



Considering victims and workers

'We'll never be the same' Learning with children, parents and communities through ongoing political conflict and trauma: *a resource.* Rosie Burrows and Bríd Keenan



Barnardo's

NORTHERN IRELAND

GIVING CHILDREN BACK THEIR FUTURE

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The victim in our context

The Belfast Agreement recognised that 'it is essential to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence as a necessary element of reconciliation'. The term 'victim' is not a simple one. Who self-defines and / or is defined by others as a victim or survivor is complex. In our highly charged political environment, the term contains and reflects the way in which people view the conflict as well as their experience of it, so that competing notions of responsibility, culpability, guilt and innocence pepper the debate.

Challenges arise for victims, survivors, practitioners and policy-makers in a number of ways: how we handle the past; the conflicting frameworks for doing so; issues for policy; implications of the term 'victim'; and implications for workers.

Handling the past

The treatment of the past 'shapes the present and the future' (Minnow, 1998). In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a structure established to bring closure to past events 'as a necessary exercise to enable South Africans to come to terms with their past on a morally acceptable basis and to advance the cause of reconciliation' (Truth and Reconciliation Commission). Political agreement on the democratic process created the ground for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Here the victim and the recovery process takes place at a time when the political future remains a contested area and where human rights issues regarding information, compensation, accountability and equal recognition – all elements of recovery – remain contested at the political level.

The relationship between the victim and perpetrator is the method by which the unfinished business of injury is addressed here. This has taken the form of public inquiries, independent human rights inquiries, the use of the administration of justice, civil actions in the courts and by political actions such as the release of prisoners and campaigns for justice and equal recognition.

Although funding and governmental structures are in place to support victims, recovery is simultaneously affected by the political response to the requirements of availability of information, compensation, accountability and equal recognition of injury. Some people argue, therefore, that further measures to address the diverse and contradictory needs of victims (Hamber and Wilson, 2003) cannot be designed without 'a past focused mechanism' to formally deal with the past by moving towards an accepted shared narrative of the conflict (Bell, 2003).

The importance of attempting, as it were, to gradually connect the dots in order to move towards a more complex integration has been a central part of the learning from reflecting between direct work, our experience, theory and research. Therefore, as Bell (2003) asserts, rather than polarise and reduce the debate into, for example, principle versus pragmatism, and justice versus peace, we need to ask new questions and consider new notions such as 'staging' that help us to design useful mechanisms for each phase or stage of transition from violent conflict.

Conflicting frameworks of reference

A victim is generally understood as someone who is made to suffer through no fault of his / her own (innocent), who suffers as the result of forces stronger than they are or beyond their control (helpless). The perpetrator is guilty and powerful. It follows, therefore, that the perpetrator should be punished and the victim's injury recognised and compensated. Clearly, this is the language of crime and the administration of justice.

When used in the context of war, the victor often determines who the victims are. They are usually those who are perceived as most closely resembling the morality of the victor or at least not to have been seen as part of the enemy. Some people understand the events of the past as being illegal and, therefore, morally unjustified. The framework of crime and punishment clearly reflects their experience.

For others, the framework is one of war and the terminology will include casualties, combatants, non-combatants and civilians. 'Victim' is the term used where the injuries have been as a result of the direct or indirect action of the authorities or by groups associated with them. Actions are illegal when the authorities have acted extra-judicially in the interests of maintaining the existing political system.

So there are conflicting frameworks that people use to understand their experiences and to identify the perpetrator. What is needed is a structure that recognises these conflicting positions and that responds to the human rights issues as a means of establishing ground for the recovery of everyone affected.

The official definition of victim allows individuals to self-identify either as victims or survivors. The allocation of funding could be an area for difficulty unless the procedures are seen to be transparent and even-handed. There has been considerable concern in relation to the development of a 'hierarchy' of victims.

Once again, this reflects the human rights issue of 'the right to be treated equally' and impacts directly on a person's ability to recover well-being. Currently the context of recovery is locked into the unresolved political situation. If this were not so, it is still true that people do not recover at the rate of political change and settlement.

