Love, War, and Healing in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: An Ethnographic Study of Torture-surviving Couples' Experiences in Multi-couple Group Therapy.

Webinar presentation
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Overview

- Background
- Research Aims
- Literature
- Methods
- Results
- Discussion

Background

- "Family therapy is a missing part of torture treatment. Torture treatment will not be effective if it ignores family dynamics and the long- and short-term effects of the transmission of torture effects to the spouse and children. Family therapy should be part of a multi-systemic, multi-modal approach to torture treatment." (Kira, 2004, p. 41)

Research Aims

- Explore perceptions of torture-surviving Congolese couples in Pweto, Katanga, DRC, of the effects of torture and war trauma on their relationships;
- Evaluate their experiences of participating in a multi-couple group therapy (MCGT) model;
- Explore couples' perceptions of effects of MCGT on their relationships;
- Assess the feasibility of conducting MCGT for torture survivors in Pweto.


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When the shadow of a tree is bent, straighten the tree, not the shadow. –Sierra Leone

A newly committed crime awakens sleeping ones. –Zambia

You cannot lean on air. –The Gambia

Trauma: Relational effects: Couple level

Trauma: Relational effects: parent/child

Systemic approaches to trauma treatment

- Despite all of this, systemic approaches to trauma treatment are sorely lacking. Most trauma survivors in therapy in the U.S. seen individually; few therapists are trained to do couple or family work to address trauma.
- A mounting evidence base to support a handful of individual treatments, e.g., narrative exposure therapy (NET), cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), and prolonged exposure (PE).
- Difficult to sustain treatment effects; relationship satisfaction and other variables tend to be affected little by the above approaches.
- Some effective couple therapy approaches emerging to treat trauma in relationships

Torture

- The very instruments of civilization that were designed to allow people to live in greater peace and safety are used against the citizens they are supposed to protect.
- Perpetrators supported by a government or militia systematically and purposefully design torture to cause pain and suffering, humiliate women and men, entertain themselves, and to intimidate and control people – sometimes an entire population, as was the case in DRC.

Mass torture and war trauma in DRC

Multi-couple Group Therapy (MCGT): Inspiration

- Pre-existing intention to develop and test a relational intervention that was needed
- Couples were reported to be an important target group
- In addition to these reports, good reason to believe that focusing on couples/parents is likely to stabilize families, and then communities (e.g., PMTO research, community research)

Multi-couple Group Therapy (MCGT): Development

- Herman's 3-stage trauma recovery model
- Stith et al.'s MCGT domestic violence treatment
- Attachment research; Johnson's adult attachment work
- Monson's couple work with U.S. veterans and spouses
- CVT's 10-session individual group model
- Solution-focused approaches
- Narrative and exposure approaches
- Somatic approaches

Multi-couple group therapy – prep

MCGT: Safety and Stabilization

- **Theme 1 (Session 1): Introduction/Orientation**
- **Theme 2 (Session 2): What my husband or wife does now, today, in the present, that I like or appreciate or enjoy.**
- **Theme 3 (Sessions 3 and 4): What was good in our relationship before the war.**

MCGT: Processing the Relationship Effects of Trauma and Grief

- **Theme 4 (Sessions 5 and 6): How I see that I have changed toward my partner, because of what I experienced during the war.**

MCGT: Reintegration and Rebuilding Couple and Family Life

- **Theme 5 (Sessions 7 and 8): What I see that you did, or that we did together, to survive or to save me or us during the war.**
- **Theme 6 (Session 9): What I want and hope to have in our relationship, marriage, home, family in the future.**
- **Theme 7 (Session 10): Completing and celebrating the group, saying goodbye, and moving on with life**

Methods: theoretical and epistemological frameworks

- Social constructionism, feminist theory
- Ecological theory, systems theory, attachment theory
- Critical ethnography, and an ethnocultural tradition: a way of exploring and studying a culture or phenomenon, heeding your role, agenda, and *positionality* as an outsider.

Methods: Trustworthiness and data sources

- Interview data – audio and notes
- My own reflections – blog, audio, notes, and emails
- PSC reflections in debriefings

4 October, 2007 - blog entry

Here, as in Italy, and Mexico, and I'm sure other places, the supervisory role really capitalizes on the "super" part of the deal. I realized that most vividly today when, truly, I said someone's name, and he jumped across the room to meet whatever need I was about to announce. After that, I realized that had happened a number of times already. There's a significant difference in deference.

I need to be aware of my own comfort level with being in an authority role, combined with their expectations of an authority figure and the desire for someone to know what's going on and to be in charge. I might be most inclined to refract what's cast on me right now, but I don't know if that's best, really. Who the hell knows what's best – why pretend there's something even called best.

