



Tagungsbericht

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Beyond Trauma: Transregional  
and Interdisciplinary  
Perspectives on  
War-Related Distress

Tutzing, 5. bis 7. April 2018

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TG 03/17 –  
IWT 06/08-2016

# Beyond Trauma: Transregional and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on War-Related Distress

International Conference funded by the German Peace Research Foundation  
organised by Teresa Koloma Beck, Professor for the Sociology of Globalisation  
at Bundeswehr University Munich

Tutzing, 5 to 7 April 2018

The international conference “Beyond Trauma: Transregional and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on War-Related Distress” took place from 5 to 7 April 2018 at Tutzing Academy for Civic Education (Akademie für Politische Bildung Tutzing). Its objective was to look beyond the presently popular concept of “war traumatisation” and to capture the social character of the dynamics in question. The event brought together sixteen participants from various social science disciplines (sociology, social anthropology, cultural studies, political science) and fields of practice (counselling, psychotherapy, community organising, memory work, advocacy). They came from Sub-Saharan Africa, South and Central Asia, the Americas, and Western Europe. All participants had spent extended periods of time in war-affected regions; about half of them came from places currently or recently affected by protracted violent conflict. The conference was organised by Teresa Koloma Beck, professor for the sociology of globalisation at Bundeswehr University Munich.

## 1 Problem Statement and Rationale

Since the end of World War II, the impact of armed conflicts on psycho-social wellbeing has become an increasingly important topic in research, among mental health practitioners as well as on national and global public health agendas. Within conflict-affected areas, the capacity of people to cope with war experiences directly affects their capacity for agency as well as the political and social dynamics in the aftermath of a conflict. But also outside the theatres of war, the psychosocial effects of armed conflicts have become a hot topic: growing numbers of refugees from conflict-affected places challenge public mental health care capacities in many countries. Moreover, with the proliferation of military and humanitarian interventions ever more soldiers, police(wo)men and aid workers return from regions affected by war and violence, finding their experiences difficult to express and integrate.

In this discursive field, “trauma”, including “Post

Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD), has emerged as the dominant concept to refer to the negative impact of war experiences and to describe the condition of people who cannot cope with these experiences easily. Although both notions are rather narrowly defined in clinical psychology, they are omnipresent in political as well as in academic discourses and are employed to refer to a range of negative effects of war on people around the world. This extensive use, however, obfuscates the complexity and social embeddedness of the phenomena described: what is expressed and recognised as a “mental illness”, i.e. PTSD, in the context of a Western(-ised) public health system, might appear as “spirit possession” elsewhere. What is expressed in words and unusual behaviour in one place, might be expressed through bodily symptoms in another.

Against this background, the universal validity of Western concepts of mental health has been and

continues to be fiercely debated. Yet, at stake here is more than cultural hegemony: the medical language of traumatisation revolves around the individual and focuses on extra-ordinary cases. It narrows the analytical perspective in ways consistent with medical concepts of “treatment”, but unsuitable for understanding the social dynamics and societal significance of war-related psycho-social suffering.

The aim of the conference was to explore how war-related psycho-social distress is produced and expressed in different contexts. In doing so, particular attention was to be paid to the question how theoretical and conceptual problems are or might be related to problems appearing in practice fields. To facilitate systematic comparison, the event convened participants working on/in different world regions,

## 2 Presentations and Discussion

The conference was organised in four thematic sessions, preceded by an opening lecture of the convener. Session I discussed how the production of traumatic experiences as well as individual and social strategies to deal with them are preconditioned and influenced by cultural frameworks. Session II looked at the impact of traumatisation on particular forms and aspects of subjectivity. Session III explored how experiences of armed conflict and political violence are or have been dealt with within particular communities. Session IV discussed how war-traumatisation is or can be addressed in memory work.

In her opening lecture, “Beyond trauma. Why a social science perspective on war-related psycho-social distress?”, *Teresa Koloma Beck* sketched a sociological approach to war-traumatisation in the horizon of a sociology of everyday life. She argued that when trying to understand the social embeddedness of traumatisation and resilience, popular discourses on “trauma” put us on the wrong path. The reason is that they tend to individualise what are social processes and to be culturally blind. Moreover, being part of a language of illness and disease, they direct attention towards dysfunctional cases, overlooking broader societal transformations. Against this background Koloma Beck argued for a genuinely sociological research program which situated processes

whose disciplinary backgrounds differed, due to the multifaceted character of the empirical dynamics in question. About half of the participants were oscillating between academic research and other fields of practice, three mainly worked outside the academic field.

