Community Integration for Psychosocial Well-Being: Building Sustainable Peace and Strengthening Identity through Story-Telling in the South Sudan

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Abstract

In a war-ravaged country, a great need exists for community integration in order to heal the psychosocial wounds and to enable the process of development and reconstruction for peace. Even after settling in their villages and home, many communities South Sudan have stories that elicit their traumatized self-images and identities. When these people pass trauma stories to their children, this has long term effects on the community identity. Trauma stories can be catalysts for selective memories of trauma that create potential atmosphere for future conflicts. This paper shows how community integration can be used to bring together individuals, families, and villages in south Sudan that have been divided by war by strengthening the common threads that bind all members. By providing forums in which individuals, families, and villages can come together, trauma stories can be narrated for constructive dialogue and integration. The stories of family members, friends, colleagues, villagers, and members of other ethnic groups can help to build trust, common identity and overcome anxieties and misconceptions about others.

Key words: Psychosocial, Trauma, Story-telling, Peace, Conflict, South Sudan

Introduction

Since independence in 1956, South Sudan witnessed civil war between the Arab-led government of Khartoum in the North and rebel forces of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in the South. After 16 years, the government of Khartoum and SPLM signed a peace agreement in 1972, which granted self-rule of the South. The war broke again in 1983, when SPLM officers revolted against President Gaafar Mohammed Al-Numeiri after he went against the Addis Ababa agreement. He was later overthrown by a popular revolt in the North in April 1985. Later on, General Omar Hassan Ahmed Al-Bashir led a military coup d'état that saw him become the president of North Sudan. Al-Bashir intensified the war against the SPLM, and massively Islamized the entire South Sudan. Meanwhile, the leaders of Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Eritrea pursued peace initiatives between North and South

Sudan under the auspices of the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD). The first initiative started in 1993, where several peace negotiations were promulgated with the aim of identifying the elements necessary to comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) (Biel, 2003, pp. 119-126). Between 1997 and 2000, president Al-Bashir and SPLM signed a series of agreements that called for autonomy and self-determination of the South, constitutional reform, and new elections (Alier, 2001). On 7 January 2005, president Al-Bashir and SPLM leader, John Garang signed a CPA that called for cessation of hostilities between North and South Sudan.

In 2011, the people of South Sudan held a referendum whose outcome endorsed the autonomy of southerners to form a Republic. However, in spite of the outcome, peace in the South Sudan remained fragile. The war broke again following the hostilities between the Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups over the power struggle between president Salvar Kiir (a Dinka) and his deputy Riek Machar (a Nuer). Soon the conflict between the two leaders connected to other people who are related or connected them. The IGAD intervened in the conflict with only transient success.

Effects of war on psychosocial well-being
The war in the south Sudan has been so long-standing that it has become part of the psychosocial horizon. Having grown up under war conditions, many people in the South Sudan cannot recall the peaceful times that antedated the war. Those who took refuge in peaceful neighbouring countries, such as Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, carried with them the traumatic experiences of the war. Victims of war experience large-scale violence that affects their psychic, social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions. These traumatic experiences can lead to creation of a new sense of self-identity which can affect the full realm of one's life.

Many victims of war in South Sudan who have resettled in their motherland can collectively be described as traumatized. Though the war might have ceased, recovery from long exposure to the traumatizing war experiences has been complex and challenging. Many victims are still preoccupied with the images of destruction and death, have lost sense of basic trust or faith in their society, experience feelings of rage and revenge, helplessness, humiliation, and victimization. Others have developed maladaptive social patterns, such as prostitution, drug abuse, domestic violence, or organized crime due to the experiences of war. As such, they need to be healed the psychological faculties that were damaged by the war trauma, and this healing usually occurs through the support of other people. Psychosocial healing implies the decrease of loneliness, mood improvement, sense of inner peace, a decrease in isolation, anger, and bitterness, and a decrease in feeling of animosity and hatred towards others.

From the psychological and social perspective four discrete phases of experiences undergone by the victims of war in the South Sudan may be distinguished as shown in Figure 1 (Ager, 1999, p. 88). The first phase is the *pre-flight,* which refers to the period leading up to flight itself. This may be an extended period and may feature economic hardship, social disruption, physical violence, and political oppression. This phase may bring extreme physical suffering (e.g. torture) and considerable anguish regarding the decision to flee one's home, possessions, land, etc. Many victims of war in the South Sudan have stories about the experiences of living in the bushes and other hiding places from their enemies before taking a decision to

leave their motherland for peaceful neighbouring countries. Others have stories of psychological and social deprivation in the hands of their enemies.