Sustained, respectful and careful work that addresses the specific needs of the injured is needed. The work must also address the context in which they live their lives. This is necessary for two reasons. The first is that trauma isolates the individual. To support reconnection with the environment the work must support the social context. The inter-generational impact of the conflict will be affected by how we deal with the current situation. The work at the therapeutic and educational level needs the support of sound political structures that recognise the complexity of recovery. This strategic approach is emphasised by Danieli (1998):



Integration of the trauma must take place in all of life's relevant dimensions or systems and cannot be accomplished by the individual alone. Routes to integration may include reestablishing, relieving, and repairing the ruptured systems of survivors and their community and nation, and their place in the international community. For example, in the context of examining the right to restitution, compensation, and rehabilitation for victims of gross violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms from the victims' point of view.

Implications of the term 'victim' for recovery

The dialectic of trauma (the urge to speak out and the urge to deny) felt at the individual level is replicated at all levels of society. It can be seen in how the victim is supported or isolated in the process of recovery. The connection between the needs of the victim and the community is complex.

If it is not clearly understood, the victim can end up feeling overlooked, with their specific experiences minimised (we are all victims), or alternatively the victim occupies a 'special' and isolated place which denies the complexity of the impact of conflict on the community as a whole, including the inter-generational impacts on our children.

Trauma recovery requires:

- speaking out the unspeakable (this happened to me and it cannot be denied)
- bearing witness (what happened was a terrible thing)
- remembering (knowing in detail what my experiences were)
- mourning the losses incurred as a result (I can't go back to how I was before)
- reconnecting with life and the future (I survived and can grow with this experience).

The term 'victim' implies innocence and powerlessness. However, to recover, injured people need to recognise and take back their power and influence. They need to recognise how their innocence and helplessness as well as their power and influence are involved in both the process of trauma and the process of recovery.

If the victim is seen as being innocent only, their helplessness and absence of power or influence is emphasised. In short, they are in danger of being re-victimised. In addition, not to support people's human desire to be agents in their own lives impedes the process of regaining control, a vital step in recovery.

The feeling of being isolated and objectified is integral to the experience of trauma. Trauma causes people to lose their 'ordinariness' and to gain a 'specialness' that is directly founded on the traumatic event. Trauma recovery programmes need to support people to become ordinary again without minimising the terrible events that they experienced.

However, the place of the victim in the community is powerful. The victims have been injured. They are visible in their pain and distress, absent in their death. At another level, they also represent and carry, at a distance, the experience of the community – the sense of wounded innocence and helplessness, and the sense of guilt about what might have been done differently. They allow the feeling of righteous anger.

Yet the victim role is not fixed. People are not always victims or perpetrators. If some groups or individuals are always seen as just one or the other, the community retains and repeats the splitting experienced in the conflict.

Implications for workers

Those who work in this area do so usually with a strong sense of commitment. However, people working in the field need to be aware not only of complex issues found in the work but, more importantly, they need to be aware of their own view of the victim in this context, and of their own experiences of victimisation.

Lichtenberg (1998) states: 'We need to have worked through some of our own painful issues towards victims and victimization before trying to help our clients. Otherwise we may find ourselves – despite all of our good and even noble intentions – functioning as unwitting agents in further victimizing our clients, the very people we intend to help.'

Our responsibility is to be present with the other person in his or her unfolding understanding of what he or she has experienced, to be attentive to the complexity of the context of the work and to bring our own experience of trauma, victimhood and recovery as a resource in the healing relationship.

We can do this by:

becoming aware of the meaning of victim in this context and environment with all its complexity

learning about and exploring our own victimhood

examining our own historical, cultural and political understanding of the victim / perpetrator relationship

recognising the intrinsic connection between victims and their environment

becoming thoroughly familiar with the psychological processes of victimhood

being aware of the range of possible supports and interventions in order to work with the most appropriate

training and working in supportive communities and contexts with ongoing supervision and training.

