

2 Societal trauma: democracy in danger

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Introduction

The overly simplistic explanations of human behaviour that guide so many organizational and political decisions regularly fail to take into account one of the most important determining factors in human experience – the presence throughout human history of exposure to overwhelming, repetitive, multigenerational traumatic experiences and the potentially negative impact of those experiences on individual, group and political processes.

The last 20 years have seen the birth of a new way of understanding human behavioural pathology from a complex biopsychosocial and existential viewpoint that we call 'trauma theory'. Trauma theory establishes a more coherent, scientifically grounded and complex chain of cause and effect for human behaviour that enables interconnections of meaning between individuals, groups and political systems without necessarily sacrificing centuries of established wisdom. Trauma theory makes it clear that individual, social and political policy decisions are intimately connected to people's experience of – and exposure to – traumatic experience. The field of traumatic stress studies has arisen out of advocacy and a global movement toward guarantees of basic human rights and for those working with trauma survivors, the personal and the political are irrevocably connected (Bloom 2000).

Trauma theory is grounded in an exploration of the evolved biological responses to overwhelming stress. Failing to recognize that as human beings we are still profoundly affected by our evolutionary roots, including the powerful evolutionary pressure of group behaviour, puts us at the mercy of unconscious forces that can be exceedingly destructive. Leaders and the people they lead may be guided – or driven – by rational self-interest, by economic considerations, by greed and the other deadly sins. But deeper, instinctual forces also drive individual and group behaviour. The study of traumatic stress has expanded our understanding of those unconscious – or

less than fully conscious – forces that impact individuals and groups and may also help shed some much needed light onto the political stage as well.

In this chapter, we will look at the parallel processes that develop between stressed individuals, the groups that they form and the societies that result. Leaders stand at the interface between these levels of social organization, representing, simultaneously, their own development as individuals and the needs, both conscious and unconscious, of the group or groups they represent. Under conditions of great stress, the behaviour of leaders will be greatly determined by the impact of stressful conditions on them and the people they govern. Likewise, crisis provides an opportunity for leaders to actively manipulate the emotions and behaviour of the group to help them carry forth their own agendas.

The parallel-process nature of traumatic reality is a particularly important issue in today's world where entire cultures may be profoundly traumatized. Trauma shatters basic assumptions and in the unstable period immediately after such an event, individual, organizational and national decisions may be made that alter destinies and fortunes (Janoff-Bulman 1992). Since September 11 2001 the United States has offered an opportunity to witness the post-traumatic uses and abuses of fear at the hands of people in power and the threat that this poses for democracy. In the long term, the negative impact of exposure to trauma can severely impair individual and organizational skills necessary for the exercise of democratic processes.

Understanding the impact of acute trauma

Individual response to immediate danger

The stress response is a total body-mind mobilization of resources (Horowitz 2003). Powerful neurochemicals flood our brain and body in service of survival. Our attention becomes riveted on the potential threat and our capacity for reasoning and exercising judgement is negatively impacted by rising anxiety and fear. Decision making becomes dichotomous and extremist, providing us with a minimum of possible options for action and thereby increasing the odds of survival by decreasing the time it takes to actually make a decision (Janis 1982). In this heightened state of aggressive preparedness, defensive action is more likely to be violent. Taking action appears to be the only solution to this extraordinary experience of tension, so we are compelled to act on the impulses that often guide us to aggressively defend ourselves rather than to run away (Bloom 2003).

More closely resembling our animal ancestors, we become less attentive to words and far more focused on threat-related signals in the environment – all the nonverbal content of communication. As fear rises, we may lose

language functions altogether as the verbal centres of the brain become compromised: a phenomenon recognized as 'speechless terror' (Van der Kolk *et al.* 2001). Without language, we can take in vital information only in nonverbal form – through our physical, emotional and sensory experiences – elements Bion termed 'beta elements', by which he meant the sensory impressions that remain in their raw state, unsymbolized and unable to be thought about or sublimated (Biram 2003). As the level of arousal increases, 'dissociation' – the loss of integrated function of memory, sensation, perception and identity – may be triggered as an adaptive response to this hyperaroused state, physiologically buffering the central nervous system and the body by lowering heart rate and reducing anxiety and pain while simultaneously shutting off troubling feelings, memories or thoughts about unfolding events, including even ethical standards for behaviour. This internal state of 'freeze' helps to temporarily reduce the overwhelming nature of the stress response and allows us to stay calm and function rather than experience emotions that are more than we can bear.

