

So That Our Dreams Will Not Escape Us: Learning to Think Together in Time of War

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Armed conflict creates situations that tear at the fabric of life, affecting both emotional and material circumstances. Far from being confined to one brief, traumatic moment, most armed conflicts today go on for an indeterminate number of years. Yet, children are engaged in a dynamic process of development. That process doesn't hold still and wait for better times. The challenge to all concerned with child development is to find ways to assist communities and families to enable their children to grow up properly in time of war.

When children are asked to name their own priorities, attending school is at the top of the list. Children associate school success with a hopeful future. But when they have been exposed to the most extreme forms of violence, they often find that the very same mental mechanisms that have allowed them to endure prevent them from using what they have experienced, making learning impossible. Further, their teachers have also been exposed to the horrors of war.

Extremely violent experiences are remembered differently, held in the mind without symbolic representation and are not held to the internal scrutiny of reflective functioning. Education programs that attempt to support mentalization may call up unexpected levels of resistance as the young minds unconsciously struggle to keep terrifying meanings away.

However, by combining traditional healing with reparative activity, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) of Uganda was able to create conditions for Acholi children abducted as child soldiers, even those who had seen parents and siblings killed before their eyes, to be able to tolerate the possibility of thinking. By addressing this fear first, the MOES has been able to embed relational principles into the fabric of its program so that in the midst of war, teachers can teach, children can learn, and adolescents can have hope that their dreams will not escape them.

In wars, we suffer from and witness some of the worst forms of violence committed against us and the people we love. Some of us have been born in the midst of this violence. It has become a way of life.

We believe that education is essential to our future and that we have a right to dream of a better life. (However) even if we go (to school) we have a hard time concentrating because we keep thinking about what happened to us and our relatives.

But when we lose months or years of school because of war, we worry that our dreams will escape us. When we should be learning, we are growing up in ignorance. As a result of this ignorance comes

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lack of hope. (Voices of Young People From Conflict Zones, From a Report by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children in Armed Conflict and UNICEF 2009)

Armed conflict disrupts the lives of children and adolescents in myriad ways. It is not only danger and loss of loved ones that they suffer, but the anxiety of the parents and teachers they depend on, and the disruption of routines so complete that it is hard for them to feel that life has any predictability at all (A. Freud and Burlingame, 1943; Honwana, 2006; IASC, 2007). Yet children and adolescents are engaged in a dynamic process of development that will not stand still and wait for better times. Therefore, finding ways to improve their lives, even as conflicts continue, becomes important to their individual development and to the future of the societies in which they live (Boothby, Wessells and Strang, 2007).

When children and adolescents in conflict zones are asked to name what they think would help them most, education is at the top of the list (Machel, 1996; Bragin, 2004a, 2005a, 2007; OSRSG-CAAC & UNICEF 2007). Even when they have a history of school failure, or no school at all, young people in conflict zones harbor hopes that they will be able to study some day, and use education as a path to a successful future (Bragin, 2004a; OSRSG-CAAC & UNICEF 2007; Bragin and Bragin, in press). Similarly, they view a lack of opportunity for education, and school failure, as the single element that will destroy their hopes for the future (Machel, 1996; OSRSG-SAAC and UNICEF, 2007).

However, as the children quoted at the beginning of this article attest (OSRSG-SAAC and UNICEF 2007); when they actually get to sit on school benches, the terrible things that they have experienced in wartime affect their ability to learn. Although the mind works to keep intolerable memories out of consciousness, it often appears to make it impossible to think at all. The very mental mechanisms that have helped their young minds to survive now appear to turn against them, making it impossible to do well at school (Saigh, Mroueh, and Bremmer, 1997; Bragin, 2005a; Yasik et al., 2007). Recent research that connects cognitive neuroscience to psychodynamic theory indicates that these phenomena have both a psychodynamic and neurobiological basis (Siegel, 1999; Perry, 2002; Allen and Fonagy, 2006; Bragin, 2009).

Just as psychoanalytic theory, from Freud (1919) and Bion (Likierman, 2008; Souter, 2009) to the present day, has contributed to understanding the effects of war and its accompanying violence on cognitive capacity; psychoanalytic theory may contain the information that is needed to reverse those effects (Fonagy and Target, 1998; Schore, 2003; Allen, 2006; Bragin and Bragin, in press). Psychoanalytic studies suggest that there are ways that war-affected students could be helped to tolerate what are now intolerable affects, sufficiently so that their minds could begin to be useful again, to think about the world, learn at school and create a hopeful future.

On the one hand, one might question how psychoanalysis could be relevant in a situation such as this. On the other, what theory but that of psychoanalysis, with its unflinching look at aggression, violence, and the worst of the human soul, might be equal to the task of helping these children to think, and then to learn?

This article unpacks the psychodynamic underpinnings of the deleterious effects of exposure to extreme violence on children and adolescent's cognitive capacity. It then uses psychoanalytic concepts to address those effects, so that the children can get their wish and be able to learn again. It discusses how this is being accomplished as part of a partnership, with the Ministry

of Education and Sports (MOES) of Uganda, that has embedded psychoanalytic principles into a community-based education program designed to improve academic outcomes for children in the war zones in the northern part of the country.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS: VIOLENCE, AGGRESSION, AND THINKING

A psychodynamic understanding of human beings as born with a certain amount of aggression that assists in the tasks necessary to survival (Freud, 1919; Klein, 1927, 1928, 1930; Winnicott, 1956, 1960, 1963, 1964, 1969) is important to help in unpacking all of this. Freud, Klein, Bion, and Winnicott are among the theorists who have posited that the infant begins life in a world in which outside cannot be distinguished from inside, in which one's own intense and devouring desires cannot be distinguished from the pains of hunger, bad digestion, or the irritation of wet (Bion, 1962).

