

COMPASSIONATE WITNESSING OF TRAUMA AS A POTENTIAL PRACTICE FOR SECURITY STUDIES SCHOLARSHIP

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“Compassion emerges when love meets suffering [...] Suffering is a prerequisite for compassion.”

(Germer and Neff 2015: 47)

What would it mean to have practice of compassion as the starting point in our research and writing on violence in the field of critical security studies? In this intervention, I propose that scholarly practice can also be something which assists and supports the healing and transformation from trauma. This intervention is informed by research on traumatic stress and PTSD (Van Der Kolk 1996, Scaer 2001, Bremner 2005) somatic trauma therapies (Levine 1997, Rothschild 2000), Buddhist Psychology (Kabat Zinn 2003, Germer and Neff 2015) and on my own experience as a moderator of an online support group for survivors of emotional intimate partner abuse in spring 2015 with Women's Line in Finland. In this process I have come to understand how compassionate witnessing of someone else's pain and suffering is a key to healing. But how can such an approach benefit critical security studies?

I have argued elsewhere (Penttinen 2013) that much of feminist and critical security studies theorizing is informed by the ontology of suffering. This means that the ontological assumption, which remains intact even in critical research, is that there is something terribly wrong in the world. With the focus on theorizing and understanding the configuration of violence, injustice and its gendered enactments, it is possible to make the conclusion that suffering is all there is and ignore how people heal, help each other out in difficult circumstances and express compassion even across enemy lines (Penttinen 2013). Stephen Chan (2011) explains this practice by saying that in scholarly practice we are so drawn to the *spectacle of violence* to such a degree that we forget how people live their everyday lives in the midst of conflict. This research is still a practice of witnessing violence and trauma, but without compassion as a practice.

The Dalai Lama defines compassion as “an openness to suffering with the wish to relieve it” (Germer and Neff 2015: 44, quote Dalai Lama 1995). This openness refers to a practice of being present with the suffering as it is, acknowledging that it is there in the present moment, recognizing how this suffering is part of human experience which everyone experiences at some point and wishing the person or oneself ease without any force or particular goal in mind. Compassion is thus a practice of acknowledging the hurt, giving it space, and being really gentle with the experience, instead telling the person to ‘just stop thinking about it’ or to ‘move on’ as a means of encouragement.

Peter Breggin (2011) explains the practice of compassion and kindness in therapeutic context in simple terms by saying that when the patient is having an emergency the therapist is not. In practice this means that witnessing the patients' pain and suffering does not lead the therapist herself into a crisis mode, thinking, for example, "How terrible! What are we going to do, this is bad!". Hearing these words was a kind of epiphany for me regarding what goes wrong in scholarly practice when we write about experiences of violence and violation by catastrophizing, or rationalizing them depending on our own argument or scholarly goals. Indeed, instead of openness to suffering as part of humanity, there is often a sense of emergency in how we write what is going wrong in the world. Or, perhaps if the suffering is too much to witness, there is a tendency to theorize it to the point of abstraction so that experience of violence and trauma of others becomes something else, an intellectual exercise in the field of academia.

It is for this reason that I am especially concerned with the reluctance with using the word victim when referring to people who have been targets of violence. The main reasons to avoid the word victim is because as feminist scholars it is necessary to not reinforce the idea of women as passive objects (Väyrynen 2004, Carpenter 2006), but instead recognize the multitude of their social roles in conflict (McLeod 2015, Pratt and Richter-Devroe 2011, Cockburn 2007). Another common practice to overcome the discourses of women as vulnerable victims is to recognize how women act also as perpetrators of violence and see this as a form of agency (Brown 2014, Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, Zarkov 2007). Although it is important to create discourses that challenge gender stereotypes,

semantic tropes do not erase the experience of violence, but may induce a deeper sense of shame.

What if a woman is deeply affected by violence, traumatized so that she questions her own capacities to function? And still, validating that the person has been the victim of violence does not have to mean that she has been or become a passive object, nor does it mean that agency is configured at the moment that someone is active in violent conflict. Paying attention to the process of healing enables to see beyond such dualistic models of thinking.

