

The Scales as a Central Symbol in Psychotherapy with Traumatized Refugees

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Most traumatized refugees come from countries and cultures where there is no or only a rudimentary psychotherapeutic infrastructure. It has therefore proven helpful to use images to explain the idea of psychotherapy to refugees (Abdallah-Steinkopff, 2015). The *symbol of the scales* – "the scales of life" – would seem particularly appropriate for this purpose. In the bright scale pan there are bright stones representing all the positive experiences and memories of one's life. In contrast, the dark stones in the dark scale pan symbolize all the bad, stressful experiences and memories. The scales of a person with an „ordinary“ life history are in a slightly oscillating balance, as there are good as well as difficult times in a lifetime. Traumatized refugees, on the other hand, almost always say that due to their traumatic experiences of persecution, flight and exile, their scales of life have been pushed strongly or even completely out of balance and that the dark stones far outweigh the bright ones. (D. Silove (1999) has accordingly coined the concept of a *stress continuum* in which the following five areas of experience have been destabilized: *safety, bonding, justice, identity and meaning*.) It is therefore the task of psychotherapy to bring the scales back into an acceptable balance. To start with there are two ways to accomplish this. Firstly, we can begin by placing more bright stones in the bright scale pan – in other words, to focus on *the bright way of therapy*, which in the language of therapy is referred to as stabilisation, building up resources, social support and empowerment. Secondly, we can remove or at least reduce the number of dark stones in the dark scale pan – i.e. *the dark way of therapy*, also referred to as trauma confrontation or exposure. Thirdly there is *the mindful way of therapy*, which refers to the motionless, detached centre of the scales. This can be practiced through meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 2011) or other mindfulness exercises. When all three ways of therapy are related to each other in a literally well-balanced manner (as in integrative behavioural therapy), refugees can experience a considerable and sustainable improvements in their health in a short period of time (if necessary with pharmacological support). We call this *basic stabilisation*, i.e. a subjectively experienced reduction in problems and symptoms by at least 70 % (www.inter-homines.org/IH-Brandenburg.pdf). Long-term psychosocial aftercare should be provided in order to ensure further consolidation.

A good method for the dark mode of therapy for politically persecuted persons is *narrative exposure* (Neuner et al., 2009), as this approach includes the *documentation of severe human rights violations* (Bamber, 2002/15). This personal testimony can then be used for both legal and human rights purposes, which in turn gives meaning to the client's suffering (Petzold, 2003). This procedure is also called *testimonio* (or testimony therapy). It is a therapeutic method that was initiated in the 1970s under the circumstances of the Chilean dictatorship by the two psychologists Elisabeth Lira and Eugenia Weinstein, the only one that was developed especially for politically persecuted clients (for safety reasons it was originally published under the pseudonyms Cienfuegos & Monelli, 1983). The *testimonio* method combines a highly effective trauma therapeutic intervention – transforming the implicit, emotionally charged "hot" memory into an explicit, "cool" memory; here it is suggested that each session be completed by a *body ritual for trauma neutralization* (Regner, 2017). The expectation is that how a society behaves in regard to human rights can be changed by providing narrative reports on severe human rights violations. This context, too, is represented by the scales as *Justitia*, the symbol for law and justice. Thus the *testimonio* method is particularly suitable for substantiating the five strategies of *normative empowerment*, a basic human rights oriented conceptualization of psychosocial and psychotherapeutic practice with politically traumatized persons (Regner, 2008):

(1) *Empowerment*: Traumatic experiences are basically condensed, encapsulated *memories of powerlessness* within a *person's sense of their own power* („Selbstmächtigkeit“, Schmid, 1998). The affective discharge and neutralization of such memories through narrative exposure leads to psychological empowerment, i.e. to an increase in the sense of one's own power. Furthermore, the testimony can influence the social debate on political persecution, albeit modestly if only considered alone.

(2) „*Enjusticement*“ („*Er-rechtigung*“): The documentation can be used as legal evidence in the person's asylum case. The testimonies are also made available to Amnesty International.

(3) „*Pursuit of Truth*“ („*Er-schließung von Wahrheit*“): The clients are given the opportunity to tell the story of their life and persecution from their subjective point of view, thus ridding themselves of the burden of false accusations and bolstering their self-esteem.

(4) *Liberation* („*Er-freiung*“): The cognitive restructuring and affective discharge of traumatic memories does have a liberating effect.

(5) *Publication* („*Er-öffentlichung*“): The testimony can be made available to the *democratic public* (Gerhardt, 2012) and thus gain *social recognition* (Honneth 2011) as well as *solidarity in a human rights framework*.

The underlying thesis is that the constitutional state is based on human rights and therefore on legal answers to experiences of injustice as suffered by politically persecuted persons (Bielefeldt, 1998). These experiences should be disclosed to the democratic public, which then in turn does have a healing effect on the people concerned.

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