The attention of the caregivers, who come and bring comfort, contact, and essentials of life, is initially divided by the child into that associated with pain and distress, and that associated with contented cuddling and feeding. The distress of the little being who is totally dependent and unable to be contented by the feed, or is experiencing its absence, may be intolerable as it is infused by the baby with its own aggressive instincts. However, time after time, and feed after feed, infants begin to fuse the good and bad aspects of their caregivers, and unite them into one image. That image is put into words. Over time and through loving care, the outside world acquires meaning; words are formed such as *blanket*, *pot*, and *momma*, etc. This is the way in which the internal world is made useful to the external one. The use of words as substitutes for things is known as *symbol formation*, and is a developmental achievement, uniting pain with satisfaction into the being of one caregiver (Klein, 1927, 1928, 1930).

However, managing one's own violent impulses and fusing them with one's positive strivings is a difficult part of growing up. This process can be observed through watching mothers and babies (Beebe and Lachman, 1988), or through children's play (Klein, 1927, 1928, 1930; Fonagy et al., 2002; Bragin, 2003). Reports from nursery school teachers, as well as child clinicians, indicate that as children grow up, they play out violent fantasies that allow them to reject *badness* and *mean-spiritedness* and rescue loved ones from terrible things. In this process, they conquer their own violent urges and propensities, identifying with the goodness of caregivers (Bragin, 2003, 2005a; Winnicott, 1960, 1963, 1964, 1969).

One of the most terrible things about acts of extreme violence is the way that they take scenes that belong to the realm of dreams and fantasy games and make them literal. However, in these real world situations, a helpless child is unable to serve as rescuer. Instead, events then become enactments of the worst part of their nightmares or force them to become actors in the nightmares of others, in which there is no salvation or relief (Bragin, 2003, 2004).

In previous work, Bragin has argued that repeated exposure to literal enactments of violent fantasy that erase the distinction between inside and outside, real and make believe, can cause regression to a state prior to symbol formation (Bragin, 2003, 2005a, 2007a). Without symbol formation, thought processes are interrupted, making the thinker concrete. Memories from the past are completed dissociated from meaning in the present; new experiences in the present cannot be enriched by meaning from the past, leaving the thinker concrete. Modell (2003) pointed

out that as this process protects the survivor from having to feel and experience that which is intolerable; this concrete state is maintained by the survivor as a defense.

Contemporary psychodynamic studies of neuroscience explain how this happens; extremely violent events, intolerable to the psyche, are processed differently than other experiences, before being stored as memory (Siegel, 1999; Perry, 2002; Schore, 2003).

Mentalization refers to the capacity not only to think, but to be aware of the fact that one is thinking, and that other people may also be thinking, as well (Fonagy, 1991; Allen, 2006). Like symbol formation, it is a developmental achievement (Fonagy et al., 2002). People who have experienced traumatic levels of violence are often unable to think about their experiences, and are terrified by the possibility of thinking about them, or even worse, reexperiencing the emotions that they associate with the event, and therefore are unable to mentalize them (Allen, 2006).

Unable to use thoughts or memories to calm emotions or to provide symbolic relief, unable give words to memories or emotional states, and unable to think about the possibility to think about them, the following specific sequelae can occur:

- Repetitive play among young children that reenacts violence over and over,
- Violent enactment behavior (breaking things, fighting hitting people, criminal activity) in older children and adolescents, or
- School failure attributed to difficulty thinking about and concentrating on school subjects (Pynoos and Eth, 1985; Yasik et al., 2007).

So war-affected children, who have won the right to an education and see that education as their only hope, find themselves unable to think, learn, and concentrate in the classroom, precisely because of the terrible suffering that they have experienced.

REVIEW OF THE PSYCHOANALYTIC LITERATURE

In Freud's early work (1896, he noticed that patients who had experienced unresolved childhood trauma sometimes developed strange and seemingly unrelated physical or behavioral symptoms to defend them from understanding experiences that they considered intolerable. In an often quoted letter to his friend Fliess (Freud, 1897; Kupfersmid, 1993), he clarified that it was not the fact of the violent abuse, in itself, that caused the symptoms (Freud considered the sexual abuse of small children to be ubiquitous), but the meaning that the mind made of these experiences that rendered them intolerable. In "Remembering repeating and working through" (Freud, 1914), he realized that an explanation or reconstruction of events and even the emotions connected to them was insufficient to promote an actual cure. This paper recounts Freud's discovery that the patient needs a process by which to work through the meaning of the traumatogenic experience over time and in the presence of one consistent person, in this case, the analyst.

This was the inception of the psychoanalytic notion that people who could not bear to think a particular thought, especially when that thought was related to extreme violence, expressed the forbidden thought in action, and that such actions could be understood and mitigated through talk conducted within an ongoing and consistent relationship; that is with an analyst who saw the patient every day. In Freud's early work (1896), he noticed that patients who had experienced unresolved childhood trauma sometimes developed strange and seemingly unrelated physical or behavioral symptoms.

Following World War I, as Freud (1919) was called upon to think about shell shock, he noted that even “actual neurosis,” that is, the realistic fear of death or dismemberment, as well as exposure to very violent events, could call forth mental reenactments (such as nightmares or sudden violent outbursts) which could be seen as the result of the “uncanny” nature of those events, that is, the horrors of war, in which real life events have come to imitate violent fantasies.

Melanie Klein elaborated on Freud’s post-World War I understandings of aggression and its properties. She discussed the capacity for symbol formation, that is, the ability to represent internal states and external reality through words and concepts, and to separate things, people, and events in the outside world, from internal fantasy and emotion (Klein, 1930; Siegel, 1957). In Klein’s view, the capacity for symbol formation developed to contain small children’s internal world of instinctual violence. In “Criminal Tendencies in Normal Children” (Klein, 1927) and “On Criminality” (Klein, 1934), she gave examples taken from the play of small children to support the view that the extremely violent behavior of some criminals (she cited Jack the Ripper) are, in fact, enactments of the violent fantasies of young children. Klein considered the capacity for symbol formation as a developmental achievement that takes the extreme violence and sadism of early infantile fantasy and begins to put those intolerable passions first into gestures and play and then into words, helping children to make a bridge from the internal world to the world outside of them (Klein, 1930).