I am inspired how Laura Shepherd (2011) conceptualizes agency as capacity to influence change; Shepherd emphasizes that having agency differs from having capacity to act, such as right to vote in elections, in so far that agency results in change, whereas action may not (Shepherd 2011: 506). It is important to note the difference between being active and being able to shape how political practices and policies transform. In this setting agency is not defined as a property of a person who is specifically situated in the world and thus is seen as 'having agency', but is something which emerges in the relationships with others. In line with Shepherd, I argue that process of transforming trauma can be seen as a form of agency as it leads to deep personal and societal change (Levine 1997, Scaer 2001). Indeed, the process of healing is a process of transformation in which a person has to move through the trauma in order to reach a new sense of self in which the experience of violence is integrated, instead of being denied, minimized or simply medicated. This process of transformation enables also the reconnection with others and formation of healthy and supportive relationships.

The process of transforming traumatic stress into relief and restored sense of self begins first by validating the violence and trauma. This means validating that violence actually hurts, changes the person and there are no guarantees of how long the process of healing is going to take.

Transformation means accepting that the person is never going to be the same, but she can experience a renewed sense of self in which the traumatizing events turn into memories which no longer trigger traumatic stress reactions in the body. This is important, as often the person who suffers from traumatic stress has hard time accepting and understanding her condition, but may feel shame and confusion as to what is wrong and feel as if she is losing her mind. This is especially so, when the symptoms of traumatic stress have lasted for a long time as especially in Western culture we value the capacity to move on and get over difficult experiences.

It is worth remembering that the experience of trauma is most importantly a deep spiritual crisis which leads to the fundamental questions on the nature of good and evil: where is God in all this, and what is the purpose of life if such terrible things can happen? Trauma ultimately changes the person's world view of what is seen as safe and unsafe, whether people can be trusted, and what the meaning of life is for the person and for the society as a whole. Ronkainen (2008) names this as a semiotic robbery, which means that relationships, places and things that once were safe, no longer feel so. Traumatic stress manifests in variety of ways as sensitivity to hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, flashbacks and recurring nightmares (Van der Kolk 1996). Moreover, traumatic stress affects cognitive capacities of the person (Bremner 2005).

The recognition that one has been a *victim* of violence and abuse can therefore be a deeply empowering moment, as it enables to emphasize that this violence was done to the person and she is not at fault for the events. This is especially important if the person feels she was not able to defend herself properly and thus blames herself for the outcome (Rothschild 2000). The cultural context in which the victim is expected to fight back, escape or end an abusive relationship may also enforce this experience of shame, which in turn amplifies the burden of traumatic stress. I want to emphasize that integrating compassion in the way we represent and write about violence can support this process of healing. Moreover, it is naïve to think that persons who have been traumatized are somewhere else other than the academy.

Compassionate witnessing is a paradox (Germer and Neff 2015). Without actively pursuing a specific goal such as ‘feeling better’, it nonetheless leads to a sense of relief, comfort and clarity. Compassionate witnessing of trauma allows holding the sorrow and hurt with compassion, acknowledging how much it hurts, instead wishing it away, denying it, or by giving advice on how to overcome the pain. It is a practice of befriending and comforting the suffering as one would comfort a fearful child, and by doing so fundamentally reducing the sense of shame associated with the experience. In the context of traumatic stress, validating of the events as traumatic and the following stress responses as normal reactions enables the victims to make sense of the often

confusing symptoms as well as the lack of trust they have for other people. In this process, victims can begin to honor their own experience, create safe boundaries and practice self-care.

The second aspect of the practice of compassionate witnessing is to recognize how suffering is part of humanity. This is not the same as saying life is suffering, but rather that suffering is part of life and no one can escape from it. Traumatized individuals also tend to isolate and withdraw from social relations as they may feel that they are fundamentally different from others, or even see themselves as tarnished and dirty especially as a result of their violation (Ronkainen 2008).

Recognizing that there are also others who suffer in the same way can offer great relief.

Compassion is a practice of being open to suffering with the wish to relieve it. Thus, it is different from being a neutral observer, an analyst of someone else's experience, or having an emergency when someone else does. Compassion in the practice includes the wish that "May all sentient beings be free from suffering" which extends also to oneself "May I be free from suffering". Practicing self-compassion actually may be the most difficult thing to do, as it is not easy to sense into our own pain that is present in the process of witnessing the violence and often extreme horrors relevant for the critical study of security. Practice of compassion to ourselves and other scholars may ease this hurt and reduce the shame we experience when the difficult materials momentarily defeat us and lead into hopelessness, or even despair.

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