Each episode of danger connects to every other episode of danger in our minds, so that the more danger we are exposed to, the more sensitive we are to danger. With each experience of fight-flight-freeze, our mind forms a network of connections that is triggered with every new threatening experience. If people are exposed to danger repeatedly, their bodies become unusually sensitive so that even minor threats can trigger this sequence of physical, emotional and cognitive responses. We can do nothing to control this reaction – it is a biological, in-built response, a protective device that only goes wrong if we are exposed to too much danger and too little protection.

When overly stressed, human beings cannot think clearly; neither can we consider the long-range consequences of behaviour. It is impossible to weigh all the possible options before making a decision or to take the time to obtain all the necessary information that goes into making good decisions (Janis and Mann 1977). Decisions tend to be based on impulse and on a perceived need to self-protect. As a consequence, such decisions are inflexible, oversimplified, extremist, directed towards aggressive action and often very poorly constructed (Janis 1982). This tendency toward extremist thinking will be exacerbated in those individuals who have strong authoritarian personality traits because they are unlikely to examine existing evidence, think critically about what they are experiencing, or reach independent conclusions (Altemeyer 1996). This state of extreme hyperarousal associated with stress serves a protective function during the emergency, preparing us to respond automatically and aggressively to any perceived threat, preferentially steering us toward action and away from the time-consuming effort of thought and language.

Group response to immediate danger

Under severe stress, if our powerful fear-driven emotional responses are not buffered by others through social contact and physical touch, our central nervous system is left exposed to unrelenting over-stimulation. This reaction can do long-lasting harm to our bodies as well as our psyches. As a buffer against such danger, human beings developed a network of attachment relationships, living in extended kinship groups throughout most of our evolutionary developmental period. Our capacity to manage overwhelming emotional states is shaped by our experience with early childhood attachments and is maintained throughout life by our attachment relationships. This development of extended social networks increased the likelihood that vulnerable offspring would be protected and, in combination with our expanding intelligence, made hunting and food gathering far more successful. Threat triggers an increase in social bonding. Under threat, human beings will more closely bond together with their identified group, close ranks and prepare for defence of the group.

A leader rapidly emerges within such a group, a complex process that is an interaction between the individual characteristics of the leader, the needs of the group and the contextual demands of the moment. Under such conditions, the vast majority of human beings become more suggestible to the influence of a persuasive, charismatic, strong, assertive and apparently confident leader who promises the best defence of the group, thereby containing the overwhelming anxiety of every member of the group (Cohen *et al.* 2004). In this manner, stress favours authoritarian social structures because, as research has demonstrated, individuals who are high in authoritarian traits are more likely to readily submit to legitimate authority figures (Altemeyer 1996).

In this state it is difficult for the members of a stressed group to discern the difference between a confident, intelligent leader and an arrogant blowhard and those with authoritarian dispositions are unlikely to question anyone who has the outer trappings of legitimacy. This is particularly true when a social group is at a point in its history when it has lost confidence in the old solutions to life problems, generating a state of helplessness and uncertainty (Werbart 2000). Decisions are made quickly, often autonomously, by the leader with relatively little input and the input that the leader receives is likely to be significantly coloured by the pressure everyone feels to conform to standards of group cohesion and unanimity. As stress increases, the leader is compelled to take action to reduce the threat while the followers simultaneously become more obedient to the leader in order to ensure coordinated group effort.