Klein pointed out that this is only possible through children’s identification with the goodness of the caregiver on the one hand and ability to find ways to identify with her altruism, through doing good things in the world, a construct she calls reparation (Klein, 1928, 1937).

Klein’s colleague, Hanna Segal (1957), noted that symbol formation is not only a developmental achievement, but also that it can be reversed in unfavorable circumstances. This supports the idea that soldiers returning from war might have difficulty processing the violent events to which they were exposed and, therefore, relive them in nightmares or daytime fantasies, or to reenact them in violent outbursts.

Wilfred Bion, a follower of Klein, who was his analyst and teacher, studied the origin of the capacity to think. Bion was a decorated hero of the First World War who was separated from his home and family the age of eight (Souter, 2009).¹ He defined thinking as process that comes into being to contain thoughts which arise in the frustration of absence (Bion, 1961). Following Klein, he located the formation of symbols, thoughts, in an aggressive state. However, for Bion, the distress that promotes the beginning of thought comes from the absence of the breast, and its relational, as well as nutritional properties, i.e., the caring and soothing of the mother (Bion, 1962). Bion then described the experience of the infant as one in which an incomprehensible world of people and things, as well as intense affects coming from both inside the body and out, are made comprehensible through the interpolation of the mother’s love. Thoughts become thinking as a way of containing them, scary *beta elements* (objects and people in the world that cannot be understood) become *alpha elements* or understood and nameable things and feelings, through concerned and thoughtful caregiving. When the baby is in the grip of nameless dread, he can communicate feeling to the mother—in effect, evacuating the feelings into her. The mother

¹I mention Bion’s (1982) experience of the violence of war reflected in the posthumously published memoir because the memoir illustrates the ways in which the extreme violence of trench warfare effectively fragmented the thinking process to such a degree that the subject had only procedural memories of the experience (Liekerman, 2008).

becomes the container of these feelings, and then in effect feeds them back to the infant in a more digestible, comprehensible form (Bion, 1962).

Laub and Auerhahn (1993) (before the first neurobiological studies that prove this theory) discuss the fact that extremely violent situations are stored differently in the mind, resulting in a sense of knowing and not-knowing at the same time. Bragin (2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2007) has suggested that these phenomena, and the accompanying nightmares and reenactments can be the result of failure of symbol formation. Her recorded clinical material includes interviews with children and adults affected by wars around the world, as well as children and adolescents affected by family and community violence in the United States. She suggested that this failure may result from exposure to extreme violence either through the uncanny nature of the violent experiences (as real world enactments of violent infantile fantasy or nightmares) or through the experience of a helpless rage so powerful that it pulls one back to the experience of the pre-symbolic infant.

The question of how symbolizing and understanding unbearable experiences that are expressed in action might be tolerated was addressed by D. W. Winnicott in his study of aggression among children in the juvenile justice system in England (Winnicott, Shepherd, and Davis, 1984). Winnicott noted that children who were very angry or hurt by external violence felt bad about themselves for the anger that they experienced in response (Winnicott, 1964). He found that they sometimes acted in ways that would engender a punitive response from adults, hoping in that way to be rehabilitated. Others felt so far out of reach that they seemed overcome by their own aggression with no way to connect to others (Winnicott, 1939). He found that the capacity to tolerate their affects and then to think their situation could be developed among these youngsters through a process that included concerned caregiving on the part of others, but also through the acceptance of anger and aggression as a normal part of human experience (Winnicott, 1963). He showed through case example that youngsters could come to accept aggression in themselves and in the world if they were able to counter these experiences with experiences that allowed them to do good and, therefore, to feel good (Winnicott, 1960). He wrote that, by these means, children could counter their need to act out their aggression and develop the capacity to tolerate their experiences and go on being, as concerned members of the community (Winnicott, 1963). He did not, however, address the development of the capacity for symbol formation or for thinking.

The second half of the twentieth century brought advances in the study of infancy and, with it, the empirical study of both the relational bases of the emergence of thinking and the precise effects of violence on this developing capacity. This work emerged from the study of human attachment.

Attachment theory derived from the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. Bowlby was also a student of Klein, who pursued the aspect of her work that relates to the importance of connection between babies and their human caregivers. Bowlby and Ainsworth began a tradition of empirical verification of their theories, a tradition that continues today.

Bowlby and Ainsworth's research indicated that the secure base created by consistent and sensitive caregiving promoted three critical functions:

- a lifelong working model for relationships with others;
- exploration of the outside world the learning of new things, and the tolerance of risk taking; and

- the regulation of affects, the management of distress and the substitution of proximity seeking as an alternative to fight-flight response in difficult situations (Bowlby, 1988; Waters and Cummings, 2000; Bretherton, 2002).

Advances in the study of the neurobiology of human development showed that the interaction between infants, children, and their caregivers created the neural networks that promoted and supported these capacities (Siegel, 1999; Perry, 2002).

Bowlby (1973, 1980) wrote about the effects of loss on the secure base and others followed with discussions of the effects of neglect, abuse and violence. Perry (1997, 2002) provided detailed analysis of the alterations of neurobiological process that are created through prolonged exposure to extreme violence, and specifies the particular effects of violence on development in children and adolescents.

Because of the importance of the secure base, attachment theorists began to explore the possibility of creating environments that might replicate and create a secure base for children who suffered from a variety of insecure attachments (Waters and Cummings, 2000; Mikulincer, Shaver, and Pereg, 2003). Al-Yagon and Mikulincer (2006) tested attempts to create a secure base in middle school and classrooms to promote improved academic and social functioning.

Theories of resilience (Werner, 2002; Hauser and Allen, 2006; Brandt, 2006) indicate that the secure base, or at the very least the presence of an ongoing connection to at least one person over time, is one of the most critical factors that protects against overwhelming risk.

Starting in 1995, Peter Fonagy and his colleagues at the Anna Freud Centre in London began to study the role of attachment in the specific development of theories of thinking. Fonagy and Target (1996, 1997, 1998, 1999) referred to the capacity to think about thinking and to use that process to modulate emotion, understand and appreciate the minds of others, and then to think about one's effect on others and the world, as mentalization or reflective function. They and their collaborators have demonstrated that this specific capacity supports the creation of thoughts, the modulation of emotions and the ability to understand other people.