The conference, hence, operated, at the intersection of different disciplines. It had to straddle the tensions between the logic of scientific research and the logic of practice. And it had to facilitate dialogue between different cultures of knowledge. More than originally anticipated, the event was marked by an exploratory and experimental setting, in which the common language necessary to discuss the questions at hand only emerged in the process of exchange.

of war-traumatisation within the horizon of existing sociological knowledge. Introducing examples from the civil war in Angola she showed how the contingency and context-dependency of “traumatisation” can be analytically captured when theorising it in a continuum between normality and emergency as disturbances and transformations of everyday life.

### Session I: Cultures

*Pradeep Chakkarath*, cultural psychologist at Ruhr University Bochum, Germany, tackled the question from the perspective of cultural psychology. In “Culture Bound ‘Ethos’ and its Role in Human Suffering and Healing” he situated the controversies about the cultural embeddedness of trauma in the horizon of broader debates on the role of Western knowledge in a globalised world. He explained the relevance of indigenous psychologies, discussing the Indian case—where similar to Korea, Taiwan and certain Latin American countries—institutional efforts to mobilise cultural traditions in academic psychology have been particularly pronounced and successful. Chakkarath argued that “cultural psychology” was needed not as sub-discipline dealing with everything outside “the West”, but as a meta-perspective to integrate the diversity of the discipline in a global horizon. The discussion highlighted the practical

importance of understanding indigenous psychologies, especially in aid and development work.

In “Rebuilding Hope on Josina Machel Island: Towards a Culturally Mediated Model of Psychotherapeutic Intervention” *Boia Efraime Junior*, clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, currently based in Rome, reflected on his experiences in building a treatment center for former child soldiers in Mozambique. He described how this project became not only an encounter between different understandings of damage and healing, but also a lesson about the social and political embeddedness of therapeutic processes. The psycho-traumatologists, many of whom were themselves Mozambicans, were not only struggling to explain their approach and position but found themselves entangled in struggles about power and legitimacy. He explained how they adapted to this situation, expanding notions of what constitutes a psychotherapeutic intervention, as well as understandings of the causes, consequences and expressions of trauma and its psychic integration. Working together with traditional healers became a central strategy, but a challenging one as it introduced questions of power by highlighting competing systems of knowledge. The discussion supported central arguments of the presentation with examples from other (post-)war regions. It was pointed out that in many places traditional healers or religious leaders start to attend to traumatised people not because they cling to their power, but because due to a lack of mental health professionals, they are the only social institution people can turn to. The latter holds true not only in developing countries, but also outside the urban centres of the global North.

*Krystal Renschler*, head of national programming at Reconciliation Canada, discussed long-term processes of traumatising based on her work with indigenous communities in Canada. Her presentation “Reclaiming Culture: Narratives of Resilience in the Shadows of Trauma” discussed culture as both a source of traumatising and a form of treatment. Introducing the concept of “historical trauma”, which had first been used by the social worker and mental health expert Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, she discussed the long-term effects of colonialism in Canada. She explained how indigenous communities in the country are marked by disproportionately high prevalences of drug abuse and PTSD, high incarceration rates, family instabil-

ities and other social problems, which can be read as long term effects of colonial conquest. By disrupting traditional social structures, alliances and kinship ties and by intentionally dislocating people from their culture, community and collective identity, colonialism also disconnected indigenous people from the concepts and practices traditionally used for recovery and healing; a particular telling case were the Indian Residential Schools designed to “kill the Indian in the child”. Renschler described how some indigenous communities today try to mobilise traditions of healing in community organising projects and how reconnecting to cultural traditions in general can contribute to resilience and recovery in a post-colonial context. The presentation stimulated a discussion about the merits of introducing the language of culture and trauma to describe what might otherwise appear as classic social problems. While emphasising the loss and recapture of cultural resources can restrengthen traditional knowledge and thus empower indigenous subjectivities, it might also be used in policy making to deflect from the harsh material realities of poverty and structural exclusion.

