

A human rights approach to psychotherapy

By Khader Rasras

This interview explores what it means to develop a human rights approach to psychotherapy and how these principles affect therapeutic work. It also considers ways of reaching out to survivors of trauma. Khader Rasras is the head psychologist at the TRC. The interviewer was David Denborough.

Keywords: human rights, psychotherapy, torture, trauma

It seems that your centre has put a lot of effort into ensuring that survivors of torture and trauma feel as if they can come here. I would like to ask you about this. What are some of the things that you have learnt in order to make this centre a welcoming and accessible place for people who have experienced political violence?

This is a key question. Those who have been through significant trauma, especially those who may have been subjected to abuse by other professionals, can find any professional institution very intimidating, even frightening. Choosing the location of this building was significant. We could find cheaper and quieter locations, but we decided our offices should be located right in the centre of Ramallah as then it is much easier for people to visit us. The lower floors of this building consist of a variety of shops which means that people can enter the building from the street and no-one would ever know that they were coming to consult with us.

A further key step was to train the team to keep everything that was told to us confidential. We only record in the files what is absolutely necessary for therapy and documentation.

Even then it is sometimes too much to expect people to come to us. So, we go to them. Our outreach program is vital. While it might be easier for us to meet with people here in the office, we realised long ago that it is much easier for people to welcome us into their homes. This means they do not have to fight the stigma of being mentally ill. At the same time, reaching out to people in their homes gives us the chance to meet other important members of their family, particularly their children.

When people have experienced great injustice, and have felt so very powerless, as if they could do nothing to prevent the injustice, or to stop it, how do you try to enable people to have a sense of agency, a sense of purpose in their lives? How can you respond to these stories of powerlessness so people can feel as if they can make a difference or be of some influence in the world?

I believe that the consequences of trauma are so complicated that it can take some time to create a context for a person to attain a sense of personal agency again. It is very important for victims of trauma and human rights violations to know that

they can make a difference. And so we often ask people to document their testimonies, explaining that this is an important process not only for them, but also for others, and for future generations. We assist them to write and edit these stories.

Torture can render a person hopeless, broken and unproductive. Sometimes people may have felt completely hopeless, powerless, weak and shamed when alone in prison. It can be meaningful to draw attention to the small ways in which people may be reclaiming their lives. They may be caring for other members of their family, or demonstrating small acts of self-care. I try to enable people to talk about their experiences, to pinpoint the things that they have done, the ways they have struggled to survive. Together we try to create a story of them as active survivors rather than as passive victims.

What is more, if a person has been kept in a cell and treated like an animal, the person can come to think they are almost an animal. In these circumstances, it is important that we find others who care about this person and who can speak about why this is so, what they value about them, what they like about them. This connectedness with others can re-humanise people after they have been through dehumanising experiences.

Throughout this process, I also try to notice when people are making a stand for other people's human rights. There might be examples in their own family. These examples might only consist of small remarks, or statements, but if people are indicating a respect for the human rights of others, then I try to notice this and acknowledge it. These are openings to different stories of identity, stories of values and stories of agency. There are also ways of linking their small contributions to the small contributions of others. I believe we all have parts to play in protecting and speaking up for the human rights of others.

I know that there are two key parts to your work - responding to those who have been subjected to violence, and also trying to prevent further abuse. Can you tell me about how you go about trying to ensure that people who have had these experiences of violence and trauma do not go on to replicate violence in other contexts?

Whenever we work with people, one aim is to ensure they are taken care of. A second aim is to

assist in preventing them from becoming a source of violence themselves. When men or women have been subjected to violence, imprisonment or political violence, we wish to take care to ensure that they don't then take this out on their families. Trying to prevent the victimisation of children is one of our key aims.

It seems significant to give people a chance to speak about their experiences, to describe the real effects of what they went through, and for this to be powerfully acknowledged. When these experiences are thoroughly explored, when the effects of particular actions and practices of abuse are richly acknowledged, it indirectly creates space for the person to become aware of the effects of these practices on others, including the times they may enact them. We pay a lot of attention to this. We also create forums and groups in which people can speak about what they went through and the ways they are finding helpful in dealing with this. We encourage people to support one another in caring for their children.

There is also a broader question involved here, in relation to retaliation. We try to create room for people to understand that if you were tortured by one person of a nation, then this doesn't reflect the identity of the whole nation. I find it a moral responsibility to create space for any victim of violence or abuse to acknowledge that other people also suffer from the current crisis in this region and that others also have their own traumas. If we want other people to acknowledge our pain and our trauma, we must also be brave enough and wise enough to acknowledge the trauma of others. We are always conscious in our work not to be supporting philosophies of retaliation.

