Book reviews

Jean-Claude Métraux (2004) *Deuils collectifs et création sociale.*
Paris: La Dispute/SNEDIT

In this French-language book Métraux wants to make a distinction between trauma and mourning. Whereas trauma often makes storytelling impossible, mourning frees the path to narration, which is a necessary condition for recovery.

Only when we are fully conscious that we are finite beings, can societies develop in an autonomous way. Only a clear consciousness of death as the absolute end of life makes us truly free beings and gives us true autonomy.

The author argues that our society, by its focus on incidences of violence, trauma, torture and terrorism, silences the spontaneous and natural reactions after tragedy, and the creative forces within society in general. In this context, he mentions the primary role of psychotherapists, governmental- and non-governmental organisations who immediately start to bandage the wounds of the survivors. Métraux wonders if the treatment of trauma in such a manner makes mourning impossible. No one seems to notice that the arduous hunt for terrorists after '9/11' has reinforced this process while at the same time has reduced the possibility to mourn – even to mourn the fact that a superpower is not inviolable.

A certain period of mourning is essential after the loss of a person, an identity, an idea, traditional values or whole populations, so that the past can be 'related'.

According to Métraux a lot has been written about individual mourning processes, but as he points out, social sciences have so far paid little attention to collective mourning processes. Before describing these more collective processes, Métraux suggests a revision of the existing terminology (for example, as described by J. Bowlby) used to describe the individual mourning process. Métraux refers to the four essential phases of this process in terms of 'freezing' (conscious mourning is still absent), 'closing-up' (negation of the irreversibility of death, and anger), 'opening' (emotions become tangible and can be expressed) and finally 'remembrance' (past events are transformed and integrated into the present).

A mourning process does not pass through these four phases automatically and can get stuck in any phase. When this happens during the phase of 'closing-up', Métraux speaks of 'fossilisation'. A person can also get stuck in despair: the deceased is idealized and images become icons. A mourning process can take at least one to two years – or even more – can come to a successful end when the remembrance of the deceased has become 'alive' again and has been transformed.

Parallel to this process of mourning after the loss of 'the other', a similar process related to the 'self' is started as a deepening of consciousness; the sadness about the loss of the other is internalised and we become conscious of the fact that it will be our turn some day. It is only with this awareness that life becomes meaningful, a necessary condition for true autonomy and creation.

Métraux describes the values of different societies throughout history through the underlying different meanings people give to life. Survival, and thus freezing, is inevitable in cases of emergency or eco-

nomic poverty. Once again, Métraux accuses humanitarian organizations of not recognising that processes of mourning may take decades before 'thaw' can occur. Survival can also become an aim in itself and destroy every chance of processing or creativity.

Control is underlying the phase of 'closing-up'. Control of the other or control of oneself. Control can be used as a protection against overwhelming feelings and as a temporary reorganisation of daily activities that can be useful, but can also turn into submission.

(Dis-) equilibrium is an underlying value when it comes to the expression of emotions. The irreversibility of death is clear at this stage, but too much emphasis on emotional aspects can lead to depression.

Creation, according to Métraux, is the ultimate value. Talking about meaning inevitably leads to collective mourning processes. These processes are culturally and historically related. They pass through different stages; phases that exist in their own right but which can fossilize at any moment as a result of an emergency (as in cases of ongoing violence), as a result of habits, but also as a mean of power. Fossilisation occurs easily because the need of people to 'belong' to a group is contradictory to the need for 'individual creation' – and thus this process poses a barrier to 'group creation'.

According to Métraux our contemporary society is in a phase where emotions are tangible and can be expressed, but in which death is not fully internalised. We mourn the loss of the other, but the dying one is kept at a distance, in a sterile environment, the suffering is alleviated as much as possible and is hidden to family or friends. The period of sadness should not be too long after whatever kind of loss.

For Métraux, Greek society in the 5th B.C. is a perfect example of a society that came to full autonomy: gods did not create the world but the gods have been created by a process that took place in society itself; no theology, no dogma, and no imposed creed. The statue of the hero does not represent the hero himself, but the eternal values that survivors can use to recreate and rebuild their society.

The book of Métraux is interesting in that it shows us the diversity of mourning processes through out history and within different cultures. In particular, his concept of 'fossilisation' makes clear how mourning processes that get stuck can influence the behaviour of an individual or 'colour' a whole society. The problem Métraux has with our obsession for the treatment of trauma is also a contribution to the discussion over whether our diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is not making a 'normal' mourning process impossible, especially since the DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition) speaks of disorder whenever symptoms last longer than one month!

However Métraux is not, as he pretends, the only one nor is he the first one to discuss or write about mourning processes and their more cultural and collective impact.