Target and Fonagy (1996) connected mentalization to symbol formation. They noted that the process of symbol formation takes place developmentally in two parts. The first part is the beginning of speech, the recognition that the people and things that exist in the world have names that can be used to describe or to actually ask for them. They pointed out that the symbol as a representation of actual mental life, including representations of emotions or mental states appears later, begins at around the age of 4. Therefore, symbol formation in the first instance is a necessary precursor to beginning to mentalize, and then in the second instance it may be understood as the same as mentalizing or thinking about thinking.

Allen (2006) gave examples of using a mentalization-based approach to restore thinking to patients hospitalized with reactions to trauma. Fonagy et al. (2009) used mentalization-based interventions to reduce violence and bullying in school communities.

The colleagues in Northern Uganda worked together with me to put what we know about the effects of exposure to violence on the capacity to form symbols, to think, and to think about thinking together with the discoveries of developmental psychology about how these capacities are developed, with the knowledge they had gained from traditional healers over time to create the Revitalization of Education Participation and Learning in Conflict Areas (REPLICA) program in Northern Uganda. The program links educational specialists, teachers, community members, older students, and younger ones to help make it possible to learn and think.

TRADITIONAL HEALING AND COMMUNITY PSYCHOANALYSIS IN TIME OF CONFLICT

The incorporation of psychoanalytically informed psychosocial interventions as part of the care provided to survivors of war or state and community violence was pioneered by South American analysts working under conditions of state-sponsored violence, and adapted during the civil wars in Central America during the 1980s (Hollander, 1997). Their approach was utilized by psychologists in sub-Saharan Africa, who combined culturally specific, traditional ways of understanding the role of myth, symbol, and unconscious meaning with social interventions to engage survivors in improving the quality of everyday life (Bragin, 2005b, 2007; Honwana, 2006; IASC, 2007). These approaches were based on the idea that the violent acts committed in war, and the values that war experiences celebrate are fundamentally at odds with the needs of the peacetime community (Freud, 1919; Honwana, 1998). They connect to psychoanalysis through a common theoretical basis Freud.

The idea that the experience of war is at fundamental odds with the peacetime aims of the community is one that is introduced early in psychoanalysis (Freud, 1919), along with the concept of a communal means of treatment for those who suffer from their war-time experiences. Freud (1913) described the rituals of many indigenous communities, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa, regarding the return of warriors to the community, before the war caused him to turn his attention to the specific needs of returning veterans (Freud, 1919). According to Freud, the tradition required segregation from the community until those who had engaged in battle could be purified from having broken the taboo against taking human life (Freud, 1913). Honwana (2006) discussed the importance of the use of these mechanisms, along with their psychological functions, in the reintegration of children affected by today's armed conflicts. Barton and Mutiti (1998) described how they were used specifically in northern Uganda.

Starting in the late 1990s, psychoanalysts from Latin America, Europe, and the United States started specifically collaborating with their African colleagues to exchange ideas about how to integrate psychoanalytic principles, into community programs to support survivors of war trauma. These programs, like the one described here, used specific psychoanalytic principles, alongside of traditional ones, to support survivors in a sustainable, culturally relevant, and effective way during and after armed conflict.

Such programs have been integrated as best practice by both United Nations agencies and international organizations (Bragin, 2011). Practice reports indicate that when such interventions are community based, culturally competent and comprehensive in nature they appear to meet with success (Boothby, Strang, and Wessells, 2006; IASC, 2007). However, there are only a very small number of papers that elucidate the psychoanalytic principles involved, and how they are imbedded in the community programs (Bragin, 2004b, 2005b). Only one of these (Bragin and Bragin, in press) has addressed the specific question of education.

THE SITUATION IN NORTHERN UGANDA: EXTREME VIOLENCE AND COPING

The REPLICa program, implemented by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) of the Government of Uganda, serves children and adolescents in the war-torn districts of Northern

Uganda, many of whom have been forced to fight as child soldiers and who had lost all hope of returning to school and learning again.

The situation in the conflict zones has been dire. These provinces have been involved in a 22-year-old armed conflict, which has completely disrupted the lives the entire community. The armed group that initiated the conflict, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) destroyed homes and villages, abducting children and adolescents to fight on its behalf. Because of its interest in abducting children, the LRA often targeted schools, where its members killed, tortured, or abducted teachers and marched the children off to fight. Villagers suspected of being hostile to the rebels were tortured or murdered in reprisal, and their homes and crops destroyed. Those who were allowed to live were often mutilated. Farmers were unable to farm their fields for fear of these raids, and eventually came to live in crowded camps where the government attempted to provide for their safety. Over the years, the independent traditions of agriculture, and the rhythms of life around the needs of crops and animals, were eroded—with them, a cherished way of life and livelihood. However, even in the camps, the population was often in danger. Camps were raided, massacres committed, and some were burnt to the ground with people trapped within them. Due to constant fear of raids and abduction, children were forced to leave home at night to the relative safety of the large towns, where they got little sleep. When abducted children were rescued or escaped, they returned to the community severely affected by the horrors that they had experienced as victims, witnesses, and forced perpetrators. Currently, the conflict is in the process of negotiated settlement, and children are sleeping at home, but no one in the region has been unaffected, and every child and family, teacher, student, and public official has known fear, loss, and violence.

Indigenous Psychological Coping Strategies

In the early days of the conflict, traditional healers gathered together and sought to address the issue, as they, too, were willing to look beyond the material and at the meaning that the mind makes of the terrible.

The healers originally felt helpless in the face of the catastrophe, saying that the methods that they had studied since childhood were designed to address the normal range of human frailty. What could they do to help a child who had been forced at gunpoint to kill another, or seen her family members burned alive?