Finally, as part of our support for the work of recovery, we have a responsibility to speak out and not deny the existence of the continuing process of trauma, however we choose to do that.

The relationship between victims and workers

Philip Lichtenberg (1994) and colleagues provide a model of working that emphasises the crucial importance of the relationship between the worker and the victim. In this they emphasise the need for the worker to understand as much about their own experience of victimisation as part of the process of supporting the victim's recovery. Unless we do this, they argue, we are in danger of missing the victim and of reinforcing the sense of disconnection and isolation characteristic of the experience of victimhood. Lichtenberg (1994) states: 'Helpers who have not worked through their own sense of helplessness, guilt, and rage are likely to disidentify and project these feelings in an attempt to defend themselves against the pain that has been aroused within them.' Paradoxically, the worker, while imagining that they are protecting themselves from being overwhelmed by maintaining this distance, is more likely to experience burn-out.

It was crucial for us as facilitators to recognise that we also had lived with the experience of political conflict and therefore had been victimised. It was vital that we understood this experience and could draw on it if we were to support parents to explore fully their own complex responses. We did this by organising written weekly post-session reviews of our experiences of the group, self-reflection, discussion and regular supervision. The need for this will become clearer in an exploration of the Lichtenberg model.

A model for working

Lichtenberg describes the victim as 'one who is subject to deprivation, unnecessary suffering, or oppression'. This definition includes those who experience one event as well as those who have a prolonged or repeated experience of being victimised. It includes those who are physically, emotionally and psychologically injured or who experience deprivation and poverty. Some people may identify themselves as victims and others strongly resent the term. Part of the resentment is related to the way in which society finds it difficult to respond to victims without either the urge to overprotect them or to blame them. In the very act of naming them as victim, we separate ourselves from the experience of being a victim and thus increase the isolation already felt by the injured person.

When we started to work with the groups it quickly became clear that we could not assume that everyone shared an understanding of the term or agreed with its application. Some people saw themselves as victims and others did not. Some saw themselves as being more victimised than others. Some people were angry that anyone would label them as victims. Therefore, what it meant to be identified or to identify as a victim was central to the work. Both the political arena and the psychological effects of trauma were interwoven throughout and reflected the world outside the groups.

Lichtenberg's definition of the victim also makes room for the life experiences of the women in the groups. They were not dealing solely with the events that had brought them together as a group. Previous experiences of a

lifetime of living with effects of violent conflict and other traumas not directly related to the conflict also became part of the work. Some participants had been born into an already traumatised community. There was also no doubt that some experienced this more severely than others did.

It was important to explore fully what victimhood meant at the individual and group level in order to use this information to support the participants to develop a way of encountering their experiences that supported recovery more effectively.



Victimisation

Victimisation forces the victim into an awareness of his or her vulnerability in the world. This raises intense and intolerable feelings of helplessness which victims often attempt to dispel through self-blame. Such self-blame gives victims back a sense of control which inevitably is accompanied by feelings of guilt and doubts about their innocence (Lichtenberg, 1994).

When we experience being a victim, we are face to face with our vulnerability, the realisation that we can be hurt, even annihilated. This evokes strong feelings of helplessness.

Since all of us live by affecting the lives of those around us and by being affected, we are aware that we have power to act and are not simply at the mercy of others. Knowing that we have this agency leads us to find a way of controlling feelings of helplessness. We want to influence what is happening to us.

We control our helplessness by self-blame, by trying to find out what we did – no matter how little – to bring about the situation. For example, if we have a car crash, rather than feeling completely at the mercy of other road users and helpless, we look for contributing factors: 'Why didn't I notice?' 'I should have known better.' In order not to feel at the mercy of others or events we have to accept that somehow we were involved, and so to give up the notion that we are completely innocent and helpless victims.