The subsequent *flight* phase involves the experience of separation from home and the community, and the dangers of passage to the country or places of asylum. Many people were forced to leave their homes and livelihood for fear of being killed. During the flight, many faced extremely hazardous journeys. For example, the media reported of deaths of hundreds of victims after their boats capsized during the flight from war (Daily Nation, 2014). Other covered hundreds of kilometers by feet and/ or motor vehicles and faced terrible experiences of crossing the borders.

The third phase is *temporary settlement.* This is a limbo experience thatinvolves extended accommodation in a formal refugee camps or centers, where the routines of normal life are hard to establish. While the victims were safe from the threats that characterized life in the home country, the processes of negotiating assistance, legal recognition, family reunification, etc. in the country of asylum were frequently experienced as highly stressful. Some victims lived in refugee camps or stayed with friends or relatives. Others, with time, established new livelihoods in their new settlements and did not wish to relocate again. Yet others became nomadic refugees, moving from one evacuation center to another before reaching their final relocation center. Many victims reported that the continued violence committed by armed militia groups in their communities, coupled with the traumatic memories of the past violence, lack of basic needs, and absence of durable peace agreement between the warring parties, constitute the main reasons for not returning to their motherland (Mading, 2014).

The final phase involves *resettlement*. After peace is established in the home country, the relevant organs of the United Nations facilitate the repatriation of refugee and asylum seekers. Scholars note that on repatriation, the refugees frequently experience considerable difficulties of re-entry and readjustment, with, in some circumstances, the threats which encouraged flight potentially remaining. Resettlement brings many challenges, ranging from struggle from survival in an environment where there are employment difficulties, dilapidated infrastructure, destroyed homes, derelict farms, destroyed social amenities, culture conflicts (particularly in form of intergenerational conflicts due to differential socialization of parents and children in during the asylum), and uncertainties about being displaced again.
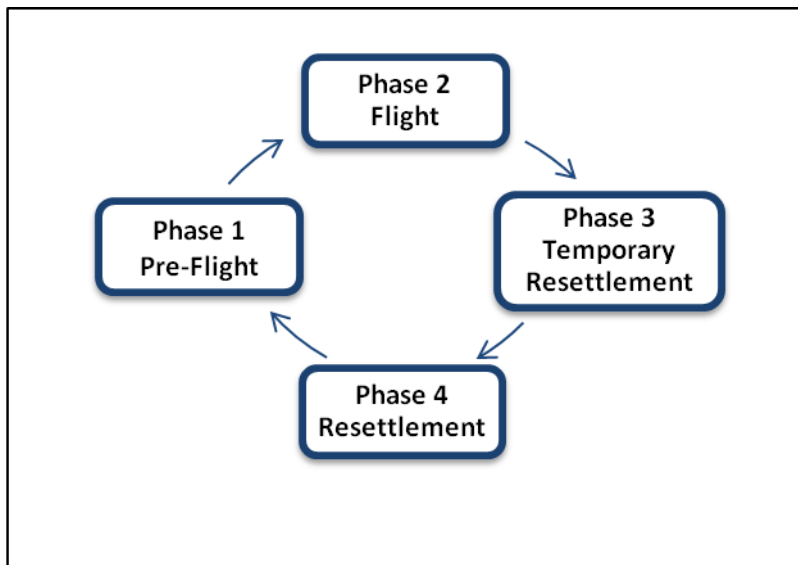
Figure 1: The four discrete phases of war-victims' experience

Therapeutic impact of story-telling: A theoretical orientation

The discussion of this paper is embedded in the psychoanalytic theory of catharsis advanced by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). The term catharsis, though popularized by Freud, was mentioned first by Aristotle and is derived from the Greek word for "purification". Much like the therapeutic effects of psychoanalysis, psychosocial well-being generally assumes that victims will feel validated and empowered to some degree by telling others the story of how they are traumatized. Thus, story-telling becomes a form of emotional purification or catharsis. This is the idea behind truth commissions, which essentially provide therapeutic process for victims by providing safe places for telling stories related to their traumatic experiences, and thereafter validating them with official acknowledgment. The therapeutic power of story-telling comes as victims get forums for expressing their personal suffering, and public acknowledgment.