Methods: Research questions

- What were couples' perceptions of the effects of torture and war trauma on their relationships?
- What were the couples' lived experiences of participating in MCGT?
- What changes, if any, did couples perceive as having occurred in their relationships since participating in MCGT?
- What recommendations do couples have for potential future MCGT?
- What is the feasibility of the MCGT intervention in Pweto in terms of acceptability, demand, implementation, practicality, and limited efficacy?

Participants and procedures

- I explained the project to MCGT participants at the end of the last session.
- PSCs approached all 13 couples who finished the groups to invite participation; 2 couples dropped out of the groups and were not included.
- All 13 couples participated: 7 couple interviews; 4 wife-only interviews; 2 husband-only interviews.

IRB and informed consent

- Verbal consent waiver
- Potential risks included difficult feelings
- Potential benefits included insight and self-knowledge

Domain analysis: Developmental Research Sequence (Spradley, 1979)

- 12-step method of conducting ethnographic interviews and analyzing the resulting qualitative data.
- Begins with "locating an informant";
- Continues through steps of collecting, organizing, and analyzing data, drawing relationships between concepts and clarifying components;
- Ends with "writing an ethnography."
- Emphasizes gaining a thorough, nuanced, and organized understanding of participants' knowledge by privileging their experiences and perspectives.

Results: Feasibility

- Evaluating a pilot intervention
  - Acceptability
  - Demand
  - Implementation
  - Practicality
  - Limited efficacy

Domains

- I: Before the war
- II: During the war
- III: After war; before group
- IV: During group
- V: After group

Results: Domain I: Before the war

- Individual:
  - No worries, calm, no pain in heart
- Relational - marriage:
  - Relationship was good, easy; there was connection: "The will was of two parts." Sex was easy and good. When there was conflict, they resolved it and forgave easily, sometimes with the help of an older couple. There was teamwork and collaboration.

Domain I: Before the war: Relational – parents/children:

- "Our children were alive."
- Material needs were met.
- Children were agreeable and respectful; parent/child relationships were good.
- I was a good parent.
- Discipline was appropriate.
- Parental roles were clear.

Domain I: Before the war: Contextual

- Material needs were met.
- We were able to provide for each other and family.
- Peace in the community; neighbors got along.

Domain I: Before the war: My reflections

- Responses in this section of the interviews were short and simple.
- Less difficult for couples to discuss this during interviews than it had been during group
- Not as many gender and culture differences as I might have expected to hear.
- Was consistent with what we heard during groups.

Domain II: During the war: Individual

- Profoundly painful emotions: anger, pain in the heart, "troubles," "worries," "too many thoughts," wondering, despair, exhaustion, shame.
- W4 winced as she admitted, "So much shame. When the soldiers captured me and did that to me, it gave me so much shame."

Domain II: During the war: Relational – Marriage

- Rape – interpretations, consequences
  - "The soldiers came and did things to me" (W4)
  - "What came was, when we were touched, my wife was undressed, but by someone who wasn't her husband, and if that comes into my heart, that makes me feel really bad." (H7)

Domain II: During the war: Relational – Marriage

- W8 and H8: "Because they did very bad things to us." "Maybe it's three or four soldiers on one person."
- H1: "I could have died, and she did everything to save me – I didn't know she saved me [at the time]."
- "What there was [of this love], it ended. When they started to rape my wife, that hurt us very badly in our hearts. It's that that affected us." (H8)

Domain II: During the war: Relational – Marriage

- Separation, dislocation, and disconnection:
  - "I didn't know if we would ever be together again. I was exhausted." (W1)
  - W12: "The relationship diminished. Each person had ideas, but they weren't expressed. They were just boiling inside him or her."

Domain II: During the war: Relational – Parent/child:

- Death, poverty
  - "They killed our children."

Domain II: During the war: Contextual

- Loss, poverty, fleeing, difficulties, and suffering
  - "In fleeing, we left all of our belongings, and everything was ruined" (H13)
  - "The war took our loved ones, everything we had, and brought suffering."
  - H8: "They took what we had as love, and also my love."

