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Brandon Hamber

Transforming Societies after Political Violence

Truth, Reconciliation, and Mental Health

 Springer

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Preface

Paraphrasing Descartes, we may say that one method is to take the reader into your confidence by explaining to him how you arrived at your discovery; the other is to bully him into accepting a conclusion by parading a series of propositions which he must accept and which lead to it. The first method allows the reader to re-think your own thoughts in their natural order. It is an autobiographical style. Writing in this style, you include, not what you had for breakfast on the day of your discovery, but any significant consideration which helped you arrive at your idea. In particular, you say what your aim was – what problems you were trying to solve and what you hoped from a solution of them. The other style suppresses all this. It is didactic and intimidating.

*J.W.N. Watkins, Confession is Good for Ideas
(Watkins, 1963, pp. 667–668)*

I began writing this book over 12 years ago. It was started in the midst of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). It is an exploration of what I have learned from the process. During the TRC, I was working at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) in South Africa, primarily with people who testified before the Commission, but also on a range of research and policy initiatives in the area that is now called ‘transitional justice’.

I have written about the TRC process extensively. I have, however, resisted compiling my publications into yet another book on the South African TRC because I and others have said so much; the process is fairly well documented. However, over the last few years, I have come to the realisation that the role of mental health in the process – and, more broadly, the role of mental health workers in transitional justice – remains under-emphasised. There is much mention of survivors of violence and processes of healing in transitional justice but most of this is still based on assumptions or political rhetoric. This book tackles these issues not only for mental health workers but also, hopefully, for transitional justice practitioners and theoreticians, as well, so that they have a wider base from which to work.

I struggled with how to present this book. First, I knew I could only write it from my perspective and locate it in my experience of the South African process and other societies in transition where I have worked, most notably Northern Ireland, where I currently live. I have opted to use my own experience in the book, as well as my research and that of others, to demonstrate how I came to certain theoretical conclusions about mental health and its place in transitional justice. I hope through

doing this it will allow the reader, in the spirit of the quote I opened this preface with, to re-think with me the struggles transitional societies present in terms of mental health, and through this reveal new theoretical and practical insights. I explain exactly how I approached this methodologically in Chap. 1.

My second challenge concerned the interdisciplinary nature of my work. Over the years, I have leaned on theoretical approaches from numerous schools of thought and integrated these. Inter-disciplinarity has become second nature to me. However, this approach risks being 'fated to be perceived through the categories which it seeks to transcend, and to appear contradictory or eclectic except when forcibly reduced to one or the other alternative' (Richard Nice, Translator's Foreword in Bourdieu, 2007, p. viii). Those risks aside, I remain convinced that one has to use all at one's disposal when dealing with complex social phenomena. I hope the risk will be worthwhile and that the book will bring to life the notion in liberation psychology that social problems require methodological pragmatism (Burton & Kagan, 2005).

The first half of the book focuses on how my work in the area of transitional justice developed. It lays the foundation for the conclusions I come to about mental health and transitional societies in later chapters. I focus specifically on how the TRC dealt with mental health issues and wider questions concerning the political use of victimhood. The second half of the book consists of chapters built and expanded upon from some of my earlier work. The chapters cover topics such as reparations, justice, truth and reconciliation. I also give some attention to the problems with the embryonic human rights culture in South Africa today. The book concludes by specifically looking at the role of mental health workers in transitional societies.

This book is concerned with the psychology of dealing with mass political violence. This is elucidated, in part, by the story of my intellectual paradigm shift and how I have come to understand mental health and transitional justice, and its place in society. Primarily, however, this book is about survivors of violence and their struggles and, especially, how the individual process (micro) of coming to terms with mass atrocity relates to the collective or political process (macro) of dealing with the past. It moves from the premise that how we deal with the impact of political violence cannot be divorced from the social context. I will show that for many survivors of extreme political traumatising, healing is directly related to the interdependent concepts of truth, justice and reparations, as well as their own attempts to shape society. I hope that this wider approach to mental health will give rise to some useful re-thinking for both mental health practitioners and transitional justice practitioners.

This book, as mentioned, was over 12 years in the making; for this reason, I have many people to thank. I am deeply indebted to my friends and colleagues at the CSVR, not only those with whom I worked on a day-to-day basis but also all those who shaped the development of my work over the years. I wish I could mention all the staff, but such a list would be lengthy – so thank you.

Specifically, though, I would like to thank Graeme Simpson, previous director of the CSVR, who has always been an inspiration, mentor, collaborator and friend,

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Brandon Hamber
March 2009

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