

Cultural Domination and Therapeutic Resistance:
A discussion on decolonization and telling our own stories

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Abstract

Using the history and experience of the human rights and social justice struggle for self-determination of Black people in the USA, I will discuss the importance for therapists working in oppressed people's spaces to locate their therapeutic work in the cultural context, history, experience and knowledge of the people they serve. I will contend that settler and other colonialism does not only impact the political, economic and cultural lives of the oppressed. Through cultural hegemony colonialism convinces the oppressed that even the ideas and practices of therapy and the myths and metaphors of the colonizer on which they are based are superior to the traditions, memories, stories and healing practices of the oppressed. This often means that therapists from colonized and formerly colonized people's, using therapeutic practices grounded in the culture of the colonizer unwittingly reinforce the cultural, colonial domination of the oppressed even as we seek to bring healing through our practice. I will demonstrate my own practice of engaging my own cultural myths and metaphors to seek more liberating therapeutic approaches for the people of my community.

Historical Context

Occupation and resistance are the central forces shaping the identities of the peoples of the world today. The people of Palestine have had their national identities sharpened by their resistance to the Israeli occupation of their land and attempted genocide since 1948, over 60 years. My own people, the Africans in America first suffered enslavement and then colonization, dispersal from the land and attempted genocide for the past 150 years after enslavement.

The realities and experience of colonization and occupation are evident to us all. The imprisonment of thousands of children, men and women and increasing laws to criminalize even the smallest aspects of our lives. The targeting of our young men as dangerous and thus justifiable targets of violence from the State and vigilante settler forces. The cordoning off of large sectors of our population into designated living spaces that are pacified by a permanent military occupation force that practices terror and intimidation as normal policy in the name of policing. Creating educational systems that track our children in directions leading to prison rather than preparing them to support and help their people. The denial of resources such as health care, housing, food, water and other elements needed for daily life. The resultant increase in disease, emotional stress, family dissolution, destruction of traditional cultural institutions, vulgar individualism and internalized violence are all evidence of the reality of the State sanctioned violence of occupation waged against us. It does not matter if we are talking about the occupation of Palestine, or of the lands of the Aboriginal people of Australia or of the occupation of the traditional lands and communities of Africans in the United States of America,

occupation looks, feels and acts the same all over the world. And in the same way, just as there is occupation there is the inevitable response of resistance to it. All over the world for the last 500 years as the West has worked toward the subjugation and occupation of the rest of the world, we have resisted in many different ways and on many different levels. We have resisted loudly and quietly. We have resisted peacefully and violently. We have resisted individually and collectively.

Occupation and cultural domination

This colonial occupation certainly imposes itself on our social, political and economic lives, but occupation moves beyond that into our very cultures. Our everyday histories, social practices, myths, folk ways, knowledges ideas of personhood and the meaning given to it are assaulted in small ways every day. And as they are assaulted, they are replaced with the idea of the superiority of Western knowledge, values and cultural practices even in our needs for sources of healing and repair for our people's fighting spirit.

This reality brings us to what I believe is a profound and powerful ethical question which we therapists who are from the occupied nations must confront. What is our responsibility to not only resist the political, social and economic occupation of our peoples land and communities, but also to resist the occupation of our people's culture and identities through therapeutic ideas, practices and traditions imported from our occupiers even when they are well intentioned?

I raise this fully convinced that all ideas, practices and knowledge is socially constructed and culturally mediated. All ideas, practices and knowledge is grounded in the history, mythology, metaphor and philosophy of their source culture. If we can accept this as true and if we are

supporters of our peoples right and need to resist occupation, then this should also include resistance from cultural domination which is the ground of political domination.

Through the cultural, religious, educational institutions supported by the colonizers even those of us who are committed to the liberation of the humanity of our peoples have been seduced by cultural hegemony and a belief in the basic superiority of Western ideas and practices. This happens whether it be the pathology diagnostic based practices of psychoanalytic theory; or the individualizing assumptions of internal state psychology; or the so-called evidence based assumptions of Cognitive Behavioral therapy or even the assumptions that narrative or the stories that people tell about their lives are always grounded in literary metaphors and practices of story.

A question of ethics and cultural responsibility

Through cultural hegemony colonialism convinces the oppressed that even the ideas and practices of therapy and the myths and metaphors of the colonizer on which they are based are superior to the traditions, memories, stories and healing practices of the oppressed. This often means that therapists from colonized and formerly colonized people's, using therapeutic practices grounded in the culture of the colonizer unwittingly reinforce the cultural, colonial domination of the oppressed even as we seek to bring healing through our practice.

This is not to claim that these practices and ideas are never useful, but if we are to complete the challenge of de-colonizing the lives of our occupied people, then should we not critically investigate, challenge, and unpack the cultural significance of these practices to our liberation?

For those of us who agree that our lives and relationships are constituted of the stories people tell about themselves, and that there is healing possibility in the telling, listening and invigorating of stories, should we not enquire about the story telling traditions of our own

cultures? What is the meaning of story? What forms did story telling take? What metaphors best described the contours, boundaries and structure of the stories? Who were the traditional story tellers and what was the traditional context of the stories told? What were the spiritual beliefs behind the telling and what purpose did those play in the shaping of personal and community identity? Were stories ever a part of traditional healing practices and what roles did people take on as they participated as healers or those seeking healing?