However, even with stern authoritarian leadership, individual and group conflict and competitive strivings are always present in a group and pose a threat to rapid, unified action. Therefore, efforts must be made to

minimize the normal tensions, conflicts and aggressive behaviours that inevitably arise and that are exacerbated by the stress response itself. The group solution is to find an external enemy on which the group can project its own negative emotions and desires in service of group cohesion. The aggression of those individuals with strongly authoritarian personality traits can be most easily directed by authority figures against any perceived enemy (Altemeyer 1996). The greater the consistency between this psychosocial need and actual events, the easier it becomes to define friend and foe. The greater the perceived differences between 'us' and 'them', the greater the ease in labelling the enemy and doing whatever it takes to defend 'us'. The greater the previous injury experienced by the group at the hands of the enemy, the easier it is to flame the fires of revenge. Under conditions that provoke fear of death, stereotyped images of the enemy are likely to be even more fervently clung to by a threatened group (Schimmel *et al.* 1999; Volkan 2002).

When danger is real and present, effective leaders take charge and give commands that are obeyed by obedient followers, thus harnessing and directing the combined power of many individuals in service of group survival. The basic programming for social functioning is 'tit-for-tat' and therefore, within the human species, a desire to seek revenge for real or perceived injury is a powerful motive force. The leader mobilizes the shared group need to wreak vengeance and directs these powerful forces toward attack on the perceived enemy. Longstanding interpersonal conflicts seem to evaporate and everyone pulls together toward the common goal of group survival, producing an exhilarating and even intoxicating state of unity, oneness and a willingness to sacrifice one's own well-being for the sake of the group. This is a survival strategy ensuring that, in a state of crisis, decisions can be made quickly and efficiently, thus better ensuring survival of the group, even while individuals may be sacrificed. Fears of mortality are buffered through a strengthened allegiance to whatever ideological framework the culture endorses, be it religious, philosophical or political and anyone who threatens to undermine or criticize that framework is considered deviant, if not dangerous, and is likely to be forcefully extruded from the group (Bloom 2004a, b; Pyszczynski *et al.* 2003).

When fear becomes chronic

Individual response to chronic threat

The human stress response is an evolutionarily designed survival strategy that is extraordinarily effective under the conditions for which it was originally designed. The tragedy is that human beings are no longer particularly well suited to the environments we have created for ourselves,

environments within which our most dangerous enemies are frequently members of our own families, while the institutions we have created to sustain and protect us often turn out to be the engines of our own destruction.

The tragedy of this magnificent evolutionary success for the individual emerges most fully when a human being is repeatedly traumatized, particularly when that exposure begins in childhood. Under such conditions, these evolutionary mechanisms that are so adapted to human survival become dangerous threats and impediments to further growth. After prolonged and/or repetitive exposure to serious stressors, the brain becomes hypersensitive, a state now recognized as *chronic hyperarousal*. In this state, people may perceive danger everywhere, even when there is no real danger, because their body is signalling the arousal response to even minor provocation. As a result, their ability to think clearly and rationally can be chronically and erratically impaired.

Although the fight-flight-freeze state of physiological hyperarousal serves a vital survival purpose in times of danger, when hyperarousal stops being a state and turns into a trait, human beings lose their capacity to accurately assess and predict danger, leading to avoidance and reenactment instead of adaptation and survival (Perry and Pate 1994). Prolonged hyperarousal can have disastrous physical effects as our biological systems become progressively exhausted. Hyperarousal leaves us physically and emotionally exhausted, burdened with hair-trigger tempers, irritability and a tendency to perpetuate violence. Our need to rescue ourselves from this untenable physiological state means that we will do anything, use any device, to calm ourselves down. If we cannot get relief from our fellow humans, we will turn to any substance or behaviour that does bring relief.