There is a belief that in each and every victim, there is tremendous need to tell his/ her story and have it acknowledged, grieve and mourn the losses, and examine his/ her conscience regarding the harm he/ she inflicted upon others (Gutlove & Thompson, 2003, p. 88). Furthermore, being listened to reduces each victim's sense of being alone with his/ her thoughts and feelings. Thus, people gain a sense that others are with them. Similarly, most experts in the fields of peace-building believe that story-telling is necessary for reconciliation to occur (Mohammed, Said, & Lakshitha, 2001, pp. 341-2).

The emotional cleansing or venting of noxious emotions through story-telling is believed to prevent violence by allowing victims patients to come to terms with the past and forge collective identity for future development. Judith Herman notes that the victims suffering from the traumatic experiences of protracted violence have a compelling fantasy of releasing repressed emotions via cathartic actions that almost seem related to the much older religious metaphor of confession and absolution (Herman, 1997). At the psychological level, all negative emotions connected with past incidents need to be externalized in order to break the cycles of vengeance and counter-vengeance. Thus, story-telling is an effective tool in transforming the negative energy of trauma into something positive and constructive. The

coming out into open through story-telling empowers the victim and enables him/ her to make sense of the past, restore sense of collective identity, and forge a future as illustrated in Figure 2 below.
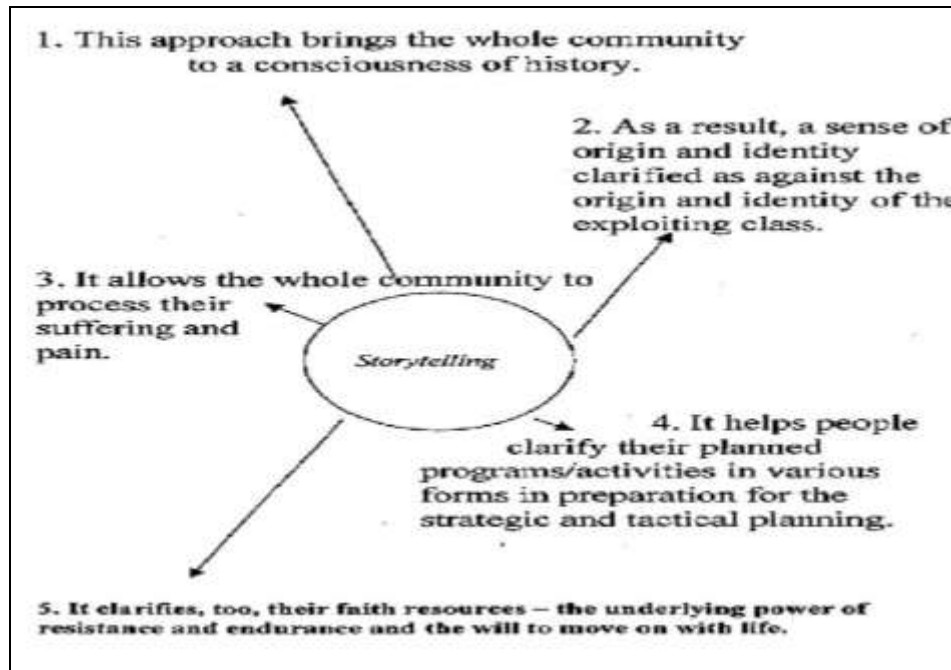

Figure 2: Therapeutic Power of Story-Telling (Adapted from Al Fuertes, 2002)

Categories of stories

Story-telling is a common feature in the African culture, and stories abound in the communities of the South Sudan. Story-telling is part of the oral tradition that is used to entrench and transmit cultural values. In communities that spoken words are more important than written words, story-telling is a mastered art of speaking and communication values. As traumatized people, the people of South Sudan have various categories of stories:

- Teleological stories – stories explaining the reasons for war by reference to fate, destiny, or final causality. Such stories focus on why terrible things (war, genocide, etc) happen to them, people's role in causation of war phenomena.
- Stories of hatred – stories about the genesis of hatred between them and others, stories about conflicts with others. For example, the Dinka express the genesis of hatred against the Nuer, a community expresses hatred against the government and the SPLM forces, people of the South Sudan express hatred against the Northern Muslim extremist groups.
- Theodicy stories – stories attempting to answer the questionson why God, spirits and ancestorsallow the manifestation of evil. They explain the myth of lost paradise, whereby God, spirits or ancestors withdrew their support due to wickedness of some people.
- Folktales – popular stories that express ideas and feelings in a society. They focus on day-to-day happenings, and are told at night to children for entertainment purposes. Behind the entertainment, there are messages regarding cultural idiosyncrasy. For example, why is certain behaviour, habit, or mannerism peculiar to certain group? Such stories may create psychological states that predispose people of one group to

react to others in certain ways. They may be fertile grounds for ethnocentrism and stereotypes.

- Proverbs, riddles and wise-saying – these are oral sources that are full of African wisdom. They are easy to remember and are passed on from one person to another. They are mirrors in which a group or community reflects itself in order to describe its values, aspirations, preoccupations, and create identity from which it sees and appreciates realities. They are means for guidance, counseling, and encouragement. Proverbs are short expressions with deep meaning (one sentence says a thousand words). Riddles are short statements made for entertainment and for stimulating people's thinking. Wise-sayings are short statements about the world in general made from moral perspective.
- Songs – these are oral templates of African wisdom. Songs give outlet to the emotions of life. Through songs, people are able to communicate things and create identities.
- Dejection stories – stories that involve oppression, persecution, betrayal, fighting.
- Hurtful stories – stories of how people were treated unfairly and unjustly.
- Reminiscent stories – stories that remind people of the dreadful attacks, tortures, and killings.
- Catastrophic stories – stories about destruction of people's properties, life, social networks, and means of livelihood.
- Unforgettable stories – stories about episodes that left victims with perpetual problems.

The art of story-telling
Story-telling should take place in a safe place designed to help individuals navigate through past traumatic experiences, examine their past identity, and forge a new identity with respect to vicissitudes of current life. From a psychosocial-well being perspective, people should not be forced to tell their stories. They should seek forum for talking about their traumatic past. Anne Marie Wagner notes that in story-telling, trust is built through creating an open, nonjudgmental dialogue. She further notes that such conversations should be based on a sense of mutual respect, and should allow individuals to feel able to openly criticize either their country of origin, if they were persecuted or otherwise mistreated by their government, or their host society, if they felt mistreated as refugees. She also notes that employing a staff of diverse ethnic origin — including foreigners and other immigrants — can be helpful in creating a sense of safety (Wagner, 2003, pp. 92-100).

The main aim of story-telling is to enable the victims to find a common narrative and thereby develop an acceptable pathway for trauma healing. The process of telling stories is not definite. In a story-telling workshop among the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Mindanao, Philippines, Al Fuertes notes the actual telling of stories did not assume the linear outline as indicated in the four discrete phases of experiences undergone by the victims of war as shown in Figure 3 (Fuertes, 2012).
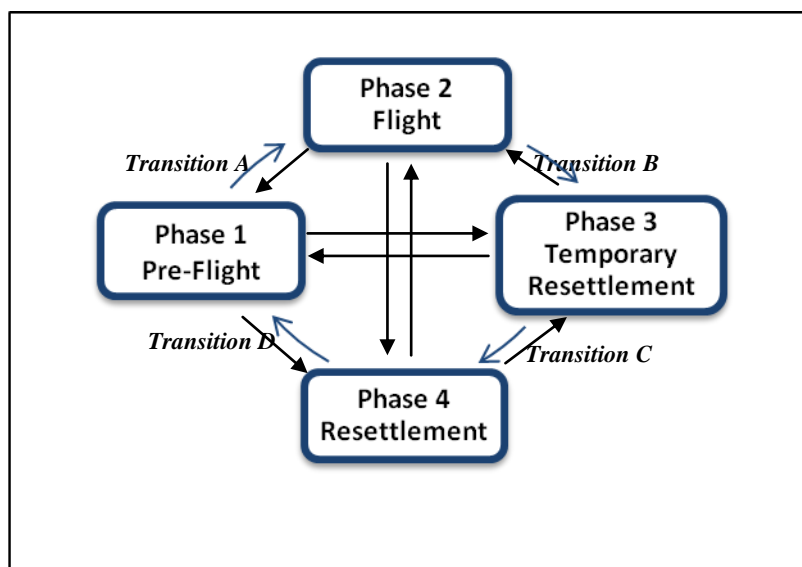
Figure 3: How Victims Narrate Their Stories (Adapted from Al Fuertes, 2012).