What I am raising here is that we therapist carry an ethical responsibility to critically reflect on the collective cultural knowledge, traditions, and storying practices of our people to create indigenous narrative practices which encourage a community spirit of national self-determination and liberation.

Some Lessons Learned in Ramallah: On Palestinian Narrative Therapy

In May of 2016 I was honored to be a guest of the Palestinian people on the West Bank in the city of Ramallah. During my short visit I have was able to learn from the Palestinian people about their amazing history of resistance to the Israeli occupation and their determination to create a unique Palestinian identity. I experienced the vibrancy of Palestinian daily life and tasted their amazing foods infused with millennia of creativity and care. I witnessed young people dancing the folk dances of their ancestors and heard songs of faith and love for God and for the land which God has provided. In just a few days I witnessed the suffering of the Palestinian people under State terror which so closely reflects the terror experienced by my own Black people in the United States. In my cultural tradition we believe that this suffering and resistance to it is the source of our creativity and our ability to survive. We believe that the time when you have been left with what the oppressor believes is nothing is the time when we are at our most creative! This is the source of what is called “Soul Power” in African-American cultural

tradition. It is out of this crisis of emptiness and no-where to turn that we believe that we become our creative best and we are able to develop the resources necessary for our own healing. This place of deep despair which we call “the Blues”, forces us to sit in contemplation and reflection and draw on the memories of our ancestors to know what must be done.

I would ask my Palestinian friends if perhaps there is some Palestinian tradition which allows you to reflect on and trust the memories of healing of your ancestors? If there is such possibility, could Palestinian therapists who know the significance of storytelling study those memories and gather the meanings, metaphors, symbols and other things which would be familiar to Palestinians and “codify” these things so that the therapeutic healing practices learned from them can be taught to others committed to healing the people and de-colonizing their lives. In taking these steps you would be re-presenting to Palestine healing practices which may seem new but at the same time they will be culturally familiar. Additionally, in relying on Palestinian resources there will be a strengthening of the Palestinian will for self-determination and cultural self-reliance. You will be placing Palestinian history, culture, knowledge and metaphors at the center of your narrative project and ending the psychological, occupation of Palestinian culture.

In my travels through Palestine and into the homes and offices of every day Palestinians, I have seen many possibilities of metaphorical and symbolic as well as cultural practices that may be codified into a Palestinian narrative therapy. The significance of the Key as a symbol of the Right of Return; the importance of the shared meal and the insistence by all Palestinians that we eat “just a little” even if we are not hungry! The Palestinian love of sweets which reminds me of sharing the sweetness of life; the certainty in Palestinian conversation that God knows our destinies and has a plan for Palestine. All of these may someday be woven into the growing and developing Palestinian narrative therapy practice which I witnessed during my time in the

occupied territories of Palestine which will also contribute to the de-colonizing of therapeutic practice in other oppressed territories and communities.

The four healing questions

As my contribution to this process I would like to share with you a small piece of my own work with my people inside the United States. This is a practice originally learned from a Native American woman, Pamina Yellow Bird. She introduced three healing questions from her tradition. After reflecting on it I added a fourth question, (which became the third of the four) *Africanizing* the gift from our Native American sister. I have used this in a small way to talk about state terrorism and violence and the importance of telling our personal and collective stories. These are the four healing questions and an explanation of their significance.

1. What happened to you?

It is important to tell our story. What is our experience? What do we remember? Our story is our testimony. How it is told is the construction of who we are today. It is how we see ourselves and impacts how we are seen by others. For good or bad, to tell our story clarifies for us and our witnesses the roots of our pain and struggle as the way out.

2. How does what happened to you effect you today?

What are the contours and contexts of our trauma? We imagine that these are expressed in at least four areas; your physical body, your mind (intellectual thinking self which unites your other parts as well as the outer world of your environment). Each of these “parts” of you are impacted by the trauma of occupation. As we reflect on this what does the impact look and feel like? Assess each of these areas of “us” in the light and context

of our trauma and then consider how the impact on each affects all together. How has the trauma impacted us in relationship to our families, friends and associates? What is different in these relationships than before the trauma?

3. What gives us the strength to carry on?

We are still here! As bad as our trauma may seem, we have not perished! As we think about that, what sources either internal or external have given us the will or the hope for holding on? What practices have we engaged in to survive? What people or things have encouraged us? What thoughts have encouraged us at our lowest moments? While the trauma has impacted us, how have we in turn impacted the trauma?

4. What do you need to heal?

Only our people know the answer to this question. It is our trauma, our pain. Only we know truly what it feels like and what relief would feel like. We are the experts of our lives. Even if we do not know the answer to healing right now, we have the answer “somewhere inside” we have the answers. Take the time to search the place inside where the answer lives. Dare to imagine and dream again about what “freedom” would look and feels like. How will life be different in our bodies, thoughts, emotions and spirits? How will our relationships be different with friend, family and associates. What will they notice different about us? What will we notice different about them? What is the story for us about a different and better life and situation? This is our theory. Our pattern for a new life. What will we do differently for these things to happen?

Conclusion

These four healing questions serve as a roadmap to healing testimonies for people who have faced trauma, occupation and attempted genocide. They invite us to reflect on not only what happens to us but on the power that we have to survive and create healing for ourselves. I am certain that just as we have been gifted with these healing questions from our Native American sister, we will soon be learning from and adapting the approaches which have been forged out of the struggles of the people of Palestine.

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