## Session II: Subjectivities

*Gayatri Vijaysimha*, co-founder of the Bagheera Project, Kolkata, India, who has also worked as a researcher and consultant for UN organisations in the Middle East focussed on the particularities of women’s experiences in contemporary armed conflicts. Based on three case studies from Syria and the Indian Province of Manipur, her presentation “Silent Resilience of Women in Trauma” explored how women adopt varying roles and strategies to negotiate violence, conflict and war. Vijaysimha emphasised the discrepancies between public discourses which consistently focused on women in war as victims and the empirical realities in which situations of armed conflict frequently lead to the practical empowerment of women as they are needed to support or fill-in for men. The presentation also explored why these increases in independence and power, even if taking place outside of the household sphere, only rarely translate into an inclusion of women into the political process of conflict transformation and post conflict rule. The discussion further unfolded the ambiguities of womanhood in war

and post-war situations. It was emphasised that traditional gender roles and family constellations had socially and societally stabilising functions; in some places, marriage even figured among the traditional mechanisms of social repair. Given the importance of stability on the individual as well as the social level, pursuing women's emancipation in transitional and postwar societies remains a challenging and risky endeavour.

“Historical Trauma and the Crisis in Masculinities: A Case Study of Black Masculinities from the Colonial Period to Apartheid and Post-Apartheid South Africa” by *Kaymarlin Govender*, psychologist, behavioural scientist and research director at the Health Economics and HIV/AIDS Research Division (HEARD) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa, discussed long-term effects of colonial violence and repression on contemporary male youth. He described how in public discourses “masculinity” is a term chiefly employed to problematise male subjectivities. And he explained how narratives problematising black masculinity have pervaded South African history since the colonial conquest: from the tales about the noble savage who has to be educated, to the oppressive policing of allegedly rampant black sexuality under the Puritan norms of the Apartheid regime, to contemporary narratives of dangerously fragile masculinities. Drawing on the theoretical concepts of hegemony, internalised oppression and the notion of thwarting (the inability to sustain or properly take up a gendered subject position), Govender described how in this context the performance of violence gains importance as an expression of (masculine) power and a way to reassert a lost sense of self. The discussion opened up a comparative perspective, attempting to sort out which aspects of the dynamics described were particular to South African history and which related to more general transformations of gender roles in the horizon of a global Modernity. This presentation also provided an occasion to continue the discussion about re-framing social problems and inequalities in the language of trauma and repair.

In “Temporal sequences in traumatic narratives” *Kristin Platt*, sociologist and social psychologist from Ruhr University Bochum, Germany, discussed

the peculiar temporal order of individual traumatic experiences and explained their relevance for understanding life-histories affected by traumatising. Autobiographical narratives are based on temporally ordered narrative structures. Temporal structures can be recognized as the most important element in reconstructing experience. Studying temporal patterns allows statements about the coherence of an autobiographical self – and traumatic fragmentations. Various therapeutic approaches integrate the notion that achieving a temporal order for the memory and narrative of a traumatic event is an important step in working through an overwhelming experience. The concept of trauma itself reflects the idea of an injury that causes a fundamental break between before and after. Yet, irritations of the temporal order are already part of the experience of traumatic distress. To express these distortions of “ordinary” temporality, metaphors are employed: time seems to “stand still” or to “run faster”. Understanding the temporal order of traumatic narratives as indicators of the effects of traumatization means to overlook the necessity for metaphorical expressions of temporality in traumatic language. From the perspective of social and cultural psychology the paper discussed the importance of metaphors relating to temporal order, to show, that disintegrations are not only reflections of social fractures and personal injuries, but also a function, that can stabilize the coherence of traumatic narratives.<sup>1</sup>

### Session III: Communities

In “Bird in the Cage. How Syrians Deal with the Trauma of Assad's Detention System” *Annabel Böttcher*, social scientist specialising in Islamic Studies at University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark, discussed how Syrians who had been exposed to the security apparatus in the war since 2011 dealt with their experiences. At the center of the analysis were in-depth biographical interviews with three medical doctors who had fled from Syria. The interviews built on personal contacts and networks established in the region during a long-term engagement with an international organisation. The doctors interviewed had all been engaged in a network of underground medical health care fa-

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<sup>1</sup>Most unfortunately, Kristin Platt had to withdraw her participation at short notice. Given her absence, there was no discussion on this paper.

cilities which had emerged in the first weeks of the anti-Assad demonstrations to attend to protesters wounded in the streets who wanted to avoid the state-run public hospitals. In doing so, they had themselves become targets of repression and violence. Their life stories came to be marked by fractured mobilities shaped by the need to stay alive, by fractured social capital as successive movements of dislocation separated them further and further from their families, and by fractured professional capital, as their refugee status made continuing work as a doctor difficult. The discussion focussed on the tension between heroism and victimhood that was very pronounced in the biographies presented and tends to mark the life-stories of people who live through extreme situations. It also brought up the problem that interview research under such conditions might come to be perceived or be used by the interviewees as a quasi-therapeutical emotional release.

