

CLÍNICAS

An empty tomb at the heart of childhood — Reflections on the victim and his group¹

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ABSTRACT

After presenting a clinical case where we can see how horror invades the mind because it is impossible to contain the experience in a narrative, the author elaborates a psychoanalytic phenomenology of the process of victimization by the victim's own environment. As a result of this designation by the group, the more subjective aspects of this process remain hidden.

The condition of victim does not belong to the subject. It is the group to which the victim belongs to that designates as a victim, or not, the person who has been subjected to violence. A catastrophic rupture disrupts the intra-psychic and interpersonal balances and radically changes the relationship between psychic reality and social reality. These two different realities merge to the point that both subject and group experience a confusion between external and internal worlds. Archaic anxieties are then reactivated, filled with psychotic elements associated with a reaction of suspicion, itself produced by insecurity in the face of the disintegration of all stable references. Danger permeates the most undifferentiated group mentality. This experience, of which nothing can be learned, reinforces the components of omnipotence and strengthens the illusion that it would be possible to avoid all forms of pain.

KEYWORDS

Victimization
Individual
Group of belonging

Impossible, therefore, to forget it, impossible to remember it. Also, impossible, in speaking about it, to speak of it — and finally, as there is nothing but this incomprehensible event to say, it is speech alone that bear it without saying it.

M. Blanchot, p. 448

I realized that groups are assemblages of diverse learning experiences, and that failing to learn from

them, failing to think, can represent a question of life or death. The forces of anti-learning that can be observed in groups can equally be observed in each individual. In Bionian terms, this theme of learning is not of an intellectual, but rather an emotional order. It involves the individual's relationship to the very matter of life, to the attention (or lack of) given to emotional experience, from which both wisdom and madness can emerge.

UNCOVERING THE SILENCE:**MARIO, 8 YEARS OLD, THE 'BUILDER'**

When Mario started his treatment, four years had passed since the disappearance of his father, during the night, from their house in Argentina.

His mother, with a pale face, a fragile and tenuous voice, explained to me that it was Mario's third treatment since the disappearance of his father. The previous psychotherapists had told her that her child was cooperative, that he was actively involved in the games, and that his drawings showed a progressive adaptation to the situation. However she was very worried: her son was withdrawn, stayed apart from the spontaneous games of the children and revealed a deep sadness which he never spoke about. At school, he is a very good pupil; at home, he takes care of his younger brother who was born seven months after the disappearance of their father.

When Mario entered my consulting room for the first time, I noticed his resemblance to his mother: very carefully dressed, he was pale and tiny. He seemed to say to me: 'oh my God, I need to tell her everything once more! He crossed the room and stopped in front of a few Playmobil toys (soldiers, policemen) probably waiting for me to invite him to play as his previous therapists had done. He then came closer to a table where I had left some pens and paper, took the red pen, pretended to sit down to work but then gave up. We sat on the floor, almost in the centre of the room, without taking into account the remaining objects.

This first encounter focused upon practical issues such as the car which had not arrived and the way he managed to get over this difficulty. He spoke in a casual way and was making sure that everything was clear. Mario presented as a perfect 'overcomer of all obstacles', able to master any difficulty.

Just before departing, I noticed on his face a suspicious smile which invited me to say at least a few word about the reason for his visit. But his mother had clearly explained to me the reasons which had led to her decision to make this appointment. I had understood that any reference to it would drive Mario into relating his life story for a third time, about which he had been complaining in his previous treatments. I opted to focus on the experience of our encounter, leaving him to open up the possibility of progressively approaching his difficulties at his own pace. I tried to keep our exchange fluid yet stayed aware that my silences might be experienced as threats.

