

The Damage of Collective Trauma on Iranian Culture

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Q1 Dr. Abadian, can you share with our listeners how it is you transitioned from a formal education in economic development and brought in the idea of Collective Trauma – how do those two fit?

First of all, Khosro, thanks for inviting me here to speak today, and I want to warmly welcome all those who are tuning in to listen to our discussion. The subject matter is an important one, and I'm really excited to be sharing with you today.

My interest in trauma was sparked while doing my research, when I realized that the histories of colonized communities across the globe are so thoroughly interlaced with trauma that economic investment and political interventions really can't fully fulfill their promise unless underlying conditions are dealt with. They need to be accompanied by a sustained effort to create emotionally, culturally, and spiritually healthy individuals, families, and communities.

Of course, it is important to give monetary assistance – we all know that – people are in need; it's critical to focus on education and health care; to provide people with jobs; to build housing, roads, and infrastructure. And it's also important to reform political and legal institutions. But I found that all of these efforts will fall short – listen, all the money in the world will not fix the deeper problems – if we don't channel resources to directly address the continued damage caused by historical atrocities and the ongoing effects – and they do linger -- of collective trauma.

The effect of unaddressed trauma is like having one foot pressed to the brakes in a vehicle with the other on the accelerator. You might intend the car to move forward, but it lurches forward unevenly and sometimes not at all. Too often, it's as though the car has been placed in reverse. I have found that unaddressed collective trauma seriously complicates efforts for prosperity, peace, and democracy. So, to stop generational cycles of poverty, violence, and oppression we must be willing to face and address underlying issues of trauma. Okay, so put simply, unless you help communities heal, other investments only go so far.

Q2 That's really interesting. Would you tell us what trauma is and give us some examples of the traumas that Iranians have experienced?

Let me begin by giving some Trauma 101 basics so we're all on the same page. On an individual level, we experience something as being traumatic when we feel something precious is threatened – something significant and meaningful to us. What's at risk could be something tangible like our life or the life of a loved one; or it could be something intangible, like our dignity or something we may consider precious like democracy. Feeling held captive, helpless, and in terror characterizes the experience of trauma. In other words, a person who experiences any kind of emotional or physical violence – could be a severe shock – can be traumatized.

Now, traumas can happen to an individual as well as to groups. Traumas can also be a one-time event of short duration, or they could be longer lasting and chronic. The experience of being

beaten, raped, verbally assaulted, or humiliated are examples of one-time traumas to an individual. At a group or collective level, earthquakes and other natural disasters are examples of shorter duration traumas.

But other traumas can be *chronic*: they last longer and are ongoing. Examples are repeated childhood abuse and neglect, or recurring wife beatings. And at a group level, war and colonization are all longer lasting traumas to the collective.

In Iran, women who are made to feel like second-class citizens or who feel forced and humiliated wearing the hijab can feel traumatized by this on-going experience. Historically, probably the most devastating collective trauma that Iranians experienced was the Arab conquest of Iran beginning 1,400 years ago. Of course, Iranians also experienced the Mongol invasion, and more recently, the Iran-Iraq War; and the continued global isolation of Iran has its own traumas associated with it. The Iranian Revolution was also traumatizing for many.

Q3 What are different ways that an individual or group respond to trauma?

This is a big topic but let me offer just a few ways people can get damaged by trauma, especially traumas that are long-lasting. Most people have heard that some can develop PTSD symptoms after acute traumas, i.e., increased anxiety, aggressiveness, hyper-vigilance, sleeplessness, etc. But more broadly speaking, trauma can set people up for victim-perpetrator cycles.

What I mean is that people who have experienced trauma can come to see themselves as victims and feel disempowered in their lives. What we don't often realize is that trauma can also set people up to feeling *falsely* empowered, meaning that because they feel like a victim, they may also feel justified hitting back and victimizing others. In other words, trauma doesn't just affect us emotionally and physically; it can distort identities and beliefs. I'll speak more about this a little later.

Mistrust is another hallmark of trauma. People who experience trauma can lose faith in themselves, in other people, and in a Higher Power. Survivors of trauma can come to feel betrayed and mistrustful, especially of those in positions of authority who they feel failed them. Or alternatively, they can readily give their power over to those in senior authority - political or religious – idealizing them, hoping that they will keep them safe. In other words, they tend to have an extreme and distorted view of authority.

Q4 Does everyone who experiences trauma have negative effects?

That's a great question. Not everyone who experiences traumatic events is traumatized or stays traumatized. That's the good news. For example, research shows that after experiencing trauma, symptoms diminish for the people who have had limited experiences with trauma in the past, or who grew up, for example, in healthy, stable families. The effects of trauma can also fade when people have supportive communities and healing environments they can return to following the trauma. With time, they can remember that people *can* be trusted, and life can *still* be good.

Look, it's important to recognize that, most people are extraordinarily resilient. That means that no single blow or series of difficult events, are necessarily traumatizing to an individual or have enduring traumatic impact. Whether someone stays traumatized is not just about how terrible the event itself was, but also, the meaning the person attaches to that experience. And what meaning we end up making has everything to do with our culture.