The arrows point at opposite directions of the phases. In each Phase there is a starting point, which becomes the point of reference for story-telling. For example, the starting point for Phase 1 is *pre-flight* situation for the victims. The reference point for stories is how life was like before the victim decided to leave his/ her home, or before attack. Through the stories, one is able to connect the situation in Phase 1 to Phase 2. After sharing their stories in Phase 2, the victims are able to look back to see if there were early warnings that would have prepared them for any possible attacks. Further, the victims are able to reflect if the attacks were a total surprise, or whether the response to the early warning was not appropriate. The stories in Phase 1 serve as transition (A) or connection to Phase 2.

The starting point in Phase 2 is the *flight* situation, that is, how life was during the attack. The transition B stories revolve around the arduous experiences before the arrival in the refugee camp. The stories narrated may reflect the loss of their family members, loss of family networks, sexual assaults (especially for women), arrests at the boarders, hunger and deprivation, etc. Through the stories in Phase 2 serve as transition (B) to Phase 3.

The starting point in Phase 3 is the *temporary settlement* or *asylum* and focuses on life situation in the refugee camp. The stories that reflect the transition (C) indicate the kind of activities the victims engage in order to help themselves, why they engage in them, resilience and coping mechanisms, the meaning attached to their lifestyle, and the creed (principles and values) they embrace in order to forge the future. Again, the stories in Phase 3 serve as transition (C) to Phase 4.

The fourth Phase deals with *resettlement*. The starting point is the kind of life the victims wish to live. The stories narrated indicate the challenges of re-entry and readjustments. Many victims return to completely devastated villages, where houses were burnt, agricultural and grazing fields left derelict, and social amenities such as schools, hospitals, factories, roads, and railway lines destroyed. Many continue to live without the basic livelihood conditions, such as food, clean water, and proper clothing. They also lack gainful employment, basic education, proper shelter, and so forth. In addition, the victims are uncertain about their security since the key violators of human rights live side by side with them. Such a tense

atmosphere can explode into a vicious cycle of conflicts and violence at any time. However, through story-telling all negative emotions connected with past incidents are externalized, thereby breaking the cycles of vengeance and counter-vengeance. The victims are empowered and enabled to find make sense of the past and forge a vibrant future.

Lessons for community of practice in the south Sudan

(The discussion here is based on Paula Gutlove & Gordon Thompson (Ed.) *Psychosocial Healing: A Guide for Practitioners.* (Institute for Resource and Security Studies, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, 2003). pp. 33-39). Story-telling does not assume linear or discrete form, from Phase 1 to 4 as indicated in Figure 1. Rather, story-telling assumes cyclical or somewhat random approach. The victims may tell their stories by referring back and forth to the different phases of their experiences. Amidst this, the bottom line is finding a collective narrative (text) whose meaning and interpretation (context) are acceptable to the victims and perpetrators. Notably, a text without a context is pretext. It does not matter the format they use to tell the stories.

A program on psychosocial reconstruction in the former Yugoslavia revealed that story-telling provides a good understanding of the present situation and experiences of victims (Gutlove & Thompson, 2003). This is crucial in identifying responses that are appropriate to the victims' psychosocial well-being. Gutlove & Thompson note that organizations engaged in helping the victims of war to heal from war-related traumas should create a safe talking space where victims can tell their stories while feeling that they are heard and understood. They further note that establishing a safe place for telling stories, caring and empathic exchange is more important than individual psychotherapies. Story-telling enables the victims to forge social connections and unity through a collective acknowledgement of the past.

Gutlove & Thompson (2003: 33-9) note that story-telling goes with active listening, which is facilitated by a third party, who facilitates the listening by teaching the parties how to actively listen to each other. This process allows the listener to understand and empathize with the speaker, while also allowing the speaker to achieve a clearer idea of what he/ she is thinking and feeling. Active listening allows for acknowledgement of the speaker's words and sentiments, and shows empathy and demonstrates a desire to help.