In our second meeting, he sat directly on the floor. This time, he invited me to follow him, with a gesture reminding me of adults hosts making their guests comfortable. He told me with a complaining tone that he was annoyed with his friends who played without taking anything seriously. His tone was desperately looking for an immediate

reply, but I preferred to wait a bit more, to allow me to understand the message he was trying to send me through his funny faces and his gestures. In the meantime, I was kneading a piece of play dough and realised that Mario was attentive to the shape I was going to give it, but in my hands, it stayed formless. When I laid it on the floor (as if I too lacked words in order to establish a contact with him), he immediately took it and continued kneading it without giving it any shape either. A few minutes before the end of the session, he made a rectangle and told me, surprised, that this shape was like the fence around the place where he was living in with other political refugees. I asked him whether he wanted to keep it and, without replying, he took it and moved towards a corner where he put it upon an empty table.

Since then and for a few months, he built tiny houses using play dough which we molded together as a way of making contact. While we were giving shape to various buildings, Mario let me know about events and ideas that came to his mind in relation to these constructions. His remarks helped me understand the meaning of his discourse, but I chose to focus our exchange on the pleasure and possibility he experienced in gradually communicating to me his experiences.

From his constructions, he always added comments about his everyday life. This is how he confessed that in order to help his mother, he had to find out the best way to behave towards his younger brother when he was crying. Mario had very clear ideas: his young brother was the only one allowed to cry in his family. His part was that of an assistant. This part was transferred to me during the session since I had to become his assistant in turn and helped him to build.

A few of his accounts, told in an overwhelmed tone, were around his capacities to feel comfortable around his friends, his sense of responsibility, his embarrassment when he could not come to his session on time.

We always built houses. As sessions went by, he started differentiating between them, not in relation to their external appearance but about the people living inside. After a few months, he said: 'the problem with these houses is that we talk about what is happening in other people's houses, without really knowing what happens at home.' I suggested that perhaps he had the same issue with his neighbors and friends. He became furious, his face and body entirely filled with anger. He snapped back that he was tired of being the son of Pedro, the disappeared hero. He felt that everyone gave in to his demands or pampered him so that he did not suffer.

Mario wondered whether the reason I was not asking questions regarding him or his life was because 'I had been there' where his father had been "sucked", taken away. While avoiding

references to the omnipotent role I reckoned he was assigning me, I explained to him that even though I was Argentinian, I had not been in the same places as his father, in order to underline common points and differences. He then started to express how important I was to him.

He recounted known facts about the kidnapping of his father. This went on over a number of sessions. He connected different moments and facts he knew about. I refrained each time from making any comment on his feelings, out of respect for how upsetting it was for him.

He generally staged either heroic attitudes or terrifying situations. I felt that through his stories, Mario was expecting me to express compassion, in the same way friends or political refugees did. I felt that I'd better remain particularly careful since Mario needed me somewhere else, in a place that remains open to the exploration of his thoughts since he had started telling me the story of the events which could free him for ever.

I understood that he was worried by various facts and that the pain of losing his father was still there. At this time my main focus was to avoid identifying him as the object of the disrupting event of his father disappearance to enable his expression of it as a subject.

A few months went by before an unprecedented event: Mario did not come to his session, without any prior notice nor sign. While waiting alone in my consulting room, he made me feel in my own flesh the power of the impact of the wait, of the absence, and of the unknown. At the end of the day, a message was awaiting me: Mario had not come because he had been held up.

He arrived right on time as usual at his next session. Just upon his arrival, he told me about a sort of 'tummy ache' and that he stayed alone with his mother. He had not come to his session, and during that night, he had slept in his mother's bedroom on a mattress right on the floor. He told me that the pain decreased.

He then asked me whether I had been waiting for him and whether I had received his message. I replied that I guessed that, if he hadn't come, it was for a very important reason. I added that one could imagine that staying close to his mother, to let her take care of him, was good for him. His naughty smile turned very childish.

Progressively, he expressed his worry of not being able to fulfill all the tasks he was responsible for.

In my view, it is clear that the fantasy of taking his disappeared father's place was linked to the expression of his pain, of his lacks, of his wish to cry on his birthday. He would have liked to share these moments with me. His anger was not directed at his close ones, but towards me since I was not helping him enough to fulfill the tasks he was responsible for. He stopped fantasizing about

the importance of my physical presence and my actions and started complaining about what I did not do for him anymore.