Childhood exposure to trauma, particularly repetitive exposure to interpersonal violence such as sexual abuse, has even more dire consequences than when an adult experiences a traumatic event for the first time. Children's brains are still forming. The release of powerful neurohormones, particularly during critical and sensitive moments in development, is thought to have such a profound impact on the developing brain that the brain may organize itself around the traumatic event in a 'use it or lose it' strategy (Perry *et al.* 1996). High-quality decision making may never develop and, instead, extremist thinking prevails, frequently accompanied by a willingness to uncritically accept the opinions of established authority. Attention to threat remains chronic and therefore all kinds of information not considered threatening are unlikely to be integrated or synthesized. Aggression becomes chronic and may become the preferred method for dealing with any kind of stress, even the stress of uncertainty or confusion. Dissociation may also become chronic, with progressive fragmentation of important mental functions and bodies of information paired

with an inability to put feelings into words (*alexithymia*) and a tendency to act out distressing feelings instead (Krystal 1988).

Perhaps the most tragic element of the human response to chronic threat resides in the human capacity to adjust to adverse conditions, the consequence of which may be to inadvertently repeat a traumatic past. Fear precipitates the compulsion to fight or flee but when you can do neither, the biologically induced state of hyperarousal with its accompanying feelings of fear and aggression is toxic to mind and body. Like animals in a cage, with enough exposure to helplessness, human beings will adapt to adversity and cease struggling to escape from the toxic situation, thus conserving vital resources and buffering the vulnerable central nervous system against the negative impact of constant overstimulation (Seligman 1992). But later, rather than change situations that could be altered for the better, we will change our definitions of 'normal' to fit the situation to which we have become adapted, regardless of how controlling, abusive or repressive these conditions have become.

'Traumatic reenactment' describes the lingering enactment and automatic repetition of the past related to a history of trauma. It has long been recognized that 'history repeats itself', but never before have we so clearly understood *why* history does so. The very nature of traumatic information processing determines the reenactment behaviour. As human beings, we are meant to function at our maximum level of integration and any barrier to this integration will produce some innate compensatory mechanism that allows us to overcome it. Dissociating traumatic memories and feelings is life saving in the shortterm, but prevents full integration in the long term because the nonverbal images, feelings and sensations remain un-integrated. Assigned no category, no context, no point in time, these fragments of experience intrude on consciousness without warning, haunting the victim who thus remains trapped between the past and the present.

We are destined to reenact what we cannot remember (van der Kolk and Ducey 1989). And, as the reenactment unfolds, the adaptations we have made to cope with the original stressful events compel us to perceive the reenactment as perfectly 'normal' and human beings resist changing anything that feels normal (Bloom in press).

Group response to chronic threat

The tragic nature of human evolution emerges in social systems when groups of individuals develop a group identity – family, tribe, organization or nation – and then are repeatedly threatened by internal or external forces, thus arousing the conditions that lead to family wars, tribal wars, civil wars and international wars. Human beings are fundamentally emotional creatures, innately endowed with a biological system that is hard-wired for affective experience. Put human beings together in groups

and this effect is multiplied as a result of the powerful force known as 'emotional contagion' (Hatfield *et al.* 1994). A fundamental developmental challenge for all individuals and for all human groups is to learn how to appropriately manage emotional arousal.

How does a group normally 'manage' emotional states? It does so through the normal problem solving, decision making and conflict resolution methods that must exist for any human group to operate effectively. Although most organizations within our society function in a fundamentally hierarchical, top-down manner, in a calm, healthy, well-functioning system there is a certain amount of natural democratic process that occurs in the day-to-day operations of solving group problems, making decisions in teams and resolving conflict among members of the organization. For 99 per cent of the time our species has been on this planet, we lived in small hunter-gatherer clans of 40–50 people and in these groups, the ratio of adults to children under six was at least three to one (Perry 2002). Containing powerful emotions and resolving conflicts within the group were necessary for group survival and in such close quarters as we lived, children had frequent opportunities to watch adults develop effective skills.

The more complex the work demands, the greater the necessity for collaboration and integration and therefore the more likely that a system of teamwork will evolve. For a team to function properly, there must be a certain level of trust among team members who must all share in the establishment of satisfactory group norms. These are the norms that enable the group to: tolerate the normal amount of anxiety that exists among people working on a task; tolerate uncertainty long enough for creative problem solutions to emerge; promote balanced and integrated decision making so that all essential points of view are synthesized; contain and resolve the inevitable conflicts that arise between members of a group; complete its tasks.