However, over time, they found that they could use their knowledge to relieve children's suffering. They worked with the MOES and the Ugandan Defense Forces to ensure that if a child was rescued from abduction, ceremonies were performed to address the angry spirits of the dead, call upon the ancestors to reclaim the child into the community, and purify the spirit of the child, so that he or she could be restored to membership in the community. Because the healers are community members themselves, they are available for follow-up support at any time during the child's life that such support, or additional ceremonies, might be needed (Barton and Mutiti, 1998; Bragin, 2005a). Because of the interdependent construal of self within the Acholi community of Northern Uganda, this spiritual healing has proved effective in lowering the level of symptoms among the participants (Honwana, 2006; Annan, Blattman, and Horton, 2006). However, these interventions, as well as Western psychotherapy when it was made available, were insufficient alone to improve educational outcomes for the war-affected children (Bragin, 2004). And education was what the children and their families wanted most.

Approaching Education: An Education Needs Assessment in the Conflict Zones

The educational assessment was begun following an investigation into complaints by parents that their children's right to education was being denied. The parents stated that even though schools were provided in the conflict zones, the children were failing the examinations necessary for promotion at disproportionately high rates, compared to their peers in the rest of the country. The MOES was deeply concerned, as many had been at great pains to insure that education was provided for these children and that there were at least rudimentary schools in the camps for internally displaced persons in which the children lived.

The assessment was conducted at a time when abductions and killings were at their height and the region was most dangerous. However, the head of the special education department at MOES was determined that children's needs were addressed and parents' concerns taken seriously. I was engaged as an outside consultant to partner with the senior psychologist from the Ministry's counseling department to travel to the conflict zone, study the problem, and develop an approach to solving it, based on local knowledge and informed by international experience.

Mr. George Opiro, the senior psychologist, was especially keen to make the trip. Born in the Northern region himself, he had been abducted several times while teaching in the district. He served as a bridge between outsider and insider in the assessment effort. He is now Commissioner of Counseling at MOES and has personally designed and supervised the program, supported by Ugandan clinical colleagues under his direction, and the teachers and members of the ministry. It was my honor to work with him on this project.

The assessment team journeyed to the conflict zone, meeting with school officials, teachers, parents, students, traditional healers, leaders, and respected community elders. The team members stayed in the community, spending the nights and eating with officials in the camps.

Classroom conditions were extremely difficult. Schools had been built in the home regions of the children, near to the farms their families had been forced to abandon; therefore, they could not be used during the conflict. So classrooms were set up in the middle of the camps. There were often as many as a hundred children in each class, sitting on logs and chairs, under a thatched roof constructed by community members, with one blackboard at the front, and one beleaguered teacher.

Teachers, themselves, had suffered multiple losses and lived in danger and fear. They were often teaching in one place (the camp where they were living) and assigned to another (their abandoned school building), so that they felt untethered to the school system and any available supports.

Administrators felt helpless and alone in the compounds. The mandate of the central government and the demands of the parents were clear: Educate the children and prepare them to pass exams. But, as they too were subject to raids, abductions, and mass murder, it was hard for these administrators to think of how to fulfill the mandates. It was clear that the program to address the needs of the children must start with a way to address the needs of all.

THEORY TO PRACTICE: THE REPLICA PROGRAM

Public education programs are, by their nature, complex. Therefore, I will not attempt to describe this one in its entirety. Instead, I will highlight two key aspects of the program that are illustrative

of how psychoanalytic theory was embedded into the program, so that the war-affected teachers and students were able to benefit as a group. The processes that were utilized enabled community members to work together to create the fundamental human connections that would enable teachers and children to be able reflect, symbolize, and think under conditions of war.

We started with the principle that if everyone was too terrified to think, then children couldn't learn and teachers couldn't teach (Yasik et al., 2007). To create the mental preconditions for thinking, we used two methods. The first that is described here is the building of attachment connections among the participants, especially among the teachers to help them to think together and therefore be able to create connections to improve the capacity for thinking among the students (Al-Yagon and Mikulciner, 2006; Twemlow and Fonagy, 2006). The second was to address the fear of thinking created by being exposed to the most terrible acts of violence. This was accomplished by creating conditions for reparation, as it is the act of repairing, and the consciousness that one is capable of goodness that makes the knowledge of aggression tolerable to the mind (Bragin, 2007; Klein, 1937; Winnicott, 1939).

To clarify these issues, two clinical examples are offered: one of a teacher and the other of two students.

Paul: A Senior Teacher's Story

Paul grew up in a small farming community in the northernmost region of Uganda. As the eldest, his family placed great hopes on his education, which he took very seriously. He hoped that his younger brothers would also be able to study, and even to follow him to the teacher's college at Kyambogo University. He was once abducted briefly, while traveling to school, but had managed to escape with his life after several hours, before they had crossed the border to Sudan. However, his world was shattered when two younger brothers and a sister-in-law were killed in a raid, and a younger brother abducted. He fled to a crowded refugee camp, now with a wife, a 2-year-old, his brother's three children, and the wife of the other brother and her new baby. There he resumed his role as teacher, supporting the new government policy of universal primary education.

He initially returned to the family fields after school hours to plow so that he could feed his growing family. His father was killed on the road, trying to bring supplies to help them, and his mother managed to join them in the camp, her heart frozen in grief. However, things then took a turn for the worse, and neither plowing the fields nor traveling outside the camp for work was possible. Paul requested a transfer to teach in a safer environment, but was turned down. Then the unthinkable happened; the camp in which he lived and worked was burned to the ground in the dead of night. He and the 18 family members now sheltering with him survived by luck, and due to the hypervigilance of a nephew, who had seen the LRA murder his parents before his eyes and was unable to sleep at night.

He wondered how children could study when they were often forced to go to town and sleep in the open at night to avoid abduction. He considered it almost impossible to teach 100 students when some were formerly abducted and all lived in fear. However, when he was interviewed about the needs of teachers and students, he found himself unable to articulate issues, despite the fact that junior teachers looked to him to explain.

Paul presented as a tall man who had once been strong, but now appeared stooped, downtrodden, and hollow-eyed. His clothes were ragged, and his copybook the same. Finally, he began in a concrete tone. "We need to belong to a formal district," he said. "We need the schools to be

reorganized to reflect reality. Our schools are in the camps but we and our students are in far-flung districts. It makes no sense. We need our pay delivered every month so that we can take care of our families. If we try to walk to the district office to seek our pay, we may be abducted on the way, or taken for rebels by the armed forces and detained.”