Domain II: During the war: My Reflections

- Painful and intense part of the interviews
- Couples revisited paralysis when discussing the impossibility of everything during that time
- Holes in my questioning in this section – possible anxiety about probing further with people when, this time, it was for my own purposes (research), rather than for theirs (treatment)

Domain III: After war; before group: Individual

- Described experiences echo PTSD symptoms: painful emotions, difficult and intrusive thoughts and worries, physical ailments, changes/reductions in functioning
  - Profound grief/sadness
  - Anger, hurt
  - Despair, pain in the heart
  - Reported changes were more holistic, involved more parts of them, changed their essence

Domain III: After the war; before the group: Individual

- H4: "What happened, we had a death. Yes. It was even more than death. Everything that happened to us, it was like a death."
- H1: "I became like a stump, like the place where you cut each time, and that made me angry."
- W1: "The anger when we remembered and thought, they're going to come back again, and they're going to do bad things."
- W5: "I had grief/sadness because of the war because when we fled…if we saw the children suffer, it hurt."

Domain III: After the war; before the group: Individual

- "I could take poison and die. I have no importance on life. I've lost everything; I lost all of my children." (unidentified for confidentiality)
- W9: "I'm sickly, and it goes on all the time. Pain in my chest, my head hurts, when we have sex, I have pain in my vagina."

Domain III: After war; before group: Relational - Marriage

- Two couples reported post-war relief and reconnection
- Overwhelmingly, though, couples lamented worsened relationships, related both to relationship qualities and to rapes perpetrated against wives

Domain III: After war; before group: Relational - Marriage

- Some exceptional understanding:
  - H4: “Not at all. We both felt the same anger. Who could blame the other? If you turn against the other, if I blamed my spouse that would feel bad… That can't happen like that. The wife didn't want it, she was forced.” Also reported feeling shame for not having “had the strength” to stop soldiers from raping. Both reported they had already spoken of this prior to group.

Domain III: After war; before group: Relational - Marriage

- Most couples detailed a rash of difficulties:
  - Increased conflict; quick to anger
  - Worsened conflict resolution: before war, it took hours; after, it took days
  - Weakened connection and love
  - Overall relationship change
  - Changes in roles as husband and wife
  - Sex refusal or avoidance after the war, due to fear, exhaustion, and anger - for men, this sometimes was rejecting the wife who had been sullied by rape

Domain III: After war; before group: Relational - Marriage

- H8: “It was as if I didn’t even hear her… Even if we talked, it always passed” (almost dissociative)
- W2: “We pushed each other away all the time. I didn’t want any more. That’s how it was.”
- H7: “In that moment, even the love had disappeared, was gone. Because there was something that came and came to ruin all of that. Even that desire wasn't there anymore.”

Domain III: After war; before group: Relational - Marriage

- W6 explained about her flashbacks: “We had troubles together, with my husband… because I was in my worries; I had so many thoughts.”
- H8: [anger was] “toward my wife. When she came, she came [doubled over]… Like that! Like that! Left like that - my wife! Yes, it was toward my wife, and I was even thinking of divorcing her, rather than stay with her.”
- This kind of anger was common among husbands when they started the couple group.

Domain III: After war; before group: Relational – Parent/child

- Parents who had lost most or all of their children were devastated.
  - W10, ruefully: “Our hearts, really, were broken.”
  - H3: “For me, really, things push me to think a lot, and really, [the loss of my children] bothers me a lot.”

Domain III: After war; before group: Relational – Parent/child

- Parents who still had most or all of their children described disproportionate anger and violence toward them, including risking severe harm or death
  - W2: "The war came, and when the war came, if there was something, right away, I would hit the kids. It was always that I would hit them."
  - W8: "…I say to myself, 'Ach! I'm at risk for killing this child because of the anger.'"
  - H7: "The anger, now I see that, I see even if I was ready, I could have thrown a rock at the children...Yes! I looked, and then I found something to hit them."

Domain III: After war; before group: Relational – Parent/child

- Parents described symptoms of PTSD in children: fear, intrusive thoughts and worries, and concerning behavior
- Relationship difficulties: disobedience, not listening, challenging parental role
- Some parents tried to soothe/comfort, with varying degrees of success – reported that they knew how to do this from their hearts, their own parents, or from god

Domain III: After war; before group: Contextual

- Extensive loss
- Poverty; lack of basic material needs
- Continued danger
- Fear
- Uncertainty
- Isolation
- In some cases, increase in peace and beginning of return to normalcy. "No gunshots" (H1)

Domain III: After war; before group: My Reflections

- Excruciating – in the interviews, but especially transcribing, analyzing, writing about this section
- Could not keep couples' details straight because of overwhelming amount of work happening at the same time; mistakes about their experiences
- PSCs overwhelmed, too, by the weight of the work

Domain IV: During MCGT: Individual

- Hearts soothed, straightened, softened, healed
- Anger and hurt diminishing
- Shame gone; dignity returning
- Fear diminished; forgiveness began
- W4: "You lifted everything that was in my heart."