Slowly, he gave me a place in his life, but very cautiously, given in my opinion his constant fear of having to face my possible departure, my possible disappearance.

The memories of his father and his relation to what he had experienced and what he could have experienced had he been alive, seemed mixed in his accounts. Like in the content of each tiny house we built together in every session, but these memories did not make the crux of our dialogue.

Today, many years later, I understood that if I had, like the other therapists, approached the issue of the death of his father directly, I would have elevated it to the shared status of a mythical social narrative, and it would have filled the void that Mario tried to fill through his compulsive and over-adaptive behavior. Although the account of the loss of his father became clearer progressively, it never became a definite explanation of his disappearance. However, the communication we managed to establish led to the expression of the pain he could not express initially, and to the surfacing of previously hidden worries.

Many years after the end of this treatment, he asked me to see him. He came to let me know about his marriage, about the end of his studies and about his choice of career: he was city planner in the town hall! This man, with whom I had played building houses full of human life, was telling me that he was building his own house and his family home. He was also telling me that the void left by his father would never be filled.

This clinical case allows me to demonstrate the difficulty in initiating the working through of a disruptive situation i.e. the disappearance of the father during the dictatorship. The containing and the holding enabled the development of Mario's reverie, then allowed me to accompany him in the development of his own temporality and his personal means of expression of the events. Through the building of houses and the evocation of what was going on in them, he managed to express his feelings of distress linked to a "transitional mythical tale" that then allowed him to discover his own personal meaning from it. It was only this multiple working through of various experiences which made it possible for us to jointly work through his difficulties. Here I must contend what our analytic practice gives us to understand: for those who find someone to whom they can really talk, the historical traumas always prove, retrospectively, to be doubly traumatic. Consequently, they compel the person who is their victim to isolate a part of his or her psychic life, by fragmenting it or splitting it off.

Not only are there the direct effects of the shock of the event and its indirect psychic repercussions

but, in addition, the traumatic shock, particularly if it is a collective shock, has the added effect of crushing the plurality of the traumas to which the subject has been exposed. This crushing effect may go as far as to make inaccessible the re-appropriation of a singular history, of a childhood that was subject, as is generally the case, to a certain number of early encapsulated traumas which are then included in the later collective trauma.

Starting from this observation which does not claim to cover the whole matter, and paraphrasing Freud according to whom all forms of research derive from life's urgency, I would like to invite you to reflect with me upon a psychoanalytical phenomenology of the process of victimization: the way in which horror can enter the psyche without a narrative to represent it and how violence which remains unthinkable generates more horror.

My central point is that the status of victim does not belong to the subject. The peer group designates, or not, a victim — being defined as the person who has suffered violence. A catastrophic event disrupts intra-psycho and inter personal equilibria and upsets the relationship between psychic reality and social reality. Under these conditions, the distance between these two heterogeneous realities disappears to the extent that it imposes a disrupting experience of confusion between external world and internal world. Archaic anxieties full of psychotic elements associated with reactions of suspicion are then reactivated as a result of the fragmentation of stable references. These are linked with the most primitive group mentality. It exacerbates the omnipotent (extreme and fanatical) components and reinforces the illusion that one can avoid any form of pain.

The group attempts to defend itself and keep the threat away thanks to movements of projection and over identification but instead, through these very mechanisms, it perpetuates the traumatic effect. Thus, the "myth of the victim"³ possibly awakens a kind of group micro-delusion which feeds on the absolute need of both the group and the individual to avoid any overwhelming and intolerable emotions.

Now let us focus on the victimization process. The disruptive environments are social contexts where relationships among individuals on the one hand, and between individuals and their physical and social environment on the other hand, are dissociated. Individuals find themselves pushed to change their behaviors and habits in order to adapt to a new environment which is in turn incomprehensible, unpredictable and, therefore threatening.

This distortion may arise abruptly following a concrete and identifiable event which is felt like a threat. Or else, it can result from a gradual process whose causes remain unknown or complex

to understand. The threat, either objective in the first case, or diffuse in the second case, triggers individual and collective reactions. The individuals and the group feel besieged and are pushed to react by urgent even desperate behaviors which then create new distortions and contribute to the strengthening and the diffusion of the disruption of the environment.

