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Vromans, Lyn, Schweitzer, Robert D., Knoetze, Katharine, & Kagee, Ashraf (2011) *The experience of xenophobia in South Africa*. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 81(1), pp. 90-93.

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The Experience of Xenophobia in South Africa

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The Experience of Xenophobia in South Africa

In May 2008, xenophobic violence erupted in South Africa. The targets were individuals who had migrated from the north in search of asylum. Emerging first in township communities around Johannesburg, the aggression spread to other provinces. Sixty-two people died, and 100,000 (20,000 in the Western Cape alone) were displaced. As the attacks escalated across the country, thousands of migrants searched for refuge in police stations and churches. Chilling stories spread about mobs armed with axes, metal bars, and clubs. The mobs stormed from shack to shack, assaulted migrants, locked them in their homes, and set the homes on fire.

The public reaction was one of shock and horror. The *Los Angeles Times* declared, “Migrants Burned Alive in S. Africa.” The South African president at the time, Thabo Mbeki, called for an end to “shameful and criminal attacks.” Commentators were stunned by the signs of hatred of foreigners (*xenophobia*) that emerged in the young South African democracy.

The tragedy of the violence in South Africa was magnified by the fact that many of the victims had fled from violence and persecution in their countries of origin. Amid genocidal violations of human rights that had recently occurred in some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the new South Africa stood as a beacon of democracy and respect for human dignity. With this openness in mind, many immigrants to South Africa sought safety and refuge from the conflicts in their homelands. More than 43,500 refugees and 227,000 asylum seekers now live in South Africa. The majority of people accorded refugee status came from Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia. South Africa also hosts thousands of other migrants who remain undocumented.

One of the unique but poignant features of the xenophobic violence in South Africa was that the perpetrators were similarly disadvantaged. The post-apartheid expectations of

many people had not been realized. At the time, several reasons for the anger emerged: inadequate public services; the frequency of illegal immigration; competition for resources (including housing and health care); competition for business and employment opportunities; perceived threats to relationships with local women; bribery and other crime attributed to foreign nationals.

Stories of Victimization

Although many people fled to South Africa in expectation of a safe and secure future, migrants from other African countries became the targets of blame for many South Africans' poverty. In that context, new immigrants could be expected to struggle to understand the hostility that they encountered. Accordingly, as researchers concerned about any abuse of human rights, we interviewed a convenience sample of foreign nationals who had been the victims of xenophobic violence. Interviewed in the Western Cape, all of the informants had fled their countries of origin (i.e., Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, and Zimbabwe). Their stories provide at least a partial view of the experience of migrants seeking refuge during May 2008.

Many South Africans believe that the xenophobic violence during that period was distinctive. Informants' narratives, however, revealed recurrent victimization. The men whom we interviewed described the May 2008 attacks as reflections of a long-standing, ongoing pattern of assaults occurring in a menacing context of chaos and rumor. The interviewees recounted rapes of foreign women, attempted murders, fights, stabbings, and strong-arm robberies. Describing victimization across a period at least 7 years long, one participant summarized, "We are disconnected. We are abused, verbally and physically, in trains and in buses and in taxis."

Discussing ethnic violence that occurred in Durban in 1999, another man said that he did not envision an end to the xenophobia: "I knew...inside my heart [that] this was not

normal violence or normal crime; it is xenophobia. It is not something that will go away in a few moments and finish. The chaos will just continue and get worse and worse.”

It was clear that interviewees who had been attacked during the violence frequently experienced threats by their neighbors. Descriptions of the xenophobic violence often took the form of a chronological list of experiences of violence, frenzy, and disorientation. The incidents often were simply harrowing: “I was pinched [stabbed] with a screwdriver here at the shoulder. I was at work so I heard people running, people coming to kill. So I was stopping at work and run quickly.” The men perceived their very existence to be tied to relationships often characterized by abuse and attack.

The men’s narratives also revealed intense experiences of multiple losses. The importance of social connections cannot be underestimated, particularly in traditional collectivist societies where each person’s self is understood in terms of interdependence. Isolated from families and communities and unlikely to place trust in others, participants reported being without strong social networks. They commonly experienced loneliness and hopelessness in trying to solve their problems: “Here is nobody who is coming to ask me, ‘What is the problem?’ Yes, I feel lonely.”

Interpersonal losses, however, were not the only losses experienced. For example, the men often described abstract losses, such as the loss of a sense of identity, place, and belonging. As one man lamented, “I really want to have a permanent residence, ...[an] ID [card] as others [do],...[and] a country which I [can] call my country.”

Often occurring in multiple contexts, material loss was a consequence for all victims whom we interviewed. Some participants described being robbed of money and possessions. Others described the complete destruction of their businesses. One participant’s workshop was destroyed, and the contents, including tools, were looted. Such vandalism and thefts resulted in a loss of livelihood: “Whatever I worked for...went in the xenophobia violence.

Because they looted everything, I had to calm myself. I lost a lot of things because of living in...the camp.”

Discrimination resulted in loss of jobs and other economic opportunities. For example, one man told about employers' unwillingness to make accommodations to meet the traveling needs of displaced workers who were relocated to distant sites for their safety.

Emotional Responses in a Hostile Environment

Participants felt abandoned by the government and international agencies. At the safety sites (places of refuge), migrants were not provided with adequate food and accommodations. The men perceived the government to be working against resettlement and local integration. “What surprised us,” one participant complained, “is that President Mbeki took one month to talk anything towards his people for behaving like beasts....He would hide...while people [were] just being burned alive.”