For groups, as for individuals, emotions routinely inform the thought processes of the group and are critical to group learning and judgement; therefore group emotional processes must be constructively managed and contained. This is frequently the critical job of leadership. The more at ease the leader is with promoting democratic processes and transparency while minimizing the potentially negative impact of hierarchical structures, the more effective the group problem solving is likely to be. In exerting democratic leadership he or she is thereby reducing the abusive use of power while promoting more creative problem solving and diverse input, enabling the evolution of far more complex strategies. The greater the availability of conflict resolution techniques, the greater the willingness on the part of all group members to engage in, and even welcome, conflict as a stimulant for creativity and change. When there is less conflict avoidance there are likely to be far fewer longstanding and corrosive buried resentments.

In groups under stress, however, this healthier level of function is likely to be sacrificed in service of facing the emergency. Militaristic hierarchies can respond more rapidly and mobilize action to defend against further damage. Leaders give orders and followers follow those orders, uniting a group as one. Problems occur, however, when this emergency state is prolonged or repetitive, problems not dissimilar to those we witness in individuals under chronic stress. Groups can become chronically hyperaroused, functioning in crisis mode, unable to process one difficult experience before another crisis has emerged. Hierarchical structures concentrate power and, in these circumstances, power can easily come to be used abusively and in a way that perpetuates rather than attenuates the concentration of power. Transparency disappears and secrecy increases under this influence. Communication networks become compromised as those in power become more punishing and the likelihood of error is increased as a result. In such a situation, conflicts tend to remain unresolved and tension (and resentment) mount under the surface of everyday group functioning. Helplessness, passivity and passive-aggressive behaviours on the part of the subordinates in the hierarchy increase while leaders become increasingly controlling and punitive. In this way, the organization becomes ever more radically split, with different parts of the organization assuming the role of managing and/or expressing different emotions that are then subsequently suppressed. This is not a situation that leads to individual or organizational health but, rather, to increasing levels of dysfunction and diminished productivity.

The chronic nature of a stressed atmosphere tends to produce a generalized increased level of tension, irritability, short tempers and even abusive behaviour. The urgency to act in order to relieve this tension compromises decision making because group members are unable to weigh and balance multiple options, arrive at compromises and consider long-term consequences of their actions under stress. Decision making in such groups tends to deteriorate with increased numbers of poor and impulsive decisions, compromised problem-solving mechanisms and overly rigid and dichotomous thinking and behaviour. Interpersonal conflicts that were suppressed during the initial crisis return, often with a vengeance, but conflict resolution mechanisms, if ever in place, deteriorate under stress.

Problem solving is also compromised because, under these conditions, group members are likely to turn to leaders who urge action and, in this condition of tension, virtually any action will do to alleviate the immediate need to respond. Extremist thinking tends to dominate discussion. Leaders may become increasingly autocratic and dogmatic, trying to appear calm and assured in front of their subordinates while narrowing their circle of input to a very small group of trusted associates. As the leader becomes more threatened, sensing the insecurity of his decisions and his position, these small groups of associates feel increasingly pressured to conform to

whatever the leader wants. In this process, judgement and diversity of opinion are sacrificed in service of group cohesion and, as this occurs, the quality of decision making becomes progressively compromised, an insidious process that has been termed 'groupthink' (Janis 1983).

Under conditions of chronic threat, escalating control measures are used to repress any dissent that is felt to be dangerous to the unity of what has become focused group purpose, seemingly connected to survival threats. This encourages a narrowing of input from the world outside the organization. It also encourages the development of split-off and rivalrous dissenting subgroups within the group who may passive-aggressively or openly subvert group goals. As group cohesion begins to wane, leaders may experience the relaxing of control measures as a threat to organizational purpose and safety. They may therefore attempt to mobilize increasing projection onto the designated external enemy who serves a useful purpose in activating increased group cohesion while simultaneously aggressively suppressing dissent internally. But the suppression of the dissenting minority voice has negative consequences. As dissent is silenced, vital information flow is impeded. As a result, the quality of problem analysis and decision making deteriorates further. If this cycle is not stopped and the group allowed opportunity to recuperate, the result may be a group that becomes as rigid, repetitious and ultimately destructive as do so many chronically stressed individuals (Bloom 2004a, b). In the process, the group will have lost the democratic processes that are so critically important to the ability of the group to respond to complex, ever-changing environments.