Domain IV: During MCGT: Relational - Marriage

- Changes in marriages
- Importance of listening to and understanding spouses' and other couples' wartime experiences
- Establishment or reestablishment of love, forgiveness, recognition, and gratitude
- Reconnection and relearning
- Rather than blaming their partners for adultery, husbands started to see their wives' rape as something that had saved their lives/family.

Domain IV: During MCGT: Relational - Marriage

- H1: [We] "started to find each other again"
- W4: "We discovered love there… it surpasses even the way we were before the war"
- W2: "That encouraged us to open up what was inside of me, and my husband too, open up what was inside him"
- W6: "Men, too, make mistakes. For my husband not to get mad at me, this lesson is good, too..."

Domain IV: During MCGT: Relational – Parent/child

- Improved communication
- W8: "[The anger toward the children changed] when we did the group…because you said that it was important to talk with the children…, talk about the suffering."

Domain IV: During MCGT: Relational – Other couples

- [It was] a form of learning, of hearing, how to live in a couple. What we said could help, help each other, a form of interchange, we could say, "Ah, if I do badly here, I need to see how others are doing it, enter their path, the good condition, the good way of living.'"(H13)
- Connection, solidarity, courage to speak about experiences, "putting ideas together"

Domain IV: During MCGT: Relational – Other couples

- H11: "The manner in which we supported each other, me and my wife, and the way the others supported each other between husbands and wives, enriched all of us. What helped us the most was, 'Ahh, what the other says, that could be helpful for me.' And we start to let it come out."
- Taboos against talking about rape and sex disappeared; understanding grew.

Domain IV: During MCGT: Group practices, content, and components

- Good, educational experience
- Separate-and-reconvene format necessary
- In couples:
  - H3: "I would ask you to do it. Because if you're in twos, you can talk. Maybe if you're in the larger group, you could have shame, but if you're in twos, you can talk about whatever you want."
  - W5: "It became what we do at the house - what we did in the group - stay as two, talk together."

Domain IV: During MCGT: Group practices, content, and components

- In gender groups:
  - H2: "Separating the women to one side and the men to one side, it was in that moment that we started to talk...it was that that caused us to start to discover really the bottom of our hearts."
  - W8: "It was, for us, useful because we failed to talk together. But when we began to talk separately like that, there was ease. We started to talk quickly. And if we come together again as a group, we can talk."

Domain IV: During MCGT: Group practices, content, and components

- Couples' advice for us, for future groups:
  - Do more of the same; do it with other couples; go help other people
  - Offer written materials to supplement group sessions

Domain IV: During MCGT: My Reflections

- Challenges of being developer, interventionist, and researcher – seeking candid responses but having a personal investment in outcome
- It was darn exciting, especially after a year of such struggle. Just weeks before MCGT started:
  - "10 June, 2008. It's not the feeling of failure I mind. It's the feeling *so much* like a failure *so much* of the time"

Domain V: After MCGT:

- Individual:
  - Hearts calm; worries gone, anger gone, hope present; intrusive thoughts about soldiers waning
- Relational – Marriage:
  - All 13 reported good relationship; 12 of 13 said this was change from pre-group
  - Diminished conflict, good understanding, the presence of love and joy, as they had been before the war or better, good to one another, more togetherness and connection, improvement in sexual relationship, better teamwork.

Domain V: After MCGT: Relational – marriage:

- W12: "Now there's no more discord. We don't squabble; we don't get mad at the other person. If one does bad, the other says this wasn't good, and then we get along."
- H13: "What we like now is to be in a good relationship, to understand each other in all things. In all things, we understand each other quickly, quickly. So, things are going better on this path."

Domain V: After MCGT: Relational – parent/child

- Continued pain and grief over loss of children
- Parents' softening toward their children; perception that this helped children behave better
- Children's return to respectful and compliant behavior
- Parents' efforts to share with their children what they learned in group – talking about the war

Domain V: After MCGT: Relational – parent/child

- W4: "Before we were hitting them, but now, after some time, we started to just teach them and talk to them"; related her softening to her children's improvement in behavior.
- W2: "I notice that even if I talk, that anger doesn't take much time…and right away, the anger disappears."
- W9: husband was now more likely to take her children to the hospital if they were sick, whereas before group, he would refuse to take them.