The participants expressed deep resentment that the safety of foreign nationals was being neglected at a time when they felt so vulnerable. The exasperation of one participant was illustrative: “I can’t just fight the government back...if it is the wrong decision.... As an individual, you cannot fight the government.”

The participants' sense of impotence was exacerbated by the perception that the president believed that “the guys here, these were thugs, or just people stealing” — an attribution that was interpreted by the migrants as a negation of their experiences of victimization resulting from xenophobia. The perception that their integrity was being assaulted in multiple ways led to further feelings of vulnerability and distress.

Describing the profound response to the hostility and violence, the participants revealed emotional distress and fearful apprehension. Explicitly and implicitly exposing core elements of the self, the emotionally charged memories reflected the significance of the events. The men described a range of emotions, including depression, numbness, fear,

distress, embarrassment, and humiliation. “I was so highly depressed,” one said. “Now I am like blank,” he added. “I can’t do anything.”

Narratives of fear were particularly frequent. Participants described chronic anxiety: “I realize that I am in a foreign country. All of a sudden I am scared, and I don’t react freely, only because of that fear.”

Despite adversity, the migrants whom we interviewed revealed a capacity to transcend their situation through a sense of agency and survivorship as they sought to make sense of the aggression directed towards them. For example, one participant demonstrated a capacity to abstract and see beyond the immediate events that constituted the xenophobic violence. “Sometimes,” he said, “you meet good people who will assist you, and you appreciate it. Sometimes you meet bad people who treat you bad, but there is nothing that you can do.”

Several sought relief from their current distress by placing their current experience into the hands of God. Referring to his faith as a significant source of strength, one migrant proclaimed, “I should be nothing today, but with hope and with grace of God giving me life and strength.”

Several participants spoke about the need to be a strong man and to demonstrate being in control. This theme emerged in discussions of personal strategies for maintaining strength in the face of perceived threats and of relationships with family, as manifest in a sense of responsibility for others. For example, one participant described his sense of survivorship: “The loss of this amount of money is not the first thing I have seen in my life. I have seen greater losses than this. I’ve seen much...bodily harm.... I had that kind of thing; it’s not new. That has trained me to be strong in my ways of handling things.”

Participants indicated the personal significance of coping with threat by engaging in mundane activities, such as getting up in the morning, leaving the safety site, and continuing with daily activities. For example, one participant continued to engage in work. He

described his routine: “I just wake up. I say, ‘I see this is morning today. OK, let me go.’ Today I can't wake up early because I sleep late, but I always go.”

Conclusions

Although the genesis of xenophobia has often been discussed, the experience of those targeted has seldom been explored. The experiences reported in this article provide an understanding of how migrants made meaning of the hostility that they experienced in South Africa.

Scholars often use a trauma framework in their conceptualization of the effects of violence. This explanation is inadequate, however, in describing the experience of violence occurring in the context of xenophobia. The sense of self as other is positioned at the heart of the experience of xenophobia, and expressed in terms of rejection, dehumanization, violence, distress, loss, yearning for home, abandonment and vulnerability. Despite these self-diminishing experiences, participants expressed gratitude for the kindnesses that they received. They revealed capacities to transcend their unenviable situations by looking beyond immediate events, trusting in God, being strong for others, and maintaining normalcy.

At a practical level, there is an urgent need to develop effective interventions to mitigate and alleviate the psychological sequelae of xenophobic violations of human rights. We hope that the voices of migrants describing their experience as targets of xenophobia will inform this work.

At a community level, several authors who have studied collective violence, mass killing, and genocide have described the origin of such acts as complex but often arising from the perpetrators' own victimization. Even though xenophobic attacks may be interpreted as racially motivated, attention should be given to the significance of the sociopolitical context, the crucible in which attitudes and behaviors are cultivated.

Pursuing such an approach, psychologist Ervin Staub, a recipient of the American Orthopsychiatric Association's Max Hayman Award for studies of genocide, has related violence to the frustration of basic human needs. Staub's work implies that preventive interventions should address the forces that result in such frustrations. Specifically, prevention of ethnic violence should include processes of healing within previously victimized groups and of reconciliation between hostile groups.

The events of 2008 exposed virulent prejudice toward other Africans living in South Africa — prejudice that culminated in xenophobic violence and that persists in some measure. Experiencing the profound effects of xenophobia and believing the dangerous situations to continue, participants assessed their future with trepidation. As one said, “It is not something that will go away in a few moments and finish. The chaos will just continue and get worse and worse.” Unfortunately, this prediction turned out to be accurate, as further xenophobic attacks occurred on a more limited scale following the 2010 World Cup soccer tournament in South Africa.

The challenge remains to address the divisions that underlay such violence. Ultimately, the answer lies in creation of cohesive communities in which the identification of particular groups as “others” is replaced by expectations of trust, so that enemies become potential friends.

Keywords: South Africa; immigrants; refugees; xenophobia; violence; trauma

Questions for Self-Assessment

1. Who were the victims of xenophobic violence in South Africa in 2008?
2. Describe the context in which such violence occurred.
3. Describe the effects of the violence on the victims.
4. How did such experiences differ from those in other types of victimization?

Suggestions for Further Reading

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