

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUDING CHAPTER

6.1 MY OWN REFLECTIONS

In most studies of victimology (Kaufman, 1985; Snare, 1984; Wertz, 1985) the intent of the victimizer is own gain, for example in cases of rape or theft where the victim is in a sense a prey. In this study, it was part of the struggle to effect social change. Thus it must be seen in relation to the great inequalities and conflicts of mass social life. Fanon's (1979) notion of 'Manichean' thinking posits the emergence of a psychological structure in which groups are divided into 'good' and 'bad' particularly in contexts of political oppression and violence. For instance, in the present study the victims have been or acted as antagonists against apartheid laws, a factor which bound them to a political cause. This cause was fundamentally founded on a basic premise of a culture of survival characteristic of economic deprivation and political repression in which the space for exercising democratic ideals was either severely constrained or simply not permitted. Most family members of victims in this study have explained the circumstances surrounding the detention and abduction of their kin, as they opposed publicly the unjust laws of the apartheid regime.

The content of Chapter Two of this thesis dealt extensively with violence in the South African context and how it impacted on the families. Although these families have experienced victimization discussed in Chapter Four, they came across as resilient. For instance, not all of them are stuck in despair or resignation. On the contrary some of them long for the healing of the broken community as revealed in their expressions of forgiveness even during the interviews. Thus, it can be said that they have regained a certain measure of control over their own lives, by, for example, going about their own affairs. Some family members show their resilience through community involvement in projects that are aimed at capacity building in those who are unemployed so that they attain self sufficient skills.

Wertz's (1984) suggestion that victimization endangers individual survival is taken further by Young-Rifai (1979) who argues that, by extension, society may be endangered and this may lead to its collapse. It can be argued here that the possible demise of society due to the social instability

that occurred (during these families' era of political struggle) during the political upheaval which resulted in victimization of these families was averted by mechanisms of change in the South African context. These mechanisms attempt and are still engaged in attempts of de-emphasizing separateness which has created a split, not only between persons or humans, or relationships with others and nature, but also a split within the nation's psyche or soul. For instance the whole nation is presented with the idea and possibility of being able to heal the rifts, splits and ruptures of the past apartheid structure which denied people their humanity and had also caused deep-seated effects on the psyche (Hayes, 1998). The repeated calls by the former President Nelson Mandela to forget the past is motivated by a political anxiety that by dwelling on the past, reconciliation and democratic reconstruction will be discouraged. The commitment of such calls is in the hope of avoiding further political violence.

One of these calls resulted in the emergence of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Asmal, 1996) through which families in the present study were allowed to tell their stories. According to Jordaan and Jordaan (1998:740), the TRC was designed "as a unique, politically negotiated instrument to effect peace and reconciliation with regard to gross abuses and violations of human rights during the armed struggle in South Africa".

Firstly, as a concept the TRC (Lubbe, 1996) has as its ideal the healing of the whole country, which theoretically includes everyone, victims, perpetrators, the public at large, as well as those taking authority over and responsibility for the process. Authors like Cone (1975), Krog (1994), Nuttall and Coetzee (1998) have elaborated that recognised psychotherapeutic principles maintain that anybody who has been subjected to pain and suffering of the kind attested by these families in front of the TRC needs an opportunity to tell their story. This implies that communication of bottled up suffering, grief, anger and bitterness is an essential component of the reconciliation process, not because there is anything magical in the facts of the peoples' stories but because the act of the party talking and another listening creates an opportunity for an encounter in which unspoken minority is articulated and thus creates shared memory. In this way reconciliation is placed in a dialogical framework of speaking and listening. For instance one family member, Dick says:

"I think the TRC was a platform to voice my experience", while Zelda said: "It was a relief to share my story with others".

Other authors like Napier (1993), Schafer (1982) and Spence (1982) also support the contention that psychotherapy is mainly concerned with helping people construct healthier life stories and in so doing, give the person a new sense of life's coherence and continuity. What is achieved on an individual level may also be true for a group. This was confirmed in the present study. Even though the testimonies of families were related by individuals, in some way this represented the communities in the South African context. It is through the story telling of their bitter hardships that many people came to a reconciled understanding of their pain as well as the motives of the alleged perpetrators.

