

Response by Patrick Luyten to David Bolton of the Initiative for Conflict-Related Trauma at the launch of the Flanders Fields Trauma & Transformation Initiative on 4th July 2013

Minister-President, parliamentarians, distinguished guests

It is a great honor and privilege to address you today, and it is a particularly great honor to have been invited to respond to the address by David Bolton, a world-renowned expert in the field of trauma and transformation.

In my response to David Bolton's eloquent and moving presentation, I want to highlight three issues concerning trauma and its impact, informed by research in the psychological sciences, as this is the perspective I am coming from. Further, linked to each of these issues, I will discuss three specific policy implications:

First, trauma is everywhere and influences us all in negative ways, and it will continue to do so unless we intervene.

The prevalence of trauma at both the societal and the personal level is high. Just a few minutes ago, David Bolton reminded us of the trauma suffered by so many in Ireland, and the continuing struggle of the people of Ireland with their traumatic past. The case of Ireland also illustrates how closely intertwined trauma at the societal and personal level are, and how trauma is transmitted across the generations if we not intervene.

Unfortunately, we have many examples that provide further support for these assumptions. Several wars continue to determine who we are, how we think and feel: the Great War, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the war in ex-Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, several countries in Africa; the list is very long, extremely long.

Moreover, the threat of terror has forever changed our world, with attacks and bombings in New York, Madrid, London, to name just a few, as have the many instances of large scale trauma, including natural disasters, plane, bus and train crashes (who doesn't remember hurricane Sandy, or the bus crash in Sierre that killed many Belgian children and their teachers?), and instances of sexual and physical abuse in the Catholic Church.

And then there is personal trauma, children growing up in social

deprivation and chronic stress situations, children and adults that suffer from physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect, that undergo experiences of bullying at school and at the workplace, the traumatic loss of loved ones. Trauma is everywhere, and these examples are more telling than statistics showing that between 20 and 50% of adults experience severe (early) adversities during their life time.

Just to illustrate the influence of trauma, consider the population attributable fractions associated with trauma: these are the percentage of psychiatric disorders such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other anxiety disorders that are due to adverse events such as abuse and neglect: these range from 30 to 60% and more!! Stated otherwise, if we could prevent these adversities, the decrease in psychiatric disorders would range from 30 to 60%, which is simply massive. Similar figures have been found for the association between trauma and problematic behaviors, such as drug abuse and partner violence. There is no intervention in the world with such potentially powerful effects.

What is perhaps the worst about trauma is, as David Bolton so persuasively demonstrated, that it tends to affect the next generation and thus it tends to perpetuate itself. Did you know that the number of deaths in the United States due to suicide is greater than the number of military that die in combat! Think about the partners of these individuals, their children, their families and friends, the communities they live in. They have been changed forever. Trauma thus runs across the generations; the oppressed often become the oppressor, the next generation often has to suffer for the sins of the previous generation.

And here is an important insight from the psychological sciences that sheds light not only on the massively negative consequences of trauma, but also on what we might do to prevent these negative consequences: trauma typically leads us to **de-humanize** the other; which prevents forgiveness and reconciliation. The case of Ireland is a prime example: as long as both parties succeeded in de-humanizing the other, the conflict remained and both parties remained convinced of their truth, their cause.

However, the case of Ireland also shows that this tendency to de-humanize the other in the wake of trauma can be overcome, precisely by humanizing the other again. Realizing that others – the enemy, the perpetrator – are also human beings with emotions, feelings, wishes, values, interests, just like us, is the first step in stopping the vicious cycle associated with trauma, and paves the way for forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. Mentalizing – our ability to understand both the self and others in terms of feelings, wishes, motives, and values, fosters forgiveness, reconciliation and peace.

This often is a slow and painstaking process – we can all think of examples from our own personal life, I'm sure. But psychological science also demonstrates that trauma may lead to so-called **post-traumatic growth (post-traumatische groei in Dutch)**, that is: positive psychological experiences as a result of the struggle with trauma and adversity. Individuals showing post-traumatic growth typically report a greater appreciation of life, changes in priorities, and a greater sense of relatedness and strength. Human beings thus have a remarkable capacity to overcome trauma and even thrive after trauma. This capacity, also known as **resilience (veerkracht in Dutch)** reflects our ability to cope with trauma, to overcome trauma and even to thrive and become a better human being after trauma. Society, and politicians in particular, have an important responsibility in this respect, as they can either foster resilience, forgiveness and reconciliation, or they can hamper these processes, by the language that they use, by the stories they tell, or fail to tell, by the narratives they create.

Hence, to summarize, psychological science shows that trauma is everywhere – a grim reality that we often deny because of the intense feelings associated with trauma. But psychological science also demonstrates that individuals and societies can show resilience in the face of trauma, and even learn from trauma. Finally, psychological science also demonstrates that wishing won't make the negative consequences of trauma go away. We have to intervene and we have developed effective intervention methods in this respect, both aimed at individuals as well as groups. We simply need to use them.

The policy implications are clear: we need initiatives to remember trauma, but we also need to provide citizens with the tools to work through trauma and to keep it from determining their lives. We need to humanize the other thus fostering resilience. Personally, I believe the school level is the ideal context to foster resilience, forgiveness and reconciliation and to stop the potential intergenerational transmission of trauma.

Second, trauma is associated not only with high personal costs, but also with extremely high socio-economic costs.

As David Bolton pointed out, there is an increasing awareness of the vast economic costs associated with trauma. From a psychological perspective, economic costs should be broadly interpreted: trauma impairs individuals' capacities to work, to do something meaningful in life – a major source of self-esteem and self-worth that is often lost by those faced with trauma

The policy implications, again, are very clear: The economic point of view

should be routinely taken into consideration in trauma prevention and intervention. This might also increase its visibility on the political agenda. We constantly underestimate the cost of trauma, particularly as trauma influences the next generation, also from an economic perspective.

Third, and finally, despite considerable progress in the psychological sciences, the factors involved in trauma and transformation are insufficiently understood and evidence based treatments and interventions are poorly implemented in this country, in Europe and the world.

Despite the high prevalence of trauma, and its major impact on individuals and societies, we still know too little about the processes involved in trauma and resilience, in reconciliation and in peace building. As David Bolton illustrated with regard to Ireland, we continue to underestimate the consequences of trauma for individuals and societies and the mental health perspective is often the last one to emerge on the political agenda, which is at odds with scientific knowledge.

Similarly, although we have developed effective intervention strategies, the implementation of these evidence based intervention strategies has far lagged behind.

From a policy perspective, it is therefore important to emphasize the urgent need for funding of at least three types of research:

(a) research regarding the factors – both biological and psychosocial – that are involved in explaining the response to trauma. It is clear that both biological and psychosocial factors are implicated in explaining vulnerability as well as resilience in the face of trauma – we need to better understand these factors to develop more effective intervention strategies promoting resilience.

(b) Research concerning the psychosocial and economic cost of trauma.

(c) Research concerning the development and implementation of more effective intervention strategies.

Currently, we are involved with several partner universities in Ireland, Israel, the United Kingdom, Lebanon, ex-Yugoslavia, and the United States in setting up these studies, and other research groups around the world are involved in similar studies, but more is needed.

I would like to end, in this respect, by focusing your attention on two

quotes illustrating that we can do something about the negative consequences of trauma, and that we have an important responsibility to do so:

“While the content of an individual’s life history or a society cannot change, it can be reconstructed and told in a different way” Mary Main

Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

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