People who have been listened to with sensitivity tend to listen to themselves with more care, and then work harder to make clear exactly what they are thinking and feeling. Through active listening, the speaker will learn that the listener is interested in him as a person, and in what he thinks and feels is important (Gutlove & Thompson, 2003, p. 34).

When active listening is used within a group, the group's members tend to become less argumentative, more ready to work collaboratively, and more understanding of the diversity of opinions and views amongst them. Because active listening reduces the threat of having one's ideas criticized, the group members are better able to present their ideas and more likely to feel their contribution will be both respected and worthwhile. When group members see that individuals are being listened to with concern and sensitivity, they feel more secure in the group. They feel that they can contribute more freely and spontaneously to the group. Within a group, over time and with practice, listening will become reciprocated. Just as anger is met with anger, and argument with argument, so listening will be met with listening (Gutlove & Thompson, 2003, p. 34).

How to engage in an active-listening process

In their guide for practitioners on psychosocial healing, Gutlove & Thompson (2003, pp.33-9) highlight procedures that a story-telling process should follow. These include:

1. Active listening: This is an acquired skill that improves with practice.
2. Provide safe setting: This allows both speaker and listener to incorporate new experiences and new values. There must be a climate that promotes equality and freedom, permissiveness and understanding, acceptance and warmth. Such a climate can be created by laying down of ground rules acceptable to parties, and by appointing an outside facilitator to ensure that the rules are respected by the speakers and listeners.
3. Capture the total meaning of the speaker's message: Messages usually have two components, the content of the message and the feelings or attitudes underlying this content. To be sensitive to the underlying feelings, the listener must try to note all cues. This includes verbal cues, such as what words are stressed or mumbled, and nonverbal cues, such as facial expression, body posture, eye movements, and breathing.
4. Avoid responding to questions that demand for a decision, evaluation or judgment: The listener should try to reframe the question so that the speaker must thoughtfully answer it himself.
5. Control the listener's emotions: Emotions of a listener can be a barrier to active listening, especially when he/she is unable to put aside his/her own feelings and listen to the feelings of the speaker. In a group where active listening is an accepted mode of interaction, where listening promotes listening, it will be possible for the listener and speaker to change roles, so that each person has the opportunity to express his needs, thoughts and feelings, with the knowledge that his message will be heard with respect, sensitivity and understanding.
6. Encourage speaker that s/he is being heard: Listener should be truly attentive, empowering the speaker by being fully present with empathy and openness. The most important aspect of good listening is the genuine desire of the listener to understand and support the speaker in articulating what s/he has to say. If the listener is not interested, the speaker will know this. The listener can encourage the speaker nonverbally through eye contact and facial expressions.
7. Encourage the speaker by probing questions: This involves asking questions that prompt the speaker to continue with the story, such as, "What happened next? What did you do? Is that all? Would you like to tell me more?"
8. The listener can verify his understanding by reflecting and reframing what the speaker has said. When the listener wants to verify that he has understood what the speaker has told him, he can do so by reflecting back what the speaker has said. This reflection can consist of the listener simply repeating what was said in the speaker's words. However, in situations that are emotionally charged and/ or where the potential for misunderstanding is great, it is more effective if the speaker can reframe in his own words the total message (words and actions) that the speaker is conveying. In complex situations it is safest for the listener to assume he has not understood the speaker until he can communicate this understanding back to the speaker to the latter's satisfaction (Gutlove & Thompson, 2003, p. 35).

Conclusion

The victims of war in the South Sudan are not a static community. They are dynamic, always adapting and changing for better. Story-telling is maximizes the potential for personal expression in the form of catharsis by associating meanings and new interpretations to the experiences of war. The art of story-telling brings people together and creates a sense of bonding and support system. Story-telling enhances mutual understanding and erases fears, suspicions, and uncertainties among the people involved. When the victims analyze and interpret their stories, they discover underlying causes trauma embedded in their narratives. They are able to focus people on their history, gain sense cohesion, and acknowledge themselves as people in agony. This in turn assists them to process their suffering, pains, losses, fears, uncertainties, dreams, aspirations, and eventually plan the course of action in response to their situation.

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