

Prof. Dr Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

Prof. Dr Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela contributed with exploring psychological and political perspectives to the question of trauma and trans-generational trauma. In this sense, she reminded the group of the emergency of the notion of trauma and trauma studies and how it should be understood also from a political perspective. There are three different historical landmarks that give birth to the study of trauma:

1. The Freudian study on women with hysteria (that became known as an unbearable emotional reaction to trauma);
2. The World Wars and the Vietnam War and the effects they had on soldiers that returned home (the whole question and research-field on “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder” – PTSD - began), with the subsequent political recognition that “men” were also wounded, and therefore were diagnosed as “traumatized” (trauma started to be diagnosed);
3. Sexual and domestic violence, in which feminist movements in the 1970s started to talk about such issues. It was a historical moment because they wanted to achieve some changes in legislation.

This history of the emergency of the study on trauma shows the political dimension in its emergence and a “social” dimension of trauma: both the “public” (such as war and political violence) and “private” (such as rape and domestic violence) worlds are inseparably connected.

When interpreted in these terms, trauma stops being merely an “intra-subjective” phenomenon (individual or personal) and it is acknowledged as an “inter-subjective” (it is build in between subjectivities or peoples). Shifting from the “individual” to the “intersubjective” implies:

- A different understanding of the self, from being auto-constituted (there is not such a thing as an “isolated mind”) to comprehending it as the result of multiple interactions and connections with others in different experiences; and
- Changing the notion of trauma itself, beginning to understand trauma as a relational experience, a way to be attached to others: with other victims, perpetrators and/or the larger community.

If we are the result of multiple interactions and if trauma is understood in a relational form, then coping with trauma implies creating an autonomous narrative on the side of the victim of what has happened (that stops giving power to the connection to the perpetrator), and as a result one can begin to confront the past and to relate in a way that embraces the self (or, in case of several individuals, selves).

Seeing trauma in this way helps then to comprehend the collective experiences of trauma and how they can be passed on from generation to generation. The fact that trauma affects the self and the self-understanding means that the process of identity building is also altered, which is why some groups build their identities around trauma (“chosen traumas”) and therefore passing on the trauma in this way, increasing the possibility that former victims can become future perpetrators or to inherit a trauma they cannot cope with either.

Prof. Gobodo-Madikizela proposed that it would be of high value to explore the power of testimony as an alternative in coping with trauma and collective trauma. In this sense, creating narratives and new narrative can help to reconstruct a shattered self, transcend the passivity of victimhood and find a voice to construct meaning from a traumatic experience. This is possible, since testimonies allow several things to occur at the same time:

1. They help victims to reclaim a sense of agency;
2. They serve to recreate temporal boundaries that place brutalities in the past;
3. They can help allowing the memory of pain to rest, not to forget what has happened, but in order to heal the brokenness and to reclaim dignity of the living and the dignity and respect of the departed (they are always remembered but the violent events can be remembered in new ways and with different emotions).

One of the big challenges that remain open is what to do with the dehumanization caused by the perpetrators: victimizers have to destroy the humanity of the victims in order to be able to harm or kill. In dehumanizing the victims, perpetrators dehumanized themselves. Here an exploration of the questions of guilt (acknowledging that what one has done has created injuries in others) and remorse (when guilt is finally confronted) need to take place, which could be aided through the process of forgiveness.