So the movement away from vulnerability to control and influence causes us to lose our sense of innocence. Another example of this is given by Hellinger (1999, 2001, 2003). He has found that guilt results in the fear of losing our right to belong in a particular family or group, while the opposite feeling of innocence is experienced as the right to belong. Psychological growth is often accompanied by a sense of guilt (thinking and acting differently from your family as an adolescent). Lichtenberg (1994) states: 'Dealing with and recovering from victimisation requires a new understanding of being in the world, an understanding that incorporates, over time, each and every aspect of the dialectic: vulnerability, innocence, influence and culpability.'

For the victim, these complex feelings are heavily present. For the rest of us, they are also present to some extent in every moment of our lives but in a way that is usually supportive to our well-being. The emotions which accompany these feelings range across fear, guilt, rage, revenge, helplessness, despair and grief as well as feelings of strength, connection, balance and peace. Our ability as workers to experience in its entirety this tension between vulnerability and innocence on the one hand, and influence and culpability on the other, significantly affects our capacity to identify with victims in our work.

Roles of the worker

Lichtenberg supports our understanding of what happens to workers when they distance themselves from their own experiences and thus from their clients. He does this by explaining what workers do with their own feelings and considers the effect on the relationship: 'As best we can, we construct our lives to maximise our innocence and influence while minimising our vulnerability and culpability.'

When we encounter victimisation in the other, we come face to face with our own sense of vulnerability and culpability. In our need to deny these, we either exaggerate our ability to influence or our innocence. In relation to victimised people, we then focus on their vulnerability and rush in to protect them or we blame them when we find their culpability.

Our attempt to seize control or to blame may alleviate our psychological distress but it intensifies the distress of the victim. When we seek to seize control and to emphasise our influence and deny our own vulnerability, Lichtenberg refers to this as the 'disaffected other' role.

The disaffected other focuses on:

- whatever influence the victim has exerted in the episode connected with the victimisation
- the behaviour of the victim that has no direct relationship with what has brought about the event
- directing attention away from the innocence of the person and so end up blaming the victim.

Our language is full of blaming statements such as:

- 'Well, he brought it on himself.'
- 'When you lie down with dogs you get fleas.'
- 'Had known connections with —.'
- 'Should have known better.'

When the disaffected other does this, it allows him or her to feel influential without having to feel guilt in relation to actions. It serves the illusion that unlike the victim, the helper can control what happens. By directing attention away from the vulnerability of the victimised person, we can avoid our own feelings of vulnerability.

When we exaggerate the innocence of the victim and deny his or her culpability, we are denying our own. Lichtenberg refers to this as the 'emphatic sympathiser'. The emphatic sympathiser:

- emphasises the vulnerability and innocence of the victim
- overprotects the victim
- stands between the victim and the perpetrator, declaring the victim entirely innocent and the perpetrator utterly culpable; it is 'them' and 'us'.

Again, our language is full of examples of how we do this:

- 'Completely innocent victim.'
- 'In the wrong place at the wrong time.'
- 'Can't really help themselves at the moment.'
- 'They, them... don't care, understand, will soon find out...'
- 'It was all their fault and you couldn't help it.'

At the same time, the emphatic sympathiser draws attention away from the actions of the victim in the circumstances of the victimisation. She denies the culpability of the victim.

The emphatic sympathiser becomes a rescuer, which allows him or her to:

- deny their own feelings of being oppressed or dominated
- avoid feeling weak in the face of overwhelming forces; they endeavour to feel capable and powerful by trying to fix other people's lives
- retain a sense of influence at the expense of the victim, who must remain weak and vulnerable.

Often, the client colludes with the worker to create and maintain the image of being completely innocent and the 'all good' victim. As long as the client colludes in this way he or she is trapped in a helpless, victimised role and remains a passive, ineffective person.

In the community

Because victims are often seen as the weak or vulnerable members of our society, those who work with victims are in danger of being fused with them in the eyes of the public and becoming discredited, less influential members of society. In our context, they may experience physical danger, discrimination and / or political and social marginalisation as this transfers from the victim to the worker.

