

## **IOI BRIEFING: Therapy Culture in war and conflict**

**By Nathalie Rothschild**

### **The Persistence of Ethnocentrism**

Shifts in approaches to development in the South have in the past occurred parallel to shifts in Western debates. For instance, postmodern critiques can be discerned amongst proposed ways out of the 1980s 'crisis of development'. At that time, development theory was increasingly described as having reached an impasse. The shift in development paradigm and practice towards empowerment, 'giving voice' and a focus on micro-narratives echoed the 'crisis of representation' within social sciences that has led to critical questionings of the status of 'the expert' and denunciations of his/her authorial role and perceived ability to be objective.

If ethnocentrism indeed persists in the planning and implementation of humanitarian aid – international aid organisations are in many ways bound up with their own societies and governments – to what extent can the proposed dominance of therapy in the Western world be said to have entered the ethos and operations of these organisations? According to Vanessa Pupavac, the Anglo-American therapeutic ethos has influenced international policy-makers in that they have adopted as a central concern the emotional state of war-affected peoples. Pupavac's critique does not involve a dismissal of the issue of emotional ill-being, but rather points to how the pathologisation of populations encourages new forms of governance and external interventions. Hence, the positive aspects of a move towards more 'holistic' approaches to crisis management are rendered problematic when considering the dominance of what Pupavac calls Western 'emotionology'.

As Pupavac points out, different forms of distress increasingly become translated into a language of emotions and, accordingly, problems, solutions and precautionary measures are formulated in therapeutic terms. This is the case even where survivors of wars or natural disasters do not necessarily conceptualise and express their own concerns in such a manner. 'International emotional management' functions in a *violent* way in the sense that local strategies are undermined along with communal ties due to the stress laid on individual management of the self within Anglo-American therapeutic models. Dependency on interveners also threatens communal and family structures. At the same time, the pathologisation of populations implies a deterministic, or cause and effect, model whereby wider, local and alternative systems of meaning, social beliefs and practices are undermined. Hence, the issue at stake is not merely an ideological one of cultural imperialism or of impositions of the ways of the West on the rest.

### **Psychosocial Intervention in Iraq**

In the constitution of the World Health Organisation, health is defined as 'a state of complete social, physical, mental well-being, not merely absence of disease or infirmity'. Thus, in emergency situations, vulnerable groups include not only women and children, but also 'the elderly, the disabled and persons with severe physical or mental disorders'.

According to the International Federation of the Red Cross, 'psychological support is increasingly becoming an accepted element in relief, care, support and first aid throughout the world' and although psychological trauma is not as evident as physical destruction, recovery from this 'hidden emergency' might take longer. Psychosocial intervention is considered necessary in crisis situations – in the case of Iraq, volunteers from the International Federation of the Red Crescent have become basic actors in attending to mental health needs due to the local lack of qualified psychologists and psychiatrists. Volunteers are invited to write down their own stories as part of a long-term psychosocial programme which will include a workshop on how to cope with traumas.

Even education is cast in therapeutic terms by The Basic Education Coalition, which points out that after three wars and thirteen years of sanctions, Iraq's educational system is

deteriorating. The coalition defines education as 'an essential psychological intervention' as it provides children with a sense of normalcy and instils hope and a sense of purpose.

The category of vulnerable groups or people at risk is also extended to students in the West who, in times of crisis such as the Iraq war, are on a daily basis exposed to these distant events through media. The Australian Psychological Society suggests that because psychological research has shown that adults play an important role in helping young people to deal with "negative side effects" of exposure to events...that are traumatic and disturbing', students need regular times where they can discuss their feelings about the Iraq war. Before being able to help and listen to the fears and concerns of students, however, adults also need the time and support necessary to deal with their own responses to the war.

Another example of psychosocial intervention in Iraq is the aid to women and children organised by a coalition of local women's organisations with support from the German NGOs Medicamondiale and WADI. These two NGOs conduct emergency aid projects with mobile teams of nurses, female social workers and psychologists providing assistance to women in refugee camps. Psychosocial support and counselling is also offered on a telephone hotline.

Children are often identified as the most vulnerable group in society, and post-war Iraq is no exception. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) representative in Iraq, Carel de Rooy, estimated in March this year that around half a million traumatised children could need psychological counselling by the end of the war. This concern seems to have been shared by World Vision's International Child Protection Coordinator, Heather MacLeod, who in April 2003 arrived in Amman, Jordan to integrate psychological and social care into programs for children and families affected by the war in Iraq. UNICEF has experience of counselling children in other conflict and disaster situations, for example in East Timor, Mozambique and after Hurricane Mitch in Central America.

### **The Power to Empower**

Of course efforts towards reconstruction in Iraq also revolve around traditional forms of intervention. The United Nations/World Bank Joint Iraq Needs Assessment, for instance, suggests that beyond security concerns, reconstructions include moves to good governance, restoring infrastructure and 'supporting an economic and social transition that provides both growth and social protection'. But attendance to basic needs, fundamental rights and human dignity is of course not as straightforward as these declarations might present it to be. Humanitarian work is, to the contrary, political and controversial.

The notion of empowerment, or of helping people to help themselves, for instance requires that 'development experts' are re-conceptualised as 'facilitators' who let 'target populations' or 'insiders' gain new forms of power in formulating and shaping their own experiences. However, the responsibility of granting stability and states of normalcy continues to rest on the shoulders of those who already lead stable and normal lives and who, relatively free from conflict, have been able to develop the funds and knowledge to share them with others.

In the process of granting the weak new forms of power, or of 'handing over the stick', new systems of meaning about their being are installed, for instance ideas about 'what it is like' to be vulnerable, mentally impaired or scarred for life, and new normative definitions are constructed.

Thus, even in cases where cultural variability and local sensibility is stressed, it seems like development practitioners cannot, when appealing to psychosocial intervention couched in a language of therapy and emotional management, escape the issue of ethnocentrism. Particularly not when the gradual adaptation of such ethos and strategies can be found to go hand in hand with shifts in outlooks in the West.

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