Pathologies of Perpetration

As Gandhi was to so clearly formulate through his own life, freedom is indivisible, not only in the popular sense that the oppressed of the world are one, but also in the unpopular sense that the oppressor too is caught in the culture of oppression.

(Nandy, 1983, p. 6)

Many may think it strange to be concerned about the psychodynamics and suffering of perpetrators of violence. There is often a fear that if we try to “understand” and “explain” violent behavior, we somehow excuse the perpetrator from moral responsibility, and diminish the emotional horror of the crimes. That is not our aim. The perpetrator of violence is ultimately responsible for his or her actions. At the same time, the historical, cultural, and political context may press powerful ideologies upon the potential perpetrator that instigate, sustain, and justify violence. As Lifton (1983) has stressed, a “critical examination of ideologies and institutions in their interaction with styles of self-process” in perpetrators is necessary as a “prophylaxis against genocidal directions of the self” (p. 500). To focus on the individual alone will mislead us and weaken our grasp of how perpetration of violence unfolds within particular communities and cultures. There are three crucial tasks for psychologies of liberation regarding perpetration: (1) to understand the intrapsychic dynamics of the perpetrator in societal context; (2) to study and facilitate processes of sharing remembrance and acknowledgment, at times apology and forgiveness, or reconciliation and restoration in post-conflict situations (Chapter 15); and (3) to help communities promote the kinds of critical thinking, empathic bonds, and dialogical relations that mitigate against violence (Chapters 10 and 11).

We want to address the contextualized psychodynamics of perpetrators as well as the long-term psychological and community consequences of their actions. As members or descendents of members of groups that have
either experienced or perpetrated injustice and violence, many of us are faced with comprehending these consequences. Because of the growing number of civil wars, it is increasingly likely that most of us will live—or already live—in communities side by side with perpetrators, or even more likely, their allies, accomplices, families, and descendents. In Guatemala, after the Civil Patrols of the 1980s, in Chile and Argentina after the “dirty wars,” in South Africa after apartheid, in Mississippi after Klan violence, in South Dakota after the Wounded Knee Massacre, community members on opposite sides of a violent struggle have to face each other daily while reconstructing their worlds. Unprecedented worldwide migration places together in cities families whose histories interlocked in deadly colonial conflicts and imperial wars in distant locations: from Moslem Algerians in Paris to Vietnamese in Los Angeles.

The children and grandchildren of perpetrators have important work to do to break the cycle of identifications and projections that would allow such enmities to continue indefinitely. They need to discover how their parents’ and grandparents’ capacity for compassion for the suffering of others transformed into a cold and rigid opposition between “us and them”, which allowed multiple levels of violation. This often means asking difficult questions that have never been asked.

The first step in such a process is finding out what happened in one’s own family and community in the past from multiple points of view. While investigating, we need to hold the tension between our awareness that even in extreme circumstances all people retain a possibility to refuse to act criminally on moral, religious, or emotional grounds whatever the consequences—often death—and on the other hand, that there are situations that are so authoritarian and coercive, that it can become extremely difficult to think and act independently. In such situations, neat divisions of victims from perpetrators may prove impossible. This is tragically illustrated in Uganda and Sudan where children have been kidnapped by paramilitary groups, beaten and tortured until they commit murder, often of their own family members (Briggs, 2005). In such cases, a complex dialogue and set of rituals must evolve that both acknowledge wounds and accept responsibility for wounding. In Uganda this is happening through traditional Matoput rituals of restorative justice and reconciliation of the returning youth with their families and villages.

What most of us will be looking at in the future, if not already in the present, are situations in which the children, other relatives, and associates of victims and those of the perpetrators will face each other in dialogue. They will begin with memories and narratives that construct historical events through alarmingly different perspectives. In order to build a common future of peace and security, new solidarities will have to be formed out of the ashes of a violent past. This is very difficult and painful work, and will require learning how to re-imagine differences. As Audre Lorde (1984)