The presentation of *Vandy Kanyako*, political scientist at University of Portland, USA, “Conflict and community resilience. A West African Case Study” focused on mid-term community transformations. More than 15 years after the end of region’s transnational conflicts, which at their height produced more than 1 million refugees and internally displaced persons, the negative effects are still being felt by its survivors today. The conflicts which engulfed Liberia, Sierra Leone, and to some degree Guinea and Cote d’Ivoire not only inflicted damage on the affected countries’ physical infrastructure and caused needless death and suffering it also devastated local communities and wrecked social institutions. The erosion of social support networks, which are critical as coping mechanisms has exacerbated the impact of this dark chapter on the local population of West Africa. The presentation explored the long-term impact of war and conflict in the region with a particular focus on traditional mechanisms of healing and reconciliation as well as on the tensions between memory work on one hand and aid work on the other.

In “Present Past. The Trauma of Liberation” *Lukas Welz* discussed the situation of Jewish Holocaust survivors, based on his work with the aid and advocacy organisation AMCHA, Germany. He explained that Holocaust survivors still alive today had lived through the camps and the persecution as children. Many experienced the end of the NS regime not as a

moment of liberation, because they had literally lost their place in the world and also could not reconnect to experiences of an adult self in freedom. The presentation showed how the stories of survivors came to be silenced not only in Germany, but also in Israel. And it highlighted the importance of the survivor community as a place where otherwise unwelcome experiences could be shared. Welz explained that research in and around AMCHA projects had identified three key elements for working with child survivors of the Holocaust: first, recognition, which includes the recognition of long-term consequences and the resulting need for long-term support; second, community, in the sense that therapeutic processes need to work against the isolation of survivors by deliberately embedding therapy in community organising processes; third, security, as the organisation’s work has highlighted the importance of the AMCHA-centers as safe spaces for protected and confidential interaction. The discussion focussed on the question in how far these criteria are applicable to institutionalised processes of supporting people traumatised by war in a more general sense.

In “Wellbeing of Staff in the Context of War and Conflict. An Impossible Goal?” *David Becker*, psychologist at Sigmund Freud University Berlin, Germany, discussed the problem of psycho-social distress among aid workers in regions of armed conflict. The presentation was based on experiences in a project relating to staff well-being carried out for an international organisation working in Syria. Becker started by emphasising the social embeddedness of traumatisation. Trauma is no isolated psychic reality but a particular aspect of social realities which need to be understood in the first place. Thinking about staff care in crisis situations, therefore, means to first consider the general conditions these organisations are working in. The latter include working under high pressure with only limited staff in a context marked by experiences of loss. It also means recognising that the conflict environment tends to foreground or even to produce conflicts within the organisation, especially such that relate to questions of culture, belonging and identity. Against the background of these considerations, Becker identified three key areas of tension or conflict which tend to affect the well-being of staff members of organisations working in armed conflicts: first, the tension between resilience and vulnerability, the latter is

necessary to prevent processes of de-humanisation, which is why the creation of spaces of vulnerability is of major importance; second, the tension between recognition and acknowledgement, which affects not only the staff but also the clients of the organisation; and third, the tension between equality and difference, because the situation of conflict creates pressure for cohesion, which might lead to an organisationally dysfunctional suppression of difference and dissent. Becker emphasised that staff care could be provided without mental health care experts on the ground in peer-to-peer exchanges, but people would need help to organise such processes.

#### Session IV: Memory

In “Enigmatic Traces. Remembering and Forgetting in post-war Sri Lanka”, *Malathi de Alwis*, social anthropologist at University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, discussed processes of memorialisation in a country that is still divided over the legacy of civil war. She introduced the distinction between memorials as sites to never forget and monuments as sites to always remember, and presented two projects, which had very different impacts on the targeted communities. The first was a memorial put together by LTTE supporters from the debris of a cemetery bulldozed by government forces. The process of destruction and rebuilding had repeated itself twice during the war. Today the memorial constitutes a symbolically important reminder of the war’s atrocities to people across the original political and ethnic divisions. National monuments have been much less effective, at least on the individual and the community level. Although they symbolically emphasise unity by naming, for example, victims from both sides of the conflict, their impact is limited as they

directly touch the lives and experiences of but a limited number of people. De Alwis emphasised that in the perception of most people the crucial sites of memory politics are not memorials or monuments but pension schemes, infrastructure projects and other public policy measures that show how the state relates to and cares for formerly contentious populations. The discussion focused on the role of the state in processes of memorialisation. It was highlighted that memorials put in place by private institutions are not necessarily more inclusive. Decisive are the social processes set in motion around the material structure.