According to Lichtenberg (1994), the disaffected other fuses with social forces and social norms that suggest we are in control of our lives and our destiny and that diminishes our attention to our common need for depending on others in our human vulnerability. Victims are therefore seen to have more culpability and influence than they actually have. This allows the wider system to leave responsibility with individuals and not provide the support needed. The disaffected other may appear or become rigid, bureaucratic, withholding and / or critical in an attempt to feel more influential and avoid his or her vulnerability and helplessness. This may be seen, mistakenly, as professionalism. The emphatic sympathiser feels a sense of victimisation in the larger society and can exaggerate the power of other social forces. Emphatic sympathisers, in separating themselves from their own

culpability, often carry a tone of righteousness which sometimes isolates them from the very people they wish to help. Not surprisingly, both the disaffected other and the emphatic sympathiser are likely to experience burn-out. Recent research (Black, 2003 and Cairns, 2002) provides further evidence for this view.

On the other hand 'a worker who feels supported and accepted and who knows he or she can survive trying emotional experiences is less likely to become overwhelmed while identifying with a client and, therefore, less likely to become either a Disaffected Other or an Emphatic Sympathiser'.

The third type of worker identified by Lichtenberg is the 'empathic helper'.

The empathic helper:

- 'meets' a victim squarely and authentically
- stays with the intense feelings of the victim, whatever they may be, without needing to stop or to alleviate these feelings prematurely
- enables the victim to grapple with and come to terms with all the influences that are creating these intense (sometimes repressed) feelings (Lichtenberg, 1994).

When workers can accept and contain their own painful experiences and feelings, these become a rich source of support and understanding for the injured person. This makes it possible for the worker to identify with victims' sense of vulnerability, guilt and rage.

At the same time, the worker has engaged with her own emotions so she is able to maintain a clear sense of self and a healthy separation from the victim. This separateness allows us to appreciate the full experience of victims and to support their exploration of the whole range of feelings present. We cannot do this if we are afraid of or deny our own painful feelings of victimhood.

What is stated concretely in this model is the need for the workers themselves to have support available both individually and in groups. Supervision, which focuses on their experience of the relationship with the victimised person, will enable workers to appreciate their own vulnerability and influence, innocence and culpability, and be more at ease with the expressions of pain that they experience in their work with the injured person. It is also an essential support in countering and alleviating the impacts of secondary or vicarious traumatisation.

Applying the Lichtenberg model

As an example of working with groups using the Lichtenberg model, facilitators noticed the following:

Lichtenberg	Examples of the model from the groups
1 Identifying the victim	<p>The group may be split in relation to who identifies themselves as victim and who does not. Statements identifying as victim could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>'The world has forgotten us'</i><i>'Nobody spoke out'</i><i>'Nobody understood'</i><i>'We have been left to cope'</i><i>'They did terrible things to us'</i><i>'Sure, what did you expect?'</i><i>'It's always been like that'</i><i>'No matter what I did, it wasn't enough'</i>
2 Innocence	<p>A sense of innocence may be expressed as bewilderment, hurt, anger or sadness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>'How could anyone do such a thing?'</i><i>'We weren't brought up like that'</i><i>'I did this in good faith'</i><i>'I didn't mean any harm'</i><i>'How could you think I meant that?'</i><i>'I wasn't to blame'</i>
3 Culpability	<p>Culpability may be expressed as some of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>'Knowing what you know now, would you do it again?'</i><i>'I should have known better'</i><i>'It was my fault'</i><i>'We should have stuck together'</i><i>'We would expect it from the other side'</i><i>'We didn't think for ourselves'</i>
4 Vulnerability	<p>Vulnerability can be expressed in many ways from crying to acceptance of their own actions, to being open to the influence of others and risking criticism from others, not blaming others.</p> <p>The denial of vulnerability may be seen as: Not being open to risking other people's influence, to tough it out alone, 'we don't need anyone else', appearing untouchable, unaffected, withdrawn and disconnected or anger and rejection of expressions of feeling, blaming the other.</p>
5 Influence	<p>Influence may be expressed as a willingness to engage, for example, in phrases such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>'It's up to me as well'</i><i>'We need to do something'</i><i>'I want more information'</i><i>'I know myself better now'</i><i>'I'll do...'</i><i>'I'll be better prepared next time'</i><i>'I can see how they would have thought that'</i>

Applying the model to facilitation

In considering Lichtenberg's identification of the disaffected other, the emphatic sympathiser and the empathic helper, it is important to state that these are not fixed personality types. Rather these are three roles which any of us who work with traumatised or victimised people may adopt at different times as ways of coping with our own painful experiences. We found his description of these roles thoroughly supportive of the work and on many occasions were surprised to reflect on how we moved around these roles.

