Trauma

The word trauma stems from the Greek word *traûma*, meaning wound. The definition of trauma as a physical wound first appeared in the 1650s in medical practice. The 1890s saw the emergence of trauma as a psychic wound, thus paving the way for psychology and psychiatry. The popularization of these ideas has influenced the study of humanitarianism, particularly since the anthropology of suffering has spread as a concept. Regarding trauma as a medical category and as a social norm entered humanitarian work in the second half of the 20th century (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). Trauma as a medical category became popular with the definition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD was applied to both victims and perpetrators of the Vietnam War (1955–1975) and contributed to the depoliticization of war crimes (Young 1995). Deconstructing the idea of soldiers as either heroes or war criminals, war veterans increasingly became mental health sufferers. Through this representation, trauma as diagnosis turned into a tool that allowed sufferers to gain a new symbolic identity in order to receive compensation (Fassin and Rechman 2009). This logic of reasoning has since been applied to all victims of violence who are seeking support from humanitarian organizations, whether because of rape, torture, or persecution. Even humanitarian relief workers are being diagnosed with PTSD in emergency situations (Connorton et al. 2012).

Despite being a medical category, trauma has also been used to define a social norm. Several generations of African Americans in the United States have drawn attention to the trauma of slavery as the collective memory of suffering in the public sphere (Eyerman 2011). Building on this legacy, trauma as historical injustice has turned into a tool that is used to gain public recognition for perished victims and to demand the state's political accountability, so that the descendants of slaves can be compensated through legislation and reparations. This has evolved into a call for humanity, solidarity, and compassion transnationally through the work of humanitarian organizations on behalf of victims of violence. These organizations work within the framework of human rights and draw on past injustices perpetrated by one nation or social group on another, whether based on mass colonization, slavery, or genocide (Fassin and Rechtman 2009).

In addition to asking what trauma does to individuals and societies (Fassin and Rechtman 2009), humanitarian studies also consider how experiences of violence manifest themselves in everyday life and the cultural meanings that people give them (Das 2015). In this case, it might be worth going beyond the concept of trauma, because it is neither “a concept with hard boundaries” nor

“a malleable category that becomes saturated with context” (Das 2015: 108). On the one hand, people who have survived multiple displacements as refugees may not even develop trauma; rather, they may think of their past experiences as “the currency with which they can buy the right to move elsewhere” (Das 2015: 109). On the other hand, people might develop trauma as a result of their constant suppression of emotions in times of crisis. This is the case for men who respond to social expectations of heroism by performing in a conventionally masculine manner. Instead of regarding medical diagnoses as tools that can be used to claim benefits (Fassin and Rechtman 2009), men might consider medical treatment as providing a safe space in which they can demonstrate weakness without fear of social judgment (Das 2015). While the case of refugee displacement demonstrates that “trauma is not found where it is expected to be” (Das 2015: 107), where gender expectations in conflicts are concerned, trauma may exist where it is not searched for.

Our understanding of trauma in humanitarianism, therefore, depends on who has the authority and voice to publicly speak about human suffering. Experts and institutions define what trauma is and how it should be treated (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). As a result, survivors embody and act upon an institutional definition of trauma, such as PTSD, unable to speak for themselves. At the same time, expert definitions of trauma are limited because survivors' experiences are broad and complex (Das 2015). Instead of universalizing human suffering under the concept of trauma, it is worth understanding war or disaster experiences in the terms that are articulated by survivors themselves.

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References

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