

ON THE FRONTLINE OF TRAUMA: 6 YEARS OF GROUP WORK WITH MSF

CON_NEC_TI_VITY

Sweet things are made of this

Presenter: Jorge Burmeister

Aosta, 29.6. 2025

**Creating Spaces for Peace and Care in
Groups in Times of Wars and Violence**

**FEPTO Task Force for
Peace Building and Conflict Transformation**

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Table of content:
Basic concepts Collective Trauma
Basic Concepts Trauma Therapy
MsF – organization / contribution of the author
Reports: Colombia, Mexico and Sudan



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ON THE FRONTLINE OF TRAUMA

The Healing Power of Groups in a Fragmented World

Trauma fracture the connectivity of individuals: to oneself, to the others and to the sense of an embracing environment

Trauma Therapy should reconnect the individual with the three dimensions

*dedicated to Federico Garcia Lorca and all the
victims of terror between human beings*



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Collective Trauma - DISCONNECTION

Due to the psychological impact of a collective trauma the individual is alienated from the sources of trust and safety. He feels lost, fragmented and dislocated from his own history.

His connectivity with values / a trans-personal meaning which embraces his existence, his connectivity with groups and persons which provide the feeling of belonging, of being accepted and appreciated and finally his connectivity with the core self of his personality.



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Connectivity: significance and millenary wisdom

Nec-to-indogerman : to overcome death or disappearance, to bind, to make a nod

Greek mythology: nektar confer immortality on gods and mortals = to overcome death

Hindu mythology: nektar is produced out of the „primary“ milky ocean of creation.


Real connectivity helps us to overcome the failures of life, it makes us feel alive or be in touch with primary, “divine” aspects of ourselves: attachment, creativity



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Connectivity: psychological perspective



Connectivity is a **fundamental aspect of the trans-personal dimension**: the morphogenetic field (Sheldrake), the collective unconscious with synchronicity qualities (Jung), the cosmic matrix (Moreno) or the quality of the universe (Al Haqq: the Sufi tradition). The world: an open system which swings/resonates/is connected.

Connectivity is a **fundamental aspect of groups and collectives**: a mental interplay in matrices (Foulkes), a co-created inter-psychic space (Moreno), cohesion (Lewin), coherence (Antonovsky) or belongingness (Baumeister) including cultural and social processes

Connectivity is a **fundamental aspect of the individual self**: formation and maintenance of the **core self of the individual and its identity** (Kohut, Stern, Damasio)

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Groups operates in terms of Resonance due to our Connectivity

Mental Resonance is an invisible communication between the mind and its environment. It activates energy, feelings, symbols, relational patterns and thoughts.



Who resonates inside of me when I am in a group? It is embedded and connected in fields

Social and Universal Matrix

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Trauma therapy operates in terms of Resonance

Resonance involves the mind improving the quality of connection/its outcome. One can „syntonize“ better to its effects 1. if one adopt an open and attentive attitude towards it 2. with exercises detaching from outside reality being inspired in: „



The Arts: music, painting, poetry, dance...

Meditation / other spiritual practises

Imagination: dreams, myths, fairy tales

Group Modalities: Circle, silence...



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Trauma Therapy – Neurobiologic foundation

There is neurobiological evidence that deep structural changes in human behavior require:



- inter-hemispheric exchange processes (synchronic/diachronic stimulation of left and right brain hemisphere)
- the activation of implicit memory traits (body and emotional stored scenes ; mirror neurons for witnessing group modalities)

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The Healing Power of Groups: MsF

MsF: created 22. 12. 1971 in Paris after Biafra

- **Goals**
- To prioritise the welfare of survivors / to ignore political/religious boundaries (difference with Red Cross)
- To provide medical assistance: conflicts, epidemics, disasters or exclusion from healthcare
- To be guided by medical ethics and the principles of impartiality, independence and neutrality



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The Healing Power of Groups: MsF

MsF: created 22. 12. 1971 in Paris after Biafra

- **Infra-Structure and Policy**
- **7 Operational centers, Non Profit, 35000 Employees**
- **90% private funding, 1.600.000.000 € budget**
- **Awarded with the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1999**
- **Declines Funding from the EU in 2016 because of their policy towards migrants and refugees**



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The Healing Power of Groups: MsF

MsF: created 22. 12. 1971 in Paris after Biafra



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The author: cooperation between 2013-2019