The most terrible and the most anxiety provoking element in this established disruptive environment, lies in the fact that distortions and threats unquestionably result from human deeds which express themselves through decisions based upon unidentifiable motives and goals. Besides, it is not easy either to predict the next 'targets' of violence since, as such, their indirect and expansive effect gives them more importance than their local and specific impact. The threats affecting a whole population cannot be faced in an individual or isolated way.

The difficulty to identify the potential source of damage creates a global and undifferentiated mistrust, compromising the capacity to represent and to apprehend events and this stops individuals from developing psychic and/or physical defense mechanisms.

It all seems to move towards a perpetuation of these environments, paradoxically protected by man's capacity to overcome the most hostile and chaotic situations. We know perfectly well, as proven by the history of humankind and by our own existence, that human beings achieve a certain degree of order in the most absolute chaos. This order enables us to progressively lessen our suffering related to helplessness and incapacity. This human feature promotes survival in lasting disruptive environments, as they gradually integrate everyday life. Therefore, threats cease to be perceived as elements from the external world, and are internalized. Once incorporated in the individual subjectivity, they sink in and mold the whole life. In order for instance to avoid trauma and to alleviate the fear produced by its possible occurrence, the 'alarm adaptive reactions' encourage individuals to reorganize their lives around the control of 'risky' situations. The so-called precarious and dubious achieved equilibrium quickly declines either because of continuous changes in the rules, or because new events periodically occur, reawakening and heightening the threats. As a general rule, the exhausting and useless adaptation efforts bring about a progressive withdrawal of individuals into their homes, a social isolation, self-aggression and aggression on others, even new violence.

This social context which presents such a high degree of fragmentation eliminates the ability of the individual and the social group to project themselves in the future, to face specific challenges of uncertainty in a situation governed by stable

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Myths are "stories about divine beings, generally arranged in a coherent system; they are revered as true and sacred; they are endorsed by rulers and priests; and closely linked to religion." In J. Simpson & S. Roud, *Dictionary of English Folklore*, Oxford, 2000, p. 254

criteria. What is left is a tendency to loneliness, frustration, resentment and despair. These feelings often lead individuals to seek a safe haven in the certainties offered by totalitarian groups, either religious or secular extremism.

Those who yield to this temptation, which helps by giving them back an identity as well as a collective sense of belonging, overcome uncertainty by considering indiscriminately others as enemies, responsible of all misfortunes and worth receiving one's hatred and one's appetite for destruction.

Another way of mastering uncertainty consists in labelling as 'victims' some members of one's own group suffering a misfortune. These 'victims' claims will justify the explosion of hostility while mobilizing altruism and feelings of reparation.

This dynamic between 'victimized' individuals and groups can only be put in place through the convergence of 'individual' factors characteristic of the victim and of the group's needs. The fulfillment of this role requires a vulnerable individual. Yet anyone affected is vulnerable, at least temporarily. If the person is seen as 'victimized', they are bound to remain so in as much as their past identity is weakened and their identity associated with the present misfortune is strengthened. In this conception of the process of victimization, the status of victim doesn't belong to the individual. It is, on the contrary, a social place defined by prevalent standards, and above all, by power relationships between such standards within a given society or culture. This means that the affected individual is victimized by his own group.

Therefore this process remains a complex social mechanism of working through. Its functioning and effects are not only difficult to identify but also are quickly rejected when they are revealed.

The most commonly involved psychological mechanisms in this process of victimization are projection and over-identification with those individuals who have been affected by events which the group refuses to leave unpunished. Let us stress the idea that through these mechanisms, the harm is inflicted on the victim and spares the other members of the group.

'Yet I could have been hit'. This path feeds and reinforces the fantasy that something that I did or did not do explains the harm; hence I feel guilty and look for new forms of expiation.