The erosion in previously held democratic norms within a group does not happen overnight. There is an insidious process of adjustment and readjustment as control measures are instituted, the numbers of rules and regulations are increased and punitive measures for responding to infractions in these rules are instituted. Because the change is gradual, not sudden, the entire group adjusts to the adverse conditions that are always created in the name of 'safety' or 'security' from some perceived negative environmental force or in order to exert 'control' over negative influences within the corporate body itself. As the changes are accepted they become the new social norms and therefore the very definitions of normal, expectable conduct within the social group change, even while actual behaviour is becoming increasingly aberrant and even ineffective. When someone mentions the fact of the changed norms, about the differences between the way things are now and the way they used to be (when the organization was more functional), the speaker is likely to be silenced or ignored. As a result there is an escalating level of acceptance of increasingly aberrant behaviour toward subordinates and leaders within the in-group as well as the out-group(s). Meanwhile, the past becomes romanticized and calls for stricter 'moral values', defined as the repression of freedoms perceived as dangerous, rise. This necessitates a call for 'purification' from

whatever forces are considered to be contaminating group unity (Volkan 2002). Those who believe that the present reality could be changed for a freer, more just and progressive future are first ignored and ridiculed, then labelled as divisive and even dangerous malcontents who should be censured or are simply called naive, absurd 'utopians', wishing for a society that can never exist.

Within a social framework we call memory 'history'. Some modern philosophers believe that all memories are formed and organized within a collective context. According to them, society provides the framework for beliefs, behaviours and the recollections of both (Halbwachs 1992). Later, present circumstances affect what events are remembered as significant. Much of the recording and recalling of memories occurs through social discussion. This shared cohesiveness of memories is part of what defines a culture over time. Shared language also helps a society organize and assimilate memories and, eventually, forget about the events. Individuals are destined to reenact what they cannot remember and so, too, are groups. There is reason to believe that maintaining silence about disturbing collective events may have the counter-effect of making the memory even more potent in its continuing influence on the organization or society much as silent traumatic memories continue to haunt individuals (Pennebaker *et al.* 1997).

Organizations can forget the past just like individuals do and the more traumatic the past, the more likely it is that a group will push memories out of conscious awareness. Corporate amnesia has been defined as the loss of collective experience and accumulated skills usually through the trauma of excessive downsizing and layoffs (NewsBriefs 2000). Analogous to the division in individual memory between verbal, explicit and situational, implicit memory, literature in the corporate world refers to explicit and implicit (or 'tacit') corporate memory, the latter referring to vital, organizationally specific knowledge that is cumulative, slow to diffuse and rooted in the human beings who comprise the organization, in contrast with the explicit corporate memory that is embodied in written documents, policies and procedures. It is this valuable tacit memory that is profoundly disturbed by the loss of personnel in downsizing (Hazell 2000).

Groups can also distort memories of the past as individuals can. Organizations may selectively omit disagreeable facts, may exaggerate or embellish positive deeds, may deny the truth. They may manipulate linkages by focusing on one cause of an event while ignoring or denying other causes. They may exaggerate the misdeeds of an enemy or competitor and minimize the group's own misdeeds toward that very competitor or simply blame 'circumstances' and thereby minimize their own responsibility (Baumeister and Hastings 1997). Groups may engage in what has been termed 'organizational nostalgia' for a golden past that is highly selective and idealized and, when compared to the present state of affairs, surpassingly better. It is a world that is irretrievably lost, with all the sense

of inexpressible grief associated with such loss and the present is always comparatively poorer, less sustaining, less fruitful, less promising. In this way the organizational past – whether accurately remembered or not – can continue to exert a powerful influence on the present. In fact, one author has noted that: 'Nostalgia is not a way of coming to terms with the past (as mourning or grief are) but an attempt to come to terms with the present' (Gabriel 1993: 132).