Domain V: After MCGT: Contextual: A mix of experiences

Domain V: After MCGT: Outlier case: Emeline's despair

- Unique among her cohort
- Great tragedy during the war ***and*** in the time immediately preceding MCGT
- Emeline's Domain V responses strikingly different from others
- Linked her feelings and state of well-being to the recent tragedy, piled atop the prior losses and grief.
- "For me, the war continues," and, "I am worse now than I was before the couple group." She described herself as suicidal, and her husband as supportive and understanding. Referred for continued sessions.

Domain V: After MCGT: My Reflections

- The gift of witnessing human healing, resilience, and determination, all embedded right in the midst of overwhelming adversity, hardship, and tragedy.

Discussion: Full circle

- Pre-war – stable to outstanding relationships
- Wartime – devastation and desperation
- Post-war – emotionally / relationally haunted
- Group – remembering themselves, growing
- Post-group – strengthened selves and relationships, more productive lives

Discussion: Links to literature

- Findings support growing body of evidence for relational therapies to treat trauma
- Despite near-universal calls for greater clinical use and greater research focus, relational therapies remain little-used.
- Mass trauma:
  - Soldiers maximized shame, bred mistrust, and forced citizens - even family members – to harm one another; isolation reigned.
  - Comfort from knowing others had similar experiences did not begin until group; shared trauma not a protective factor here.

Discussion: Relational therapies

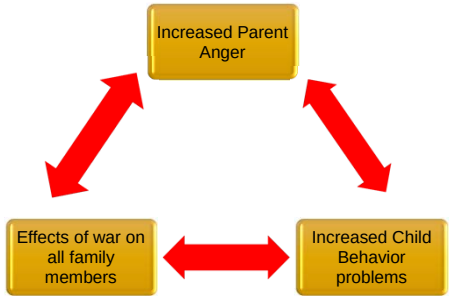
- When it is based on principles that inform effective therapies from both the trauma treatment field and the couple treatment field, couple therapy is often an effective way to address a range of intrapsychic and relational issues resulting from trauma (Monson, Wagner, Macdonald, & Brown-Bowers, 2015)

Gender

- Expressions of love, feelings, grief, and relationship were similar across gender.
- Gender differences in concerns, associations, perceptions of consequences of rape, as well as responses to partner regarding rape.
- Cultural ambiguity about gender roles – not just DRC.
- Stronger relationships seemed to transcend gender roles more than weaker relationships.

Discussion: Parents and children

- Children not interviewed; parent reports
- Findings consistent with literature on risk and resilience re: attachment and trauma
- Pre-war: children relatively well-adjusted; relationships positive
- Wartime: children's emotional, behavioral, and relational lives unraveled in the wake of trauma; response to parents' harsher treatment of them and parents' couple relationship conflict



Discussion: Limitations

- Small pilot study; non-random sample
- Surviving, intact couples may skew "stronger"
- Two couples dropped out; not interviewed
- Self-report data
- Researcher was also interventionist/therapist
- Quantitative data of limited reliability/validity
- Severely limited resources of every type
- Limited access to advising and support

Discussion: Strengths

- First relational intervention with torture-surviving couples in Pweto, possibly in DRC
- Critical ethnography approach
- Immersion in context for a year
- Close examination of researcher's role, influence, and experience

Discussion: Clinical implications

- Great need for relational interventions to address the effects of trauma
- Training must include empirically supported relational models of therapy for trauma treatment

Discussion: Research implications

- Follow-up study
- Randomized controlled trial (RCT)

Discussion: Dissemination and implementation

Conclusion

25 August, 2008, blog entry:

You tell me which is more thrilling, more humbling, to witness:

Is it the client who re-tells his 4th session ("The Most Difficult Moment") story [about when his house was burning and he grabbed his wife and and kids to get out of the house, because, "it was better to leave the house and be killed in the massacre outside than to stay and burn alive in the house"], but this time, during the 8th session, "Exploring Your Internal and External Resources: What Did You Do to Survive?" tells us how, upon exiting his house, he was beaten and beaten until he couldn't feel the pain anymore, and that he decided to play dead, went limp, slowed his breathing and made himself a dead weight when they kicked him to see if he was still alive.

25 August, 2008, cont'd

Instead of telling the story of how he was brutalized, he told the story--*the same story*--of how he managed to outsmart his killers. He told this story with a smile on his face. With pride. With joy. And then explained to us that it was his intelligence and his spirit and his heart that led him to those decisions and allowed him to save his own life.

Or is it the PSC who looks at me and says, "*Madame!* He re-told the same 4th session story, but *completely differently!!!* It was like he wasn't even the same client! He was telling it from the *survival* side of the story instead of the *suffering* side! He was *smiling* !"

?

You tell me.

Thank you.