes from past significant relationships. He called this transference. He warned that the therapist must not be seduced by these past wishes and must remain objective and uninvolved. The notion that the therapist also had transference feelings (counter-transference) and that these gave important clues working with the patient were new ideas. They were to evolve into new more humane models of psychotherapy.⁵ Humility, empathy and honesty were the new “techniques” that made a difference. The therapist no longer could remain aloof.

1. Gilligan, James. Psychiatrist, U.S.

2. Agression from Fantasy to Action. Psychoanalytic Ideas, Karnac Books. 2011.

3. Paul Williams, Editor. Opus Cit.

4. Freud S. Basic Writings, Modern Library. 1938.

5. Greenberg J. & M. Mitchell. Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory, Harvard University Press. 1983.

One emphasis at the Belfast Conference was to help develop the ability to think; to verbalize thoughts and feelings in the place of action. The therapist was aware of how anxious the patient was, how dangerous the situation appeared in the transference. The therapist, too, was afraid that the patient might throw the ash tray on the table at him. Both had to avoid taking on the “victim” role by open discussion in place of any action. The therapist would need staff support for this task.

Real or projected threats of aggression were differentiated from more benign *interactions*. Threats experienced as real attacks to the life instinct can lead to defensive and aggressive action and retaliation. Predatory defensive behavior can become an end in itself in later life beyond the immediate threat. Mitigation of these fears can be part of the treatment process.

Shame and disgust of the self were described as aggravated by accusations of failure by others that threaten self-esteem. Raging physical attacks, even murder, can occur to preserve the fragile sense of self. More recently early deficits in childhood are recognized as a factor in borderline, aggressive personalities. Poor representational figures in the inner life of neglected or abused children effect thought process and the ability to self-reflect in adult life. Outrage, betrayal and need for justice predominate. Treatment of murderers requires team and institutional support. As more awareness develops for another

person as well as the awareness of causing possible harm to them the anxiety becomes overwhelming. Medication and staff supports are required.

Several papers discussed adolescence as a vulnerable time with fears of helplessness and vulnerability. Recent attacks by young adults or older adolescents, school shootings, reflect the search for meaning, self-esteem and belonging in what is experienced as an alien landscape. Feelings of betrayal, outrage and the need for justice predominate and make treatment lengthy and difficult.

The political and social aspects of terrorism were discussed in the effort to understand recent violent outbursts. Group psychology suggests a process of identification with the aggressor to deal with feelings of shame and humiliation. Regression occurs to an earlier stage of development with dehumanization which becomes a prerequisite for terrorism. The group demands justice and retaliation. In “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego” Freud explains the need for boundaries for control of aggressive and destructive fantasies.⁶ Religion, culture and society serve that purpose.⁷ The ability to discuss and process events collectively as they occur at both the individual and group level to promote change is vital to preserve the humanity and dignity of

6. “Psychology and Analysis of The Ego”. Norton & Co. 1959.

7. “Civilization and Its Discontents” College Edition. Norton & Co. 1915.

those concerned. This is a huge challenge inasmuch as groups and individuals look to preserve the status quo and resist change.

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