For instance individuals at grass root levels of the community made the following remarks on 'Two Way' a SABC television programme debate, during September 1996, which expressed their perception of the TRC:

- some families were relieved by the cathartic method of telling their stories and crying with others but found it difficult to reconcile if alleged perpetrators were not disclosing the whole truth;
- many people were unhappy about the composition of the TRC as they thought that it had disregarded the element of justice;
- there were fears that the TRC process might backfire, causing more violence especially if the expectations of the communities endangered during the struggle were not met;
- there were fears, concerns and anxieties by the Amnesty applicants before the testimonies as others had been terrorized with death after they told their stories of how they victimized people;
- the TRC process has opened wounds while mechanisms to deal with them are not in place yet.

In the present study, some family members also experienced the detachment and separation that the TRC process brought amongst family members. Emma remarked:

“I was approached to make a statement to testify in the TRC. I did that but I didn’t testify as my daughter-in-law went to testify without my knowledge and in my absence.”

The above statements support what Young-Rifai (1979) envisages as the individual being intertwined with the environment on a variety of spatial levels. Chapter Three of this thesis has touched on a theoretical mode, laying out comprehensive theoretical constructs in ‘systems’ theory’ congruent with individuals being intertwined with their environments on a variety of spatial levels. Social actions according to Young-Rifai (1979) depend on effective communication, social exchange and mediation between the individual and the environment. She further suggests that individuals interact with one another in order to fulfill needs and establish physical well being and that behaviours are conceived as a reward-cost system. This concept according to Kelly and Thibault (1978) is based on an exchange theory which postulates that the outcome in an interaction is visualized in terms of rewards received and costs incurred by participants. People expect reciprocity in this exchange with the environment, hence the victims that testified through the TRC also communicated their expectations that the government would make reparations by educating their children, covering medical costs of those who are sick and setting up memorials on behalf of their dead. If these expectations are not met, the perceptions exist that serious social imbalances are created, which might lead to the collapse of the society that Young-Rifai (1979) refers to.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider in any detail the work of the TRC or to review its many and varied functions. Swartz (1998) argues that this model of finding the truth, as a basis of healing which the families in the present study went through, is of course at the centre of psycho-analytic approaches to individual psychotherapy. These views maintain that in order to solve a problem in living, one must understand how the problem came about, to get at the ‘truth’ of that problem. Although collective truth seeking was the task of the TRC process, it is difficult for me and may be for many in the South African context to conceptualize how the notion of understanding the past does come to be seen as a basis for collective healing.

Owens (1996) states that in South Africa the effects of this historical process on the creation of a category of survivors of political violence and abuse are clear. He further questions if this collective abuse becomes the same thing as individual abuse, and if national healing is the same as individual healing.

During the struggle in South Africa funerals were extremely important vehicles for community mobilization and, it could be argued, for community healing. But in this large community audience, as in the larger drama of the TRC, the needs of the individual may be sacrificed to those of the group. Ramphele (1996) has commented on how a political widow of the 1980's complained that her husband's coffin was wrapped in the flag of the South African Communist Party (SACP) when, in fact, he had been a member of the African National Congress.

The taking over of the suffering and grief of individuals by the larger community in the name of a greater communal aim is not an isolated event. Swartz (1998) recalls that during the 1980's, individuals who had lost family members in political violence were suddenly being asked to speak at meetings, and to come to symbolize something more than themselves as private mourners. This was very difficult for some of these people, but very hard to refuse to participate in rituals which seemed to be helpful to the broader community.

Many families interviewed in the present study still showed residual symptoms of grieving as individual families. They were mourning the loss of their material possessions, such as, burnt houses. Some were also deeply hurt about the non-traceable remains of their loved ones while others experienced grief about 'living' abnormally from handouts distributed by charity organizations. Most of these families had gone through the process of testifying in the TRC, admitting to being relieved immediately after their stories were heard. But individual concerns and grief remain part of those individuals rather than that of the whole community.