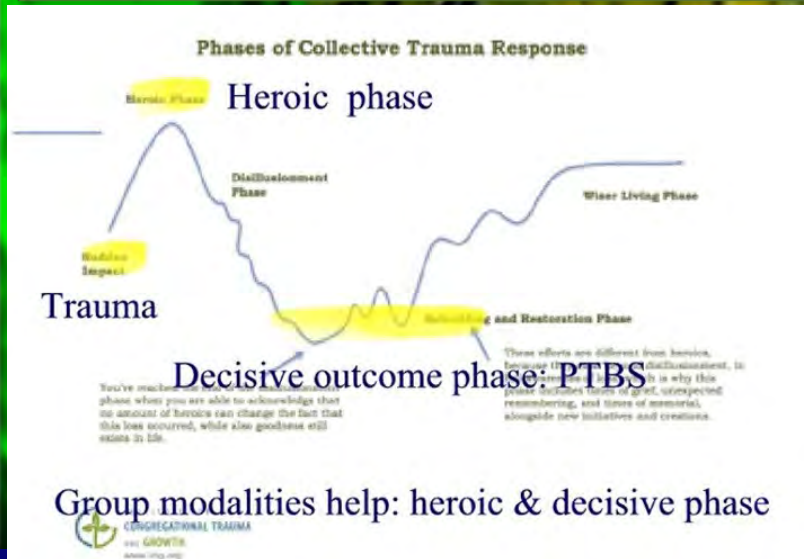
- Training - for trauma work and other mental health assets: depression, anxiety or psychosomatic dis.
- Training – 1 time/year cross centered and 6-10 times/year on site in Colombia, Mexico and Amman/Sudan (Africa, Asia)
- Training – training the trainer, training the team including supervision, self-care and practise

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Trauma - Fundament of group modalities

Whereever a collective trauma happened we will pass through a heroic phase. Inspite of the feeling of helplessness we are able to build a distance together (Future). We are survivors. We have a legacy. We are the ones who can transmit (heroic identity)! This aspect empowers group work and primary interventions!



Primary psychological interventions in the immediate aftermath of collective trauma try to restore connectivity as the trauma swallows experiences like a "black hole". Group modalities favor this endeavour.

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Colombia: 2013-2019, Bogotá and Buenaventura

- **Challenges –**
- **“Desplazamiento” = Displacement – violent expulsion of whole villages by regular or paramilitary forces incl economic reasons. MsF assisting the exposed (indigenous farmers, afrodescendants) to reduce harm**
- **Primary care with psychological non compliant/illicit population**
- **Integration of local/regional culture and health care**

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Colombia: 2013-2019, Bogotá and Buenaventura



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Colombia: 2013-2019, Bogotá and Buenaventura

- **“Desplazamiento”**: 2017 - 8 million persons affected
- **High risk**: combate área, narcotraffic, mineral resources e.g. jungle, pacific coast, indigenous people
- **2016 Peace treaty** Government + FARC but...
- **Goal for intervention MsF in cases of confinamiento**:
- immediate stabilization and rescue purpose
- short term interventions in hospitals or refugee camps
- long term interventions as part of primary health care

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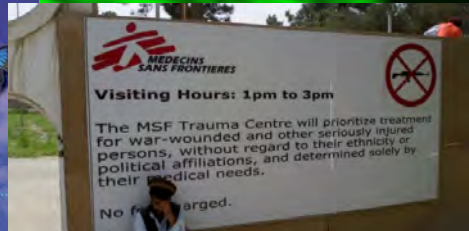
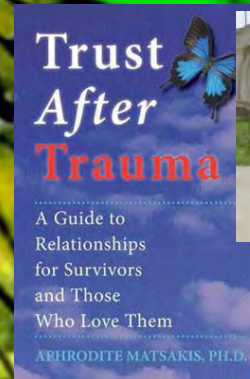
The Healing Power of Groups

Colombia: 2013-2019, Bogotá and Buenaventura

First aid group intervention 10 minutes to guarantee the best possible survival

To connect with ourselves: to focus on the inside – to bring it to the outside

1. To focus the overwhelming pain, the harm and destruction To express it NO NOT THIS 2. to focus other emotions: our right to live, to care and to continue our life sharing with others: to express it YES I AM ALIVE I INSIST



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The Healing Power of Groups

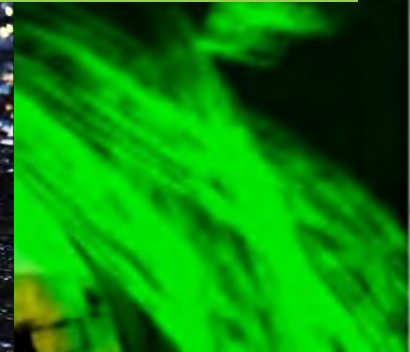
Colombia: 2013-2019, Bogotá and Buenaventura