Critical events and group failure change us and change our groups, but without memory – without history – we lose the context. Studies have shown that institutions do have memory and that once interaction patterns have been disrupted, these patterns can be transmitted through an organization so that one 'generation' unconsciously passes on to the next norms that alter the system and every member of the system. But without a conscious memory of events also being passed on, organizational members in the present cannot make adequate judgements about whether the strategy, policy or norm is still appropriate and useful in the present (Menzies 1975). This process can be an extraordinary resistance to healthy group change.

An organization that cannot change, like an individual, will develop patterns of reenactment, repeating the past strategies over and over without recognizing that these strategies are no longer effective. With every repetition there is, instead, further deterioration in functioning. Knowledge about this failing is available but it tends to be felt before it is cognitively appreciated, but without the capacity to put words to feelings a great deal of deterioration may occur before the repetitive and destructive patterns are recognized. Healthier and potentially healing individuals enter the group and may even vie for leadership, but are rapidly extruded as they fail to adjust to the reenactment role that is being demanded of them. Less autonomous individuals may also enter the organization and are drawn into the reenactment pattern. In this way, one autocratic and abusive leader leaves or is thrown out only to be succeeded by another.

Reenactment patterns are especially likely to occur when events in the past have resulted in behaviour that arouses shame or guilt in the group's representatives. Shame and guilt for past misdeeds are especially difficult for individuals and groups to work through. The way a group talks to itself is via communication between various 'voices' of the corporate body. If these voices are silenced or ignored, communication breaks down and is more likely to be acted out through impulse-ridden and destructive behaviour.

Conclusion

Endangering democracy

An evolutionarily based, biological understanding of human behaviour has broad implications for national and international leadership. The world is now so obviously interconnected and ecologically interlinked that destruction of others is, in an increasingly real sense, self-destruction. The need to address repetitive crises is of global concern since every crisis presents us with complex dilemmas. Yet under conditions of national and international stress the quality of thought processes is likely to deteriorate to dichotomous 'good and evil' thinking. All that is required to mobilize aggression and hatred against those defined as enemy is the incitement to vengeance paired with sufficient fear to disarm coherent thought processes. Unable to engage in complex decision making, governmental problem solving becomes compromised, making it more likely that we will turn to leaders who appear strong, decisive and who urge immediate action and a satisfaction of the growing lust for violent action. Unfortunately, such leaders are likely to be charismatic authoritarians, frequently right-wing fundamentalist authoritarians. Authoritarianism is known to increase under the threat of violence and when such an ascendance occurs, critical thinking, the ability to collaborate with others and the search for nonviolent solutions to complex problems are likely to evaporate (Altemeyer 1996).

In a time of national tension, virtually any action will do to alleviate the immediate pressure to respond. Under conditions of stress, we are more likely to be swayed by the influence of a group we are identified with and pressures for conformity increase at the moment when we are most desperately in need of diverse opinions. This leads to an increase in territoriality and aggression that, to some, may feel satisfying in the long run but is likely to compound existing problems. Although intended to decrease the sense of danger and insecurity, premature and poorly considered action tends to increase danger. As leaders focus exclusively on physical security, we may sacrifice other forms of safety and well-being in order to achieve an elusive sense of physical security that remains threatened. Unfortunately, focusing on only physical safety while ignoring the other domains of human existence that constitute sustained security tends to procure 'exactly what we seek to avoid – more danger.

Using violent means to achieve nonviolent ends is oxymoronic action bound to involve a group in the escalation of ever more dangerous forms of offensive behaviour. As a species we cannot escape our evolutionary heritage, tied as it is to our biological makeup. We can, however, learn to more effectively understand and manage our impulses, desires and instincts.

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