His voice took a bit more strength as he went on, although he told himself that his words would have no effect and things would continue as before. But somehow his voice grew stronger and he continued, “And we teachers need help. We have 100 students, sometimes more, under the tree in class. We don’t know who has been abducted and who simply living in fear. How can we teach them?”

Making it Possible to Speak About Reality: The Establishment of Learning Centers

The MOES took Paul and his fellow teachers’ concerns to heart. The first aspect activity of the new program was an administrative change. The new reality of the teachers and the schools had to be connected to the central offices in the capital for the world to make sense to the teachers. Teachers and administrators were now officially assigned to teach in the camps where they were living for the duration of the conflict. Since these were not housed in formal school buildings, they were called learning centers. The centers are monitored by education officials who also live in the camp. This began the process of making meaning for teachers like Paul. They did not have to live in a fictional world, appointed as teachers to schools in which they did not teach, in places that were inaccessible. Teachers could now be attached to the system for which they worked, and get support from administrators who lived and worked beside them. For Paul, seeing that he was now assigned to the learning center in his camp, could receive pay there, and actually order supplies for the children he taught allowed his world to feel less bizarre. This was a precondition for him to begin to use the attachment to the system that it created for him to think with. Someone had taken note of what he said, even when he was not there. Someone had kept him, and the other teachers, in mind.

Connecting to administrators. In conflict zones, and other places where hope is in short supply, poor management becomes a symptom of despair, and poorly managed systems (where no one knows how to properly dispose of trash or care for basic supplies) reflect lack of concern for teachers, and eventually a lack of hope that they or their students can or will succeed. Therefore, the MOES took extra care to train and support administrators, and provide solutions to practical problems.

To support a consistent sense of connection, district education officers spend the night in camps where the students and teachers lived on a regular, monthly basis. The Commissioner of Guidance and Counselling came regularly from the capital city to visit classrooms and meet with teachers and administrators together (Opiro, 2006a). They began to discuss their problems and arrange for problem solving measures, instead of leaving them unattended. A critical component of the system is what the MOES refers to as Coordinating Center Tutors or CCTs. These education experts, usually professors from local universities, help school administrators improve education quality and meet directly with teachers to help them manage problems in teaching and classroom management. They are constant objects in the teachers’ world.

Paul’s response to these interventions. The interventions that are described here may seem prosaic, institutional. But for Paul, the idea that someone had kept him in mind was

palpable. When the District Education Officer returned with the teacher's pay, and announced the construction of the learning centers, Paul felt both hope and disbelief. Someone had heard him. The words that he and the others had spoken went somewhere, had effect. As the administrators returned for monthly meetings, sometimes with Commissioner Opiro along, he began to feel that there was something that he could rely on. He looked at Commissioner Opiro and saw himself mirrored, affirmed. But it would take more than one visit for this to matter.

Connecting to teachers. Commissioner Opiro, in fact, knew that teachers are the most important component of an education program, and that addressing their needs is paramount to their success. Nothing could be put into place without their engagement. Further, the fact that the war affected them every day could not be ignored in supporting their capacity to teach. Since teachers like Paul were living with violence, fear, and loss, their capacity to think and reflect was also being compromised. Therefore, they needed focused attention and support to be able to think, reflect, and encourage their pupils to do so in the classroom (Opiro, 2005, 2006a; MOES, 2005).

To be able to teach and to learn new and more effective techniques, teachers needed attention in small groups that first addressed their material needs, then their emotional needs, and in the process brought them into a dialogue in which they could think about their classrooms.

In the conflict zones, where life was so difficult for everyone, the CCTs and head teachers met together weekly to share implementation experiences, identify areas of improvement, and think about their own needs, as well as those of the teachers. They developed innovations that made teaching possible, like paying community members to work in the classrooms so that the teachers could circulate and work with small groups of 20 students on the main lessons, although the others did supplementary activities or practiced their lessons.

Then the tutors met with teachers themselves in small groups and learned about how the week was going, how they were feeling, and asking after their welfare. In these meetings, they could also begin to think together about their classrooms. Had someone succeeded? That was time for applause! Was someone needing a new idea? That was time for discussion? Was there a material problem that needed a solution? Group members put their heads together. Did someone feel that he or she just could not go on? That was time for group support.

As the meetings continued faithfully, week after week, Paul found himself in the minds of the tutor, the head teacher, and the administrators. The connection he felt to the other teachers and the tutors who cared about them made Paul feel that he was not alone. At home, with his family, he was part of a group united by love, but also by terror. He was responsible for caring for them and he was worried all the time. Here he was a member of a group of others who were struggling together. He was sometimes a helper, but sometimes an object of care. And, like the father he had lost early on in the fighting, the administrators were there to congratulate, support, and bless their efforts. This sense of consistent, available, focused attention enabled him to begin to sort experiences in the classroom and to do the work of beginning to give meaning to the events of every day. The presence of the tutors in the group, day after day, began a process by which affects could be contained, and through the presence of the group, returned as emotions and thoughts, equipped with meanings.

When Commissioner Opiro came to the meetings himself, they all felt that he, and with him the education authorities, kept him and the other teachers in mind. What is more, they thought about what the teachers were thinking. "You think about what we tell you and you respond to our ideas. We appreciate that."

At first, the conversations were basic. They needed supplies, or were fearful of raids. Then the need for assistant teachers, so that small groups were possible, was raised in the meeting. As these problems were discussed, the teachers formed a connection to one another that helped them to feel that they could count on one another. They had all known each other before, but now they were a team, there for a purpose: to help the children in their camp to succeed. These meetings held the teachers from week to week in the difficult surroundings, and the tutors began to contain the teachers' affects, enabling them to begin to metabolize their experiences. Slowly, they began to be able to focus on lesson plans. They began to brave the world of ideas.