To connect with our relational group

1. Silence 2. Focus and express the NO right hand 3. focus and express the YES left hand 4. sounds, one voice after the other 4. gestures 5. hands, one hand will reach out for the other. 6. humming together. 6. embracing 7. Do a step YES

To connect with our values, religion or embracing existential believes . Choose 1 or 2 or 3 (after dialogue with shaman)

1. Person of trust and love 2. Model of wisdom and strength – myth, fairy tale 3. Creator/God and his creation / his dream. Quality? Message? Sharing with the neighbour. Coloured string. Circle. Stories of wisdom, stories of coherence/meaning



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Colombia: 2013-2019, Bogotá and Buenaventura

- High percentage of afrocolombian persons:
- integrate traditional stories of “struggle and success” like fairy tales, traditional goddesses and belief systems
- E.g. Yeyanj, the mother of the water:
- representing after all the power to heal and to save those who are in precarious situations. In addition Yeyanj is at the same time the only power which is able to protect against white (!) vampires controlled by a witch. Originally rooted in Africa.
- To build a symbolic place for Yeyani in the group, to ask for her help by a mesoamerican ritual: Quetzalcōhuātl, feathered serpent rite
- 1. ask for courage 2. ask for strength 3. ask for wisdom 4. ask for humility – a ritual to integrate cultures

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Colombia: 2013-2019, Bogotá and Buenaventura



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The Healing Power of Groups: MsF

Colombia: 2013-2019, Bogotá and Buenaventura



The military has occupied the village. The people have been displaced. There is an eerie calm in the air in which fear remains palpable. It's not just about control over the territory, but also about the drug trade. The soldiers remain in the houses, which is even more frightening. A survivor reports: Everyone had to flee. They violated our land, they took everything from us. When will something change? We are not allowed to vote. Hopefully, the new candidate wins.

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México: 2013-2019, México capital and Acapulco

- Challenges –
- Group work in unsafe/"corrupted" places / systems with criminal gangs infiltrating community groups
- Primary care with psychological non compliant migrants in a survival / existential-threat situation
- Role modelling between Messiah and Invader – self care – Percentage of primary transference: 75% intruder/invader/enemy

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México: 2013-2019, México capital and Acapulco



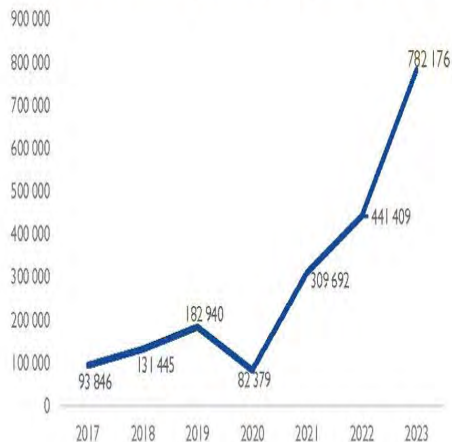
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México: 2013-2019, México capital and Acapulco

MIGRACIÓN IRREGULAR EN MÉXICO³

Gráfica 2 Eventos de personas en situación migratoria irregular registrados por la autoridad migratoria mexicana, 2017 – 2023



+ 77%

en 2023 en contraste
con 2022

En 2023 se presentó el mayor número de eventos de personas en situación migratoria irregular del que se tenga registro en México. Ello supera la cifra record registrada en 2022 en un 77%.

2023: 800.000 persons
Reason: poverty, hunger due to
climate catastrophe
violence
Venezuela, Haiti, Ecuador,
Honduras, Guatemala
No primary health care
Discrimination
Each Center MsF: 500 persons/
year plus community services
A drop in the Ocean but...

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México: 2013-2019, México capital and Acapulco



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México: 2013-2019, México capital and Acapulco

- Community groups for “transeúntes” – no personal information, psychoeducational program: strategies for stress coping, e.g. streaming light/where to find help: general health, trauma/risks and risk prevention including gangs
- Special Trauma Group: no emotional re-exposition, resource orientation: special safe place/three área model/reconnection with the three dimensions/ exercises: e.g. favourite season, animal of strength

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Sudan: 2013-2019, Amman and Khartoum

- **Challenges –**
- **Group work with traumatized children who became aggressors themselves: children soldiers in violent / "corrupted" places / systems with no home at all**
- **Role modelling between Messias and Invader – self care for team worker**

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Sudan: 2013-2019, Amman and Khartoum