*Omar Alejandro Bravo*, psychologist at Universidade Icesi, Cali, Colombia, in “Enforced Disappearance in Columbia. Trauma, Forgiveness, Reparation”, discussed the impact and memorialisation of disappearances. Having worked as a researcher as well as as a psycho-therapist and activist, he emphasised the intrinsically social character of the phenomenon of enforced disappearance. The disappeared person is missing not only for her/his family, but also for society. He presented a project that in a cross-over of photo art, activism and therapeutic intervention attempted to make disappearances visible. In “Ausências” the photographer Gustavo Germano shows old family photos next to recent re-enactments of the very same motive with the very same family but without those who had disappeared during the armed conflict. Their absence becomes visible, sensible as a gap or a void in the picture. Bravo planned on taking up this idea in his work with survivors not only of political but also of gang violence. The discussion brought up questions about the role and the ethical and political responsibilities of researchers, activists or other practitioners working with or on war-traumatisation.

### 3 Summary of Main Insights

The conference created a discursive space at the crossroads of various disciplines, cultures of practice and cultures of knowledge. A central insight gained from the dialogue in this heterogeneous group related to the importance of social science perspectives for understanding and dealing with war traumatisation. The conference showed that the “sociologisation” of the matter appears to be needed not only from the perspective of the social sciences themselves, but also seen from other fields of practice. Practitioners working with individuals or communities on war-traumatisation intervene in complex social realities, which are charged not only with loss and suffering, but also with history, politics and power. The discussions also highlighted that there is not really a lack of literature relating to these issues; the psychologies that have emerged in the horizon of postcolonial political struggles as well as in the aftermath of the Holocaust are empirically rich and conceptually stimulating resources in this regard. The limited impact of these literatures on current debates and public policy making relates to more general problems of integrating knowledge produced at the “peripheries” of World Society into the canon of “universal science” and the production of “facts” in sciences in a more general sense.

The discussions at the conference suggested that promoting and developing less individualised, more social understandings of war-traumatisation necessitates not primarily theoretical mega-projects, but comparative research across different world regions and time periods. The event foregrounded the parochialisation of knowledge in the field, in which allegedly universal concepts have been produced in response to historically and politically situated cases. Bringing these cases and concepts into dia-

logue, however, proved fruitful for generalisation.

While in current debates about the limits of clinical approaches to war-traumatisation the notion of culture plays a central role, the participants agreed that looking at the cultural embeddedness of the processes in question is but one route to follow. Equally important are questions of power and politics as well as material realities such as poverty or institutionalised discrimination and exclusion. Moreover, cultural differences and “traditional” practices of dealing with traumatisation are relevant not only in the so-called Global South. The participants also agreed that generally rejecting clinical psychotraumatology in favor of “local practices”, as some culturalist approaches suggest, would be short-sighted. What is needed is a diversification of knowledge, including a nuanced understanding of the potential and the problems different practices pose in specific contexts.

A last major issue were the implications of working with war-affected populations as an outsider. Also regarding this point, the discussions revealed the complexity of the situations in question. The cases presented undermined the simplistic dualism between ignorant and disturbing outsiders on the one hand and knowledgeable and productive “locals” on the other. Some of the case studies presented highlighted how experts in “traditional practices” of healing and repair might play a problematic role as they cannot shed their entanglement into local dynamics of power and politics. Other cases showed that sometimes the outsider with her but temporary presence and her connection to a globalised world can become an actor who invites trust of a particular kind.



## 4 List of Participants

- Malathi de Alwis, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka
- Rohullah Amin, American Institute for Afghanistan Studies, Kabul, Afghanistan / Bundeswehr University Munich, Germany
- David Becker, Sigmund Freud Private University Berlin, Germany
- Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, Ruppin Academic Center, Israel
- Annabel Böttcher, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark
- Omar Alejandro Bravo, Universidad Icesi, de Cali, Colombia
- Pradeep Chakkarath, Ruhr University Bochum, Germany
- Kaymarlin Govender, HEARD, University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa
- Teresa Koloma Beck, Bundeswehr University Munich, Germany
- Boia Efraime Junior, freelance clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, Rome, Italy
- Vandy Kanyako, University of Portland, USA
- Kristin Platt, Ruhr University Bochum, Germany
- Krystal Renschler, Reconciliation Canada
- Gayatri Vijaysimha, Bagheera Project, Kolkata, India
- Lukas Welz, AMCHA, Berlin, Germany
- Katharina Maria Wuropulos, Bundeswehr University Munich, Germany