In addition, teachers participated in cultural activities, theater, music, and dance that were part of the essential curriculum. Engagement in these activities was as therapeutic for teachers as it was for students. It gave them the opportunity to begin to make meaning out of the suffering of the literal life of day to day, through symbolic expression. This symbolic expression supported their work with the students.

In the classroom, the teachers were able to use the method that was created in their own support groups to contain the anxieties of the students, and help reflect their words back to them. As stable, constant objects, there in the classroom every day, they would be able to work with the students, as the tutors worked with them (Al-Yagon and Mikulincer, 2006; MOES, 2005).²

Paul found himself leading an after-school theater group. His own children joined him there with the others. Although he says that the pain in his heart, the loss of his brothers and his father, will stay with him always, he is now full of purpose and hope and he can convey that to the students and the fellow teachers even more unfortunate than he.

Two Students

Two students that captured Paul's heart from the first were Rachel and David, now members of his theater group. Rachel was a slight 12-year-old who isolated herself from the others and never spoke. She often appeared to be in another world. David was younger and had haunted eyes that darted around the room. He could not concentrate on lessons and sometimes simply hopped off the back bench and left class. Sometimes he stood up and rushed aggressively toward another student and had to be stopped. He'd been to school, up through class 4, and it appeared that he actually read, wrote, and did arithmetic quite well when Paul sat with him, but his exams were always blank or full of scribbles.

Rachel and David had been abducted together one night after a raid that resulted in their home being burnt to the ground with their mother and baby sister inside. Their father had been away, finding work and a means to feed them. They had grabbed the younger children and run out of the house in time. The rebels stated that they were "big enough" to go along with them. They were marched off with the screams of those trapped by flames in their ears and the smell of burning flesh all around.

"Don't cry out or we'll make you eat your own mother!" the rebels shouted to the frightened children as they placed ammunition and supplies on their heads, tied their hands behind their

²The presence of assistants to sit with small group so that teachers taught groups of 15–20 students at a time while others practiced made the job possible. The importance of this intervention, as well as the symbolic meaning of having community members paid to be in the classroom to support education, cannot be overemphasized.

backs and then tied them to a chain of other children. A child fell and was beaten to death. The chain stopped for the dead child to be untied. There was little water or food as they walked for days until they crossed the border into Sudan.

The south of Sudan is vast and undeveloped, with few towns or villages or roads along the way. There was no one that they could ask for help, or even for something to eat or drink. The commander said that they were fighting to purify their people, the Acholi, for God. He said that their purpose was to destroy sinners and bring the 10 commandments. However, David and Rachel kept thinking about the commandments that they were breaking every day.

Once in the Sudan, they were taught to shoot and issued automatic rifles to carry along with their roads. They were warned that they would be forced to shoot and that, if they didn't, they would be handed machetes and forced to chop people's limbs, ears, or mouths off. That any who refused would be shot and left to die slowly in the wilderness. They were assured that the punishment for escape were tortures too terrible to imagine, and that once they had participated, any family members left alive would no longer accept them. There are some sins that can never be forgiven.

Rachel, however, saw a means of escape. She collapsed one day as they marched in the sun and was beaten and raped for punishment. Then she was left for dead, or for wild animals, smelling the blood, to finish her while she was still alive.

Somehow, Rachel had managed to stagger and to crawl, depleted and dehydrated, across the border where she was found by a Ugandan army patrol on alert for abducted children. They brought her to a rehabilitation center. There she received medical and psychological treatment while her surviving family members were found, informed that she'd been rescued. She was then returned home, to the crowded camp for internally displaced persons where her grandmother was living.

David admired that Rachel had managed to pass herself off as dead, so that no one was looking for her. At least he hoped she wasn't really dead . . . but the other boys said that was a dream, no one lived when they were in as bad shape as Rachel. They were all malnourished and dehydrated. They all had malaria often, as well as insect bites, swollen feet, and legs riddled with open, infected sores. He had nearly lost hope for escape when he was able to run for it in the midst of a hail of bullets during a fire fight with soldiers from the national army. He expected that they would shoot or torture him as the LRA commanders had advised. Instead, they picked him up and carried him to the rehabilitation center, where he learned that Rachel was alive and that she was living with their grandmother in a camp several kilometers north of the center.

Traditional Treatments

Both Rachel and David received a package of traditional treatments, beginning with one that welcomed them back to the community when they were received at the center. Then specific treatments were continued when they returned home. There are rituals designed to cleanse the individual, and purify him or her. Then there is another ritual that is designed to bring about reconciliation with the spirits of the dead. Since the children had killed members of the community, they must participate in this process with the elders. These symbolic acts made the children acceptable to the rest of the community, and symbolized the possibility of returning home and

moving forward. The inability of many of the terrorized children to think symbolically, unfortunately sometimes limits the effectiveness of the treatments the first time round, and may require that they be repeated at a later date (Bragin, 2005b).

Because the elders are community members, they can be called upon to repeat a ritual or to add one when they are needed. To follow up on their well-being, they also to visit the child and see what he or she needs. The healer can serve as a constant object, in the way that the administrators did for the teachers, connecting the children to the larger community, able to help contain affects and to remind the children that they are kept in mind. The local healer visited Rachel and David's grandmother, learning that she wanted them to return to school. That would have been their mothers' wish. The healer escorted them.

School is the most useful medicine for war-affected children. First it provides a normalizing experience, as they are together with other children, and are able to resume activities that are familiar from normal times. Second, it provides a routine, a series of routines to follow every day, that again can make life begin to feel normal. The decentered classrooms discussed earlier are designed to help students create the connections to others that are the fundamental building blocks of resilience.