It can be summarized then that national healing and individual healing are not necessarily the same. Individuals who, through their actions or their experiences of being subjected to human rights abuses, are given the role of speaking for the nation's pain are not necessarily healed or helped by this process. Swartz (1998: 184) puts it in nutshell as he remarks:

"In fact national healing is perhaps centrally a communal, political effort! It will never fit seamlessly with the needs of every individual".

The above arguments as supported by Swartz (1998), sensitize mental health professionals to the fact that public and political processes may be unhelpful or distressful to some individuals. In their awareness, mental health professionals need to understand further the interface between the

individual suffering and that of the society, a matter which cannot be debated in this thesis.

Although I come from a background that is similar to that of the participants in this research, as an investigator in the South African context, suspicions about what I wanted to achieve were raised by the families. Schutte (1983) documents that the investigator in South Africa experiences many difficulties. One becomes a stranger if one lacks familiarity with the group one studies. Most of the families, though my credibility was established by being involved in the counselling role during the TRC sessions, still had questions about whose ideals I was advocating. Other families were cautious and guarded about responding to questions as they saw me as representing the interests of the bureaucracy.

This suspicion and mistrust is a theme that reverberated throughout the text of the present study. It stems from distrust of investigators by the black people, since most researchers have documented their lifestyles in the context of apartheid. In Chapter Four and in the Appendix, most family members are shown to have disclosed how negative information about being informers or working for the security police were spread to their communities. According to the participants, this created disharmony and havoc amongst the black people themselves thus creating black on black violence.

The foregoing statements confirm that though I was known, to some families, my credibility was not secure. My position of authority in an institution which the community regarded as having been founded on apartheid designs made the families suspicious. However, the therapeutic group sessions that I spent with the families gradually paved the way for the development of trust and confidence between ourselves. During these group sessions I explored ways and the meaning of the trauma experienced and of providing a safe milieu to be supportive to each other.

It was not uncommon for some families to have higher expectations of what I could do on their behalf, especially in influencing the TRC body in making decisions with regard to their need as families, for reparation. This anticipated help by the families fits in with Schutte's (1983:12) notion that when the researcher is trusted by the subjects he/she is regarded as an "advocate or champion of his/her subjects' cause".

6.2 CONTRIBUTIONS TO PSYCHOTHERAPY

Studies on victimization as a broader social issue can contribute not only towards an individual's healing but to that of the whole society as well. In fact, the present study reveals that psychological themes which emerged from interviews with these selected families, speak to experiences of most families and people in our context.

Peltzer (1995) refers to a theory of ethno-psychotherapy which can be applied in contexts where individuals have been subjected to trauma or torture as it touches the areas of the concept of healing the professional, trauma therapy and coping styles. This becomes a possible contribution that psychotherapy can make to all South Africans which would translate into national healing that has often been a theme of reference by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. For instance, traditional healers often undergo an initiation illness before they become healers, just like psychotherapists working in the Western paradigm, have to undergo a shorter or longer process before they engage themselves in healing others. This concept of the wounded healer, as he/she is the medium of authority over the age group or myth of the client is what transpired during the TRC sessions as the commissioners and briefers also received psychotherapeutic intervention, for they could no longer cope with the intensity of the emotions from testimonies or stories told by the victims.

Debriefing is part of trauma-focussed psychological assistance. It is believed (Peltzer, 1995) that positive outcomes require that patients be encouraged to reveal as many details as possible about the torture to allow catharsis and re-evaluation of the meaning of the trauma by the victim. The goals of therapy are to help patients understand that torture presents victims with impossible choices. This allows patients to recognise that all responsibility and guilt for their trauma must be placed on the torturers. The therapist attempts to free victims from excessive guilt about their responses during the torture. During my involvement in psychological debriefing of the families before and after they had testified, families conveyed relief at being able to ventilate impressions and feelings about the hearings, as well as the strange reactions they experienced. This experience also evoked thinking about group issues and tensions as well as the mobilization of resources amongst the kin members of the family. It can be said that the detailed recollection of past trauma revealed their suppressed anger, rage, grief or hatred towards those who had violated

their rights. These experiences shared by the families point to the flexibility that psychotherapists could engage in the future when working with their clients either as groups or families, as it places great value in working with people as part of their environment. According to Swartz (1998) family therapy is by its very nature a more public activity than individual work and may help people feel included in a process which otherwise may feel foreign and strange to them.