	Facilitator 1	Facilitator 2
Disaffected other	<p>At the beginning of the programme when I imagined what people would need to know without having met them.</p> <p>When I judged 'poor parenting'.</p> <p>When I blamed people for leaving without fully exploring what was happening in the group.</p>	<p>Thinking I knew what the group needed in advance of meeting them.</p> <p>Distancing, imagining I was more above it all / outside than I was / am.</p> <p>Thinking that the group were missing out on a 'good thing' (me) when they left the group.</p>
Emphatic sympathiser	<p>Being interested in the work from the beginning because of wanting to help.</p> <p>Feeling connected to the women.</p> <p>Strongly attached to feminist principles and images of strong women.</p> <p>Going in with an agenda.</p>	<p>Urgency, wanting to help, wanting to make it better now for children and families in working-class communities most affected.</p> <p>Wanting to make change happen / drive change.</p> <p>Strongly identifying with the group.</p>
Empathic helper	<p>Let go of needing to have a formal pre-set programme and paid close attention to what was happening in the group.</p> <p>Being able to explore grief and loss with the group.</p> <p>Being able to explore revenge.</p> <p>Being able to explore differences with co-facilitator – political, cultural and professional – and to appreciate these as reflection of movement and processes at work in the group and wider field.</p> <p>Self-review and reflection.</p> <p>Taking supervision.</p>	<p>Taking support in order to let go of my need to have it all worked out in advance, that is, to control.</p> <p>Trusting co-facilitator and myself to be enough in terms of knowledge, experience and so forth.</p> <p>Structuring the work by attending to the experiences of group members and supporting them with relevant interventions, information and so forth.</p> <p>Learning to manage and contain strong emotions, including my own fear, guilt and so forth.</p> <p>Connecting to a bigger picture / context.</p> <p>Self-review, reflection, reading, supervision, taking support.</p> <p>Recognising and acknowledging limitations.</p>

Interpersonal level: the drama triangle

The original concept of the drama triangle of victim, persecutor and rescuer as archetypal roles and as reactive, unaware patterns of relating was developed by a transactional analyst, Steve Karpman (1975). The way out of the repetitive, constricting roles of victim, persecutor and rescuer is first through awareness of the cycle and then experimenting and learning to respond differently.

For example:

- not forcing others to do anything against their wishes (persecutor), and instead working with others by agreement
- being clear about what you want and asking for it rather than not asking or being unclear or asking in a way in which you will not be heard, then complaining and being resentful (victim); of course, we will not always get what we want, but we can be clear
- encouraging participation with others rather than dependency (rescuer), sharing responsibility rather than taking control.

In healthy relationships, each person takes the risk to be up front and tends to openly assert his or her own needs and desires while accommodating the other person, while in unhealthy relationships, each person tends to hide his or her responsibility while indirectly trying to get his or her own needs and desires met (Lichtenberg, 1990).

Wider relationships

Finally, a strategic approach is required that embraces the whole community as an interconnected set of relationships and structures in order to address the legacy of the past, the current situation and our vision for the future.

The inter-generational impact of the conflict will be affected by how we deal with these. Work at community, educational and therapeutic level needs the support of sound social and political structures that recognise the complexity of recovery.



Victims, perpetrators, and bystanders each require mutual acknowledgement. Yet there are costs of embracing these three roles as if they are sharply demarcated. Few who survive can fit comfortably into simply one of them (Minnow, 1998).

Our shared humanity dictates that those who were mere spectators... are also part of the equation (Akhavan, 1997).

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