However, Paul noticed that even the effects of the child-centered classroom did not help these two (nor the other formerly abducted children) to learn. The formerly abducted, both girls and boys, actively avoided thinking and symbolizing, as that could possibly involve calling up and making use of experiences that were too terrible for their minds to endure. From the moment of their mother's death by fire, to their own harsh treatment to the acts that they participated in, these children were in the grip of a powerful, but helpless, rage at all that had been done to them, and all that they could not do. Watching one horrible event after another, their minds were filled with images of destruction so primitive that they could not be fathomed, except by their vicious captors. Prior to their capture, their aggression had been modulated and managed through loving care, so that unacceptable violence was relegated to the land of dreams and nightmares, and utilized in the real world through energetic pursuit of education. Angry fantasies about siblings were mitigated but opportunities to participate in meaningful family chores. The violent scenes that they witnessed awakened and stimulated aggression and took scenes from the realm of nightmare fantasy into real life, confusing and conflating the two in dangerous ways. Were this not enough, the enormity of their rage toward their captors, and those who had not protected them, connected to all of this unleashed aggression, allowing them to connect in some deep way, to the violent aggression of their captors. This was often most terrifying of all.

To survive, their minds shut down and they regressed to a stage prior to symbol formation, with Rachel largely living in a dissociated state; David found himself trying to survive between flashbacks and enactments. They tried, above all else, to keep their affects flat, and the meaning of experience far away. They were frightened of noise and frightened of quiet. Getting them to participate in activities that would help them to think, even in small groups, with a supportive learning partner, was not only ineffective, but initiated their defensive symptoms. To mitigate these symptoms, the program contained an additional element; the opportunity for reparative activity (Bragin, 2004a; Opiro, 2006). When they could do good things, feel good about what they did, they could begin to feel able to tolerate, to some small degree, awareness of the destruction that they had experienced and participated in (Bragin, 2003, 2004b, 2007b; Klein, 1928, 1937; Winnicott, 1960, 1964).

Aggression, Repression, Guilt, and Reparation

The violent rages or deep withdrawal provoked by experiences of extreme violence are a normal reaction to abnormal circumstances. However, if there is no chance to repair the damage caused by exposure to extreme violence, the associated affects cannot be regulated and the resulting feelings of overwhelming *badness* causes splitting to take place, and precludes symbol formation (Klein, 1928; Bragin, 2003). The neurobiological result of exposure to violence means that memories are not symbolized, not able to be thought as thoughts. In addition, their capacity to separate inside from outside, nightmare from reality, was extremely tenuous. Connection to others, of the type that was offered in the program, can be used to make thinking possible, but only when the thinker is able to tolerate thinking.

Paul and the other teachers were, because of their profession, giving back to the community every day through their work. That helped them to be able to use the connections that were created in the groups, and the efforts of the leaders to keep them in mind to begin to think. However, the formerly abducted children had no such opportunity, unless one was specifically created for them. Further, their experiences had been even more unbearable; they had actually killed in battle, and had been starved, beaten, abused, and in Rachel's case, raped. Their contact with bad things, and their rage, along with their lack of certainty about what was real, what a nightmare, terrified them.

For them to tolerate the process of thinking, and with it remembering and working through, they would need a way to tolerate the intolerable. The mechanism for doing this came from reparation. The students would be given the opportunity to do and be praised for, helpful actions that improved the lives of others, every day, and even many times a day, during and after class.

The tutors recommended that Paul start with simple things, assigning the formerly abducted students, and any others who seemed fearful of thought or concentration, to be special helpers in class. They were to make sure that assignments and supplies were distributed, or that small children were taken to the latrine. When David stood up and seemed about to seek an enemy to strike, he was invited to help Paul with a pressing problem. ("David, can you come and help me distribute chalk to group three; I see that you are standing.") When Rachel seemed to lose contact with her surroundings, she was given a helpful task to do around the classroom.

The theater group formed a special section that gave health messages to the community. The group members taught lessons about the importance of hand washing and the use of bed nets for preventing malaria. They gave messages about staying safe from HIV and AIDS. Healers and community leaders could come to the group with common community problems and ask the theater group to do a skit to tell people how to solve them. For Rachel and David, this was especially important, as it included contact with the healer, and ways to participate in healing others.

From Retribution to Restoration

In many classrooms and school systems, including those in the United States, poor performance is punished in administrators, who then punish teachers and then punish the students. In the REPLICA schools, supports are built into the program, as a whole, that replace the concept of failing with that of intractable problems to be resolved (Opiro, 2006b). Instead of the poisonous

retribution the children had experienced in the rebel camps during the period of abduction, school represented a place that exemplified justice as being restorative, rather than retributive. Klein (1928) pointed out that this is a necessary precursor to symbol formation.

In the Acholi culture, the work that Rachel and David did to serve the community helped to make the traditional ceremony of reconciliation that they had experienced feel meaningful. Since the traditional healer who performed the ceremony was also the person who helped them to think about good things to do for others, he could be container for unbearable thoughts, helping them to be symbolized.

As part of an ongoing group, with Paul as the leader, Rachel and David could make the connection to a constant object, someone who could keep them in mind day after day. They could begin to bear to think, and to learn again. Both Rachel and David, along with most of their cohort in the REPLICA program, passed their 1st-year exams (Opiro, 2006b).

DISCUSSION: PSYCHOANALYSIS IN A WAR-AFFECTED COMMUNITY

Freud (1913) first illustrated the need for community-based cleansing and reparation for warriors returning to the peacetime community by invoking ceremonies from sub-Saharan Africa. He later incorporated these ideas into his work on the war neuroses. Melanie Klein wrote many of her critical papers during and directly after a time of war, when she and her patients lived through incessant bombings. It should not be a surprise, then, that psychoanalytic ideas could be joined with those of a determined and creative African community to create the space for war-affected children to learn at school. Twemlow and Fonagy's (2006) work on mentalizing systems in schools created a context for beginning the process of mentalization among members of a community too severely terrorized to think about thinking at all. Consistent supportive connection, combined with opportunities for reparation, gave teachers and their students in the conflict zone of Northern Uganda the chance to begin to learn and to think again, to survive the war with their hope for a better future intact.

This program is purely made in Uganda, and perhaps only possible because a dedicated and creative school official organized an entire community to help its teachers and children during the most dark and despairing period of an ongoing war. However, it illustrates how psychoanalytic theories can be combined with indigenous ones so that they can become a vehicle for transformation in the lives of people faced with extremes of adversity.

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