In order to better understand these processes, let us examine the way unconscious mechanisms initially unfold. Projection and over-identification are provoked by narcissistic motivations according to which we all tend to be the protagonists of anything happening around ourselves. Indifference is just its counterpart. These mechanisms enable us to place the harm outside on the one hand, and to associate it directly to our identity on the other hand. The observation of a misfortune affecting

someone else makes us believe that we are ourselves safe, but also that we could have been the target.

The victimization presents itself as an imperative. It forces us to think about its nature and its consequences. The task of giving support to thinking remains hidden and sometimes justified by altruism, which is an undisputed social value, accompanying the process and emerging as a reply to guilt feelings.

Although compassion, solidarity, altruism alleviate guilt, they do not erase it. The seeds of the victimization process remain active and seek to perpetuate it. Hence the sufferer is condemned to the condition of victim, which is a rigid predicament difficult to escape from. Once defined as a 'victim', the subject loses the possibility of being the product of his/her own life history and is reduced to an object of pain and social requirements; at the same time, his/ her history is conceived within the limit of these events.

In brief, 'victims':

- act as support of the maintenance of memory in the face of certain events;
- expiate individual and social mistakes;
- alleviate the anxiety provoked by the presence of suffering as far as they allow to objectify and focus the 'evil' on to the 'criminal' and to confine its consequences to a specific sector of the society which is then considered as a 'victim' or as a 'scapegoat';
- reinforce collective identities often binding together individuals through a 'common cause'.

What about us psychoanalysts? The mechanisms I describe are inherent to the human condition and therefore they affect our task. To treat persons who stand as symbols of social troubles elevate our narcissism, which complicates the analysis, since it involves us in socially valued causes.

Let us be reminded that 'victims' histories always end up becoming 'Official Histories'. Thus the necessary confrontation between past and present loosens up. All differences then fade away and any possibilities of debate disappear. We, psychoanalysts find ourselves in the midst of a real yet unsolved tension which appears between on the one hand the social need to perpetuate memory and assert identities, and, on the other hand the need to keep the individual's subjectivity. In order to maintain ourselves in a 'neutral' place, and to avoid becoming agents of 'victimization' processes, psychoanalysts must be careful not to succumb to projection and over identification processes with the patient and, through him, with his group, which would be harmful to the patient. An excess of pain can never be shared because it never finds its way in any psyche. However, the wish to share this pain may transform it into suffering. This inevitably inadequate sharing defines an ethics of responsibility which encompasses truth as well as life.

The word “victim” names those who suffer, it provokes compassion and our desire to help; but at the same time it exerts violence while making it invisible. The definition devalues and ignores the subjectivity of the person. It forces them to adapt to the prevailing image, and enslaves them in a stereotyped role.

Finally, and as a way to widen our discussion, I would like to quote Hannah Arendt, (1955):

Whatever cannot become the object of discourse — the truly sublime, the truly horrible or the uncanny — may find through which to sound into the world, but it is not exactly human. We humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human. (p. 25). 📖

RESUMO

Após a apresentação de um caso em que vemos como o horror invade a mente por não ser possível conter a experiência numa narrativa, a autora elabora uma fenomenologia psicanalítica do processo de vitimização pelo próprio ambiente que rodeia a vítima. Como resultado desta designação por parte do grupo, os aspetos subjetivos deste processo mantêm-se escondidos.

A condição de vítima não pertence ao sujeito. É o grupo ao qual a vítima pertence que designa ou não como tal a pessoa que foi sujeita a violência. Uma rutura catastrófica perturba os equilíbrios intrapsíquico e interpessoal e muda radicalmente a relação entre a realidade psíquica e a realidade social. Estas duas realidades diferem-se a um ponto que tanto na experiência do sujeito como na do grupo se instala uma confusão entre mundo externo e mundo interno. Ansiedades arcaicas são então ativadas, albergando elementos psicóticos associados a desconfiança, que é produzida pela insegurança perante a desintegração de referências estáveis. O perigo infiltra-se na mentalidade indiferenciada de grupo. Esta experiência, na qual nada novo pode ser aprendido, reforça os aspetos onipotentes e a ilusão de que é possível evitar qualquer forma de dor.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: processo de vitimização, indivíduo, grupo de pertença.

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