Françoise Dastur (1994) for example, stated that mourning is the origin of culture; *'one of the most essential aspects of a human being is that he knows he has to die'*. This includes, according to her, the existence of the other. Only after the death of the other, man becomes conscience that he will not remain forever. Derrrida (2001, see Gregoriou, undated) speaks about the act of commemoration as a manifestation of national melancholia. Though he does not use the same words as Métraux when it comes to '9/11', both talk about an Anglo-American idiom that dominates the world, an idiom that focuses on

terrorism, trauma and evil, making the real experiencing of mourning impossible. Although Métraux pretends to have deeply explored different cultures, his analysis, to give one example, about Buddhist tradition and their beliefs about life after death, shows his very personal and limited view of the purpose of mediation, or dealing with karma. When he states that withdrawal from daily activities means no more than a denial to live with pain, in my opinion he forgets the opportunities this tradition (or philosophy) offers to deal with loss and grief.

Finally, his assumptions about successfully completed mourning processes, betray his one-sided western approach when it comes to cultural matters. When Summerfield (1995) states that '*For one person, recurrent violent nightmares may be an irrelevance, revealed only under direct questioning; to a second person, they may indicate a need to visit a mental health professional; to a third they may represent a helpful message from his or her ancestors*', this cannot mean only that the second one is more or less 'on track' when it comes to going through the mourning process.

While I agree that the emphasis on 'post traumatic stress' reflects a globalisation of Western cultural trends towards the medicalisation of distress, and that successful mourning (in our culture) often implies that the ego has overcome loss by freeing its 'libido' from the lost object, violent nightmares as 'messages' from ancestors can be as effective, successful and certainly as creative for others.

In short, Métraux's pretension to give us clear and new insights into collective mourning processes is somewhat disappointing.

References

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Summerfield, D. (1995). Psychological responses to war and atrocity: The limitations of current concepts. http://www.torturecare.org.uk/publications/Archive/Summ_2.rtf

Reviewed by Bibiane van Mierlo, international consultant in the field of psychosocial work and counselling in areas of armed conflict.

David Ingleby (Ed). (2005). Forced Migration and Mental Health: Rethinking the Care of Refugees and Displaced Persons. New York: Springer.
The steadily increasing number of large-scale armed conflicts, both within and between nations, has also created increasing numbers of displaced persons, refugees and asylum seekers. The provision of appropriate mental health services for these individuals has become a major focus of concern, yet controversy remains concerning the kind of care that is necessary.

Four chapters of this book deal with humanitarian aid and reconstruction in post-conflict societies. In chapter 2 Derrick Silove describes a framework for guiding mental health initiatives in post-conflict societies. Chapter 3 has the title '*Transforming local and global discourses*'. It offers a reassessment of the PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) movement in Bosnia and Croatia. Chapter 4 describes a study of a large number of Sudanese boys with a particular exotic nomadic upbringing who survived the terror of civil war. Relief work with these refugees shows that they have, notwithstanding severe traumatic experiences and many posttraumatic symptoms, relatively few problems with adaptation and development. This study under-

scores the limitations of the Western model of traumatic stress and the important role played by political and cultural contexts. In chapter 5, Clifton-Everest discusses the problems in relation to the care of former child soldiers. The most striking problems were uninhibited aggressive and threatening behaviour, deep distrust of adults, confusion about the right and wrong of past actions, and the conviction that thieving is the only way of getting what you need. Most troubling for the former child soldiers themselves were thoughts of future dangers. The author describes a program for recently demobilised children in Sierra Leone, combining elements such as humanistic therapy using drama, drawing and story telling, alternatives to stealing, controlling conflict and aggression and helping to rebuild villages. The program was adapted for use in schools. A lot of emphasis is on rebuilding trust and self-esteem, and help with the realities of right and wrong by creating an environment of caring adults. An extensive case history illustrates the text in this chapter.

The second part of this volume is devoted to the problems with service provision in host countries. Chapter 6 deals with the referral of a severely traumatised Rwandan asylum seeker with many somatic complaints to a psychiatrist in London. The counselling was aimed at dealing with practical problems rather than on emotion. For refugee children in exile in Sweden, the results of a treatment approach based on social support and intervention on a societal level are described in chapter 7. Research on the interaction of non-Western asylum seekers and their Western therapists is the topic of chapter 8. There was a lot of variation in the coping styles adopted by the refugees researched. The mental health workers were largely oriented toward reduction of symptoms, rather than chang-

ing the ways in which their clients cope. Choman Hardi addresses various ways female Kurdish refugees can be empowered in chapter 9. How can mental health professionals contribute to changing policies that are blocking the recovery of refugees, by influencing negative societal forces? Opening the dialogue with those involved outside the field of mental health is one solution explored by Julia Bala in chapter 10. The message of chapter 11 is that the risk to mental health has less to do with personal traumas experienced in the countries of origin and more to do with the psychosocial contexts of the lives of refugees and asylum seekers in the host countries. In the final chapter, the question "what is good practise" is raised. The results of attempts to transfer promising programs developed in one country to other countries are described and discussed.

This book is relevant to all those working with refugees and displaced persons amongst health and social work professionals as well as other care givers and policy makers. In almost all chapters the limitations of the Western concepts of traumatic stress with its strong accent on posttraumatic stress disorder is emphasized.

Furthermore, the important role of the cultural context is illustrated. The advantage of focusing on practical problems rather than on emotion is another leading theme. However, this book is not a treatment guide with ready therapeutic approaches. The strong side is that it offers a wealth of information to rethinking and contemplating the care for refugees and displaced persons.

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