Coping styles in non-Western societies can be classified according to this theory of ethno-psychotherapy that Peltzer (1995) refers to. This suggests that social support, including 'trust in leadership' increases group cohesion, recreating a flexible family support system and community support network. Most families in the present study talked about how they were humbled by the overwhelming support of their communities during the times of their turmoil when they were looking for missing family members and when they had to give their testimonies. The 'trust in leadership' seems to be an ongoing expectation as victims make references to how the present leadership in the government has to fulfil its obligation with reparations to the families concerned. One of the members from the Khulumani victim support group recommended as follows::

"I would like to see parliament decide on just reparations. They must make sure that people who were victimized and whose lives are still in tatters, have something to rebuild their lives" (Sowetan: August 16, 1999:5).

This perspective, as seen from the trauma experienced by victims, becomes an important dimension for psychotherapy because it encompasses the person's totality and his/her milieu. It is not only their emotionality but also the scars of those who left orphans without food and with educational disabilities or deficiencies.

The role of religion in instilling coping mechanisms in the search for a deeper meaning of the traumatic events experienced by these families, is perceived as healing. Centering their life style in God is seen as helpful, so as to gain freedom from the bondage of victimization. Many families in this study kept on referring to helpful prayers which promoted the binding effect of one's particular loss to the losses of the other people. It would appear that one's personal trauma becomes resonant with history and part of a life cycle of recovery.

Another important aspect of psychotherapy, especially amongst non-Western societies is the use of rituals. These are of central importance for the construction of individual and social reality. I recall how an elderly woman (whose son disappeared and died during the political upheaval) talked about how she experienced uncertainty about going on with her life as a born again Christian since she was guilty of failing to perform appropriate cultural rituals on behalf of her dead son. Westermeyer (1987) describes these experiences as grieving death at a distance that presents special problems. The absence of a corpse and a funeral ritual, as experienced by many families in the present study, undermines the culturally supported healing process whereby individuals demonstrate the experience of healing in burying or cremating the body. This happens in a context of mutual support, of renegotiating kith and kin ties, of replacing obligations to, and support from the deceased and of initiating the period of grief work. These practices serve a mental health function, hence, according to Gilligan (in Peltzer, 1995), the tradition of rituals may be used in psychotherapy by applying a four-step model namely: suggesting a ritual as a possible solution; planning the ritual; enacting the ritual, and post-ritual activities.

6.3 CONTRIBUTIONS TO FUTURE RESEARCH

In South Africa during the past decades there has been little academic freedom to research certain areas which would be considered risky to be investigated, such as the experience of detainees. This study and others which might have been conducted previously, contributes to the premise that Kruger (1998) refers to, of human science which has to be based on unbiased and faithful description of human phenomena illuminated and enriched by hermeneutic understanding.

This suggests that a meaningful contribution to both psychology and psychotherapy in South Africa can be made using a phenomenological method of research. This enquiry not only involves the researcher but community participation in action oriented research, where, not only the researcher is empowered about the cultural issues in research but community dialogue is enhanced. The therapist or researcher's experience during the undertaking of the research could also be interrogated more astutely as an independent study so as to evaluate the effect between documentation of the experiences as they emerged and pre-selected aspects of the researcher.

The general themes such as suspicion and mistrust, absence of helpful community and the problem of forgiveness which emerged from this phenomenon of victimization can be researched further by others because these need to be amplified. Carefully researched ethnographic accounts of mental health issues and psychotherapy are scarce but such accounts can provide very useful information which would facilitate the culturally appropriate delivering of psychotherapy for all in the South African context.