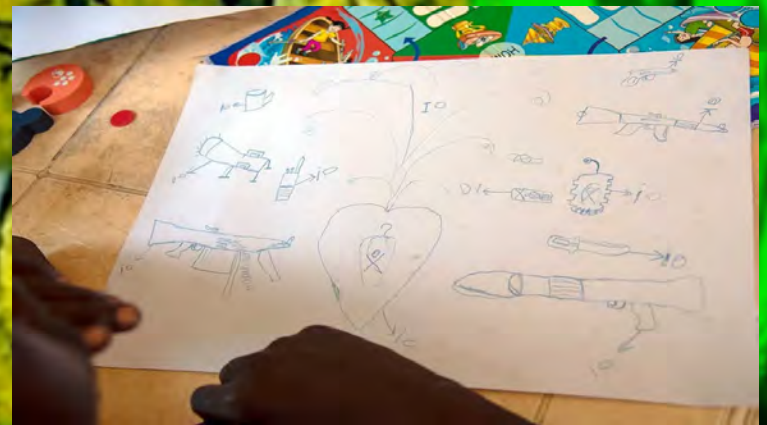
Context: Worldwide 250.000 children soldiers, Sudan 10.000 ?

Families have often fled. Society views them as murderers and accepts them neither by relatives nor by neighbors at home. Many use cheap drugs to stand the pain and out of hopelessness, despair, and fear, allow themselves to be recruited again or end up on the streets. If repatriation isn't possible, they are cared for in small residential groups and attend specially built schools by UNICEF. MsF offers trauma and training programs to reduce the loss of moral standards, frozen humanity and compassion for others

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The Healing Power of Groups: MsF

Sudan: 2013-2019, Amman and Khartoum



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Homogeneous group work: gender specific/ foster solidarity against shame and guilt feelings, creation of a group matrix based on its own narrative: crime as forced to arms, to accentuate the new group and its positive actions

Exercises:

"The Little duck" Give a home to the little duck in the space in front of you. The duck should feel ok. How does the little duck feel before and after? Show it. How does it feel being the little duck and being protected? Store this place in your mind. Take the tiny duck with you if you like. Toys are important for therapy.

Sand play sceneries to re-construct the story (no role play). Everybody can choose objects to complete the scenery. A model to make a change? Hitler. NO. Drougba. SI: courage/strength/ power justice! Finally the scenery is buried: a new chapter can begin!

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Exercises:

To become the hero yourself a hero has power to save the others, the village, themselves. Imaginary first a model, then role playing using the scenery, symbolic representation of the "evil", then try yourself

To mourn together and make a commitment: construct a place to remember them, place an object there, make a commitment: not to be silent, to carry them with you with your heart, to make them visible when appropriate, choose a string. Important against survivor guilt.

Case: Joseph – kidnapped with 11, others were killed or slaughtered, extreme stress, run away with 13, was found by nuns. First Aid: to be able to control/to calm down emotions. His dream: to become a doctor or a monk to save others as he was saved. A symbol to remember his fate and gratitude: the Virgin

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The Healing Power of Groups: MsF

Sudan: 2013-2019, Amman and Khartoum



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Sudan: 2013-2019, Amman and Khartoum



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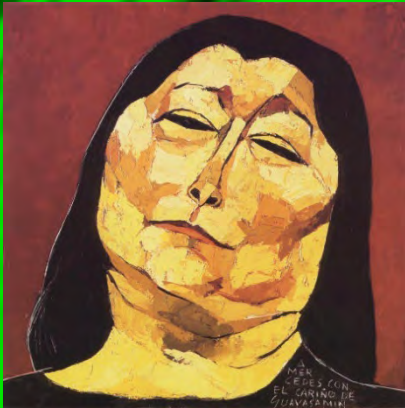
THE CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE: TEAM/ALL

It must be emphasized that the victim suffered more from the indifference of the onlookers than from the brutality of the executioner. The cruelty of the enemy would have been incapable of breaking the prisoner; it was the silence of those he believed to be his friends—cruelty more cowardly, more subtle—which broke his heart. There was no longer anyone on whom to count. It poisoned the desire to live. If this is the human society, we come from — and are now abandoned by — why seek to return? (Wiesel, 1970, pp. 229)

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The Healing Power of Groups: Team

MsF operates in terms of Humanity



Eu só peço a Deus
Solo le pido a Dios
I only ask God

Sometimes it is not silence but
indifference which is the real crime

Mercedes Sosa – “la negra”
– expresses the feeling of
millions of people

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