We draw clear distinctions between notions of retaliation and the search for justice. It is very important for people who have been abused or victimised to be able to seek some form of redress, some form of justice, some form of powerful acknowledgement of the terrible harm that has been done to them. Justice can be powerfully healing and yet is not often spoken about within the psychological field. When people have felt so powerless to prevent the abuse that was happening to them or their loved ones, the desire for justice can be very strong. Unfortunately, we are very rarely in a position to bring the particular perpetrator to

justice. But we try to provide avenues, where possible, for people to document their experiences. We try to create forums of acknowledgement for what they have been subjected to. We try to create space for the considerations of healing and justice, rather than retaliation and further violence.

This whole centre seems to have a strong ethical and political focus. How do you see the emphasis on human rights and the emphasis on healing fitting together?

I used to be a human rights activist and, in addition to now being a psychologist, I have a powerful interest in human rights and democracy. At all times, we are emphasising the need for respect of human rights. Our counselling or psychological work is not separate from advocating for human rights in this region. They are totally connected. Of course, when we call for human rights to be respected, we are not only calling for Palestinian human rights. Human rights relate to everybody. I sympathise with the innocent people who are being killed on both sides. I sympathise with all those people who are just trying to live their normal lives and yet violence and trauma has had devastating effects.

Are there particular cultural practices and traditions that you draw upon in this work?

There are many Palestinian cultural practices that I think are quite extraordinary in how they assist us to tolerate the circumstances with which we live. If I think only of our team, they go to such lengths to meet with their clients. If certain roads are closed, if there are military incursions, if the queues are long, it can take many hours to reach a person's home. And yet, when we get through, we do not speak of how difficult it was to get there, we speak of how happy we are to have made it and to meet with those we have come to see. We have found ways to endure what others may find unbearable.

Importantly, we live as families. If ever we need to talk to someone, we will always be able to find an aunty, an uncle, a nephew, a niece, a brother, a sister. Even if alone on a bus, you can look at the person next to you and initiate a conversation. Amongst our people it is relatively easy to find a sense of sharing. We are not as lonely as those in

other countries where individualism is so highly valued, and where it can be hard to find a friend. This makes a difference to us and to our work. We can usually quickly involve others in the healing process.

I know that you also work with children, can you please tell me something about this ...

I used to be involved in a kind of art therapy with children. I would give the children pictures drawn by kids from elsewhere and ask them what they thought about these images. They would then start to speculate: 'This must be a school' ... 'No, it is too big' ... 'It could be a luxurious home' ... I would then ask certain questions, such as: 'Why do you think she used red and green?' And we would start to have conversations of imagination.

After some time, I would let them know who had drawn the picture. For instance, it may have been drawn by Sylvia who is thirteen years old and lives in Wales. I may then tell the story that Sylvia was trying to convey in her drawing. Then I would ask the children to draw something similar to Sylvia, and the children would re-discover that life has colours and that they can draw so many things, not only tanks, guns and checkpoints.

I also talk about stones. Many Palestinian children see a stone as a mighty weapon to express their resentment and rejection of the occupation. In play therapy or summer camps, I ask kids to collect stones from nearby and we start to build houses with the stones, and then surround these with a fence and garden. We try to convey that stones have not been created only to be thrown at soldiers. They have other uses. They can be used to build houses, schools. They are also important in art, to use in sculptures, and so on.

And sometimes I talk about the dreams I had when I was a little boy. I always dreamt that I would become a doctor one day. I tell them that I am not a doctor quite yet but that in another few years I think I will get my doctorate and then I will finally be the doctor I always dreamt about. I ask them if they have similar dreams. What do you think you might become? We try to get children interested in something called 'the future'. The landscape of aspirations and dreams is beautiful to work within. I am interested in ways that can put children back in touch with different dreams and the colours of life. I enjoy this work very much.

As you speak about this, your whole face lights up! It seems that these conversations bring you joy. Can you tell me more about what sustains you in this work ...

Prior to coming here, I worked in Bethlehem psychiatric hospital for ten years. My work there was not rewarding as I did not feel that I was making much of a difference. Working with those who attend this centre here is quite different. Despite the painful stories, the work here is rewarding. I feel that people respect us for what we do. I receive very good supervision and support which makes a considerable difference. On a more basic level, I am working and so many people in Palestine cannot find work! I have good health and an excellent family. When I go home I have much to enjoy. All of these things sustain me. So too does sharing these stories with you and with others. I am always interested in talking with others about the links between healing, psychotherapy and human rights.