Perpetrators & Victims

The Psychodynamics of Traumatising Relationships

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Agenda

- Victims and perpetrators – definitions
- Victim and perpetrator attitudes as surviving strategies
- Victim-perpetrator-splitting
- Ways to resolve – realistic and illusionary
Victims

- A person becomes a victim by experiencing harm to his body and his psyche (from natural disasters, from other human beings).
- The harm can be small or big, stressful or traumatic.
Perpetrators

- Someone becomes a perpetrator if he does harm to someone else (by violence, murder, theft, betrayal, dishonesty)
- or if he does not give the necessary support to another person he is responsible for (particularly lack of contact, love and food).
- One can be a perpetrator consciously and unconsciously.
- One can also be a perpetrator towards oneself.
Harm as a traumatic experience

• A victim feels helpless and powerless
• His stress reactions (fight or flight) make the harm even greater
• Blocking, freezing, dissociating and splitting are psychic emergency reactions in order to survive
• It is not possible to reverse the harm that happens.
Different types of Trauma

- Trauma of Existential Threat
- Trauma of Loss
- Symbiotic Trauma (pre-, peri-, postnatal)
- Traumatisation of a whole bonding system

Every sort of trauma can produce a specific type of victim-perpetrator-dynamic
Splits in the personality structure after a traumatic experience

- Traumatised parts
- Survival parts
- Healthy parts
Being a Victim means

- Having undergone a traumatic experience
- Surviving it by splitting
- Being a victim stays present in the psychic structure/in the body
- Trauma-surviving strategies become necessary
Victim Attitudes as a Trauma-Surviving-Strategy

(1)

- Suppressing impulses to fight or run away
- Submissiveness
- Denying being a victim
- Trying to be strong
- Suppressing memories of the trauma
- Feeling guilty
- Feeling that punishment is justified
Victim Attitudes as a Trauma-Surviving-Strategy (2)

- Suffering, lamenting, complaining without mentioning the real underlying reasons
- Chronic depression
- Chronic diseases
- Has ideals of harmony and peace
Victim Attitudes as a Trauma-Surviving-Strategy (3)

- Not seeing perpetrators as perpetrators
- Clinging emotionally to the perpetrators
- Protecting perpetrators
- Identifying with the needs of perpetrators
- Disgust at one’s own weakness
- Self-destructive behaviour
- Becoming a perpetrator oneself towards innocent others
Being a perpetrator as a traumatising experience

- Bad conscience
- Massive feelings of guilt
- Massive feelings of shame
- Fear of being socially despised
Perpetrator Attitudes as a Trauma surviving strategy (1)

- Not seeing the harm that they have done to another person
- Denying perpetrator deeds and facts
- Not feeling guilty, instead feeling righteous and justified
- Demonstrating a good conscience in social situations and in public
- Suppressing anxiety
Perpetrator Attitudes as a Trauma surviving strategy (2)

• Blaming victims, playing with their anxieties
• Feeling oneself as the victim
• Insulting victims
• Calling victims sick and insane people
• Claiming an ideology that justifies perpetrator actions as a higher and socially justified duty
• Feeling satisfaction in destruction and aggression
Antisocial personality disorder

is characterised by at least 3 of the following:

– Callous unconcern for the feelings of others and lack of capacity for empathy.
– Gross and persistent attitude of irresponsibility and disregard for social norms, rules, and obligations.
– Inability to maintain enduring relationships.
Antisocial personality disorder

– Very low tolerance of frustration and a low threshold for discharge of aggression, including violence.
– Inability to experience guilt and benefit from experience, particularly punishment.
– Markedly prone to blaming others or offer plausible rationalisations for their behavior bringing them into conflict.
– Persistent irritability. (ICD 10, F60.2)
Victim-Perpetrator Splitting (1)

- Split off victim experiences create victim and perpetrator attitudes as survival-strategies
- Victims become perpetrators and are not aware of their victim and perpetrator attitudes
- Numbness towards oneself becomes unempathetic behaviour towards others
Victim-Perpetrator Splitting (2)

- Pendulum swings between victim and perpetrator attitudes
- Alternating feelings of powerlessness and rebellious fury
- False atonement
- Revenge against innocent others
- Aggression and depression as normal in relationships
- Illusions of love as a fragile basis for living together with others
Victim-Perpetrator Splitting (3)

• A vicious cycle that sucks in more and more people
• A vicious cycle that goes on for generations
• Violence, murder, incest and sexual abuse become the norm
• Consequences: Traumatisation of whole bonding systems which is dominated by trauma
Victim-Perpetrator Splitting (4)

- Criminal behaviour
- Personality Disorders, Dissociative Identity Disorders (DID), “Psychopath”
- Psychosis, Schizophrenia, Delusions,
- Chronic diseases e.g. auto-immune diseases, cancer
- Self destructive behaviour, suicide
Illusionary attempts to find a way out of the victim-perpetrator-splitting

- Revenge: wanting to destroy the perpetrator
- Rebellion: fighting blindly against the perpetrator
- Forgiving: trying to take away guilt and shame from the perpetrator
- Reconciliation: Ideals of harmony without integrating one’s own victim or perpetrator trauma
- Escaping into the realms of spirituality
How to overcome the victim attitude?

• Acknowledging being a victim, i.e. feeling one‘s own trauma
• Seeing and accepting the harm that has been done to oneself
• Feeling compassion for oneself
• Realising one‘s own healthy strength
• Learning to protect one‘s personal boundaries
• Acknowledging one‘s own perpetrator attitudes
How to overcome the perpetrator attitude?

- Acknowledging the facts and deeds
- Accepting real guilt and responsibility
- Feeling one’s anxieties and shame
- Feeling empathy towards the victim
- Offering compensation, making appropriate amends
- Renouncing the need for lifelong atonement
Without getting access to the fact of being a traumatized victim, perpetrators will not realize that they are perpetrators.
Living beyond the Victim-Perpetrator Splitting (1)

- Learning to regulate one’s feelings (fear, rage, love)
- Continuous contact with oneself, healthy autonomy, clear boundaries
- Self respect, growing ability to deal with conflicts
- Leaving systems that are caught up in victim-perpetrator-dynamics
- Learning to live in constructive symbiotic relationships
- Creating win-win- instead of win-lose-situations
Literature