What I mean is that experiences of trauma can make us stronger and wiser, or on the other hand, they can chronically haunt us and make us hurt ourselves even more, to self-sabotage, and strike out at others. Whether we use trauma constructively or destructively depends in part on how we make meaning out of our trauma. And how we make meaning depends in part on our existing culture – our values, our beliefs, the prevailing stories, songs, ceremonies, what we choose to commemorate, etc. So, our culture can really steer us in the direction of healing and progress, toward hope and expansion, or the prevailing culture can keep us stuck in despair, pessimism, revenge and retribution.

Q5 What's an example of a way that the Iranian culture keeps some Iranians stuck and limited?

There are elements in our culture that tend to keep sorrow alive – almost like relishing stories of betrayal and victimization. There's an ever-present underlying tone of tragedy. The elements in our culture that glorify death or are fixated on martyrdom don't easily allow people to feel they can celebrate the joy of being alive. The continuous memorialization of so-called martyrs, the somber insignia of women in their black *chadors* evokes a sense of perpetual mourning. Rituals of self-flagellation like Ashura commemorating the killing of Husayn – all these potentially keep Iranians stuck in a depressive and pessimistic view of life. To be pious really becomes confused with suffering.

Now, don't get me wrong: It's important to be able to grieve actual loss in our lives, but the process of healthy grieving allows us to eventually find liberation and release from deep pain and to actually gain wisdom from it. When suffering is elevated and habitual, when people are made to believe that to be connected to the Divine, to be religious means you have to hurt and endure, or when grieving is manipulated and continuously evoked, first, it doesn't give people permission to have real joy. And second, it can keep them stuck in the past instead of being in the here and now. They often miss opportunities to make the most out of their lives.

Q6 Can you say more about the relationship between culture and trauma?

Let me give you an analogy that may make it easier to understand given our current reality with COVID19. One way to think of cultures is as a *collective immune system*, and trauma is like a debilitating virus that's contagious. If our culture is generative and healthy, it can help us withstand the trauma virus, can actually help us process everyday traumas and make meaning in ways that benefit us, and stop us from spreading that trauma to others. But if our culture is damaged, it can make things worse: It normalizes trauma, and it also can justify us acting out abusively, victimizing others when we've been hurt ourselves – and in a sense, infecting others with the trauma virus.

So, how do cultures become damaged? Well, our collective immune system can become weakened when we undergo extreme forms of collective trauma – when the people in your community have all experienced massive disruption and unrelenting trauma over long periods of time. Then the fear, the anger, grief and deep pessimism that people tend to feel after experiencing trauma can seep into their world view and culture. So, it promotes beliefs like “I’m unsafe, I’m damaged, and weak. The world is dangerous, and I’ve got to control as much as I can. That they’re out to get me, and people can’t be trusted.”

Extreme collective traumas not only wound large numbers of people, but they also distort critical sociocultural institutions like how we raise our children, how we educate them. They warp our understanding of how men and women should treat one another. They taint even our religious observances, as well as spiritual and other healing resources, all of which end up compromising our culture’s capacity to inoculate us from trauma going forward. So, when a culture is itself infected by trauma, people don’t heal well, and in fact, as a group, they tend to keep recreating experiences that actually re-traumatize – re-infect themselves and others. So, this is what I saw happening in some of the communities I worked with, and I see it happening with Iranians as well.

[Q7 How do you see this trauma reinfection happening with Iranians? How does a culture become damaged?](#)

Well, before I speak about Iranians, it might be helpful if I first described what I mean by cultural trauma in the context of another group I know well, Indigenous Peoples, I think we say in Farsi, Mardom-e bumy-e. From there, we can extrapolate to Iranian cultural trauma. How does that sound?

So, just to be clear, there are different kinds of collective trauma, and some are harder to address than others. The most damaging collective traumas are those that weaken the culture, damage the collective immune system, making it easier for trauma to spread and even replicate into the future. Indigenous peoples experienced this – an assault to them and their culture. It would be as though they were exposed to a pandemic when most of their doctors were either killed or suffering themselves from the disease. Now, let me explain what I mean.

Most of us by now know the story of how many were slaughtered, their food and way of life destroyed, how their lands were stolen right from under them, and how they were forcibly removed to reservations. But there’s so much more. For example, up until the 1960s when the Civil Rights Movement helped change things, many of their traditional spiritual practices were actually banned by the federal government. It was illegal to practice some of their healing ceremonies and rituals that had made them resilient in the past. Probably the most devastating part of their history that most Americans aren’t even aware of is that beginning in the 1890s in the US and Canada, Native American children were, by law, often forcibly removed from their families and taken to what was called Indian boarding schools to be educated – I should say reeducated -- primarily by missionary organizations or the military. This continued for not just a single generation, but three or more generations.

So, we now know that in many of these schools, large numbers of Indian children experienced the worst kinds of abuse – emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual, spiritual and intellectual abuse -- usually at the hands of religious representatives like priests and nuns. In the first generations of these schools, almost half of the children never returned home, dying literally of homesickness and disease. These schools severely punished Indian children if they spoke their native language or practiced any of their traditions. Now, imagine that. These schools were designed to make them into proper Christians and supposedly civilize the savage. Indigenous peoples were shamed and repeatedly told that they were inferior to Christian Europeans. Of course, this is how they learned to view themselves and how they learned to treat their children. And after several generations of this, few were left who hadn't been infected by trauma and who knew the old ways anymore.

People often resort to using substances like alcohol to numb themselves from feeling unbearable shame, grief, helplessness, and despair. It's quite literally an escape. It's not surprising then that, beginning in the 1930s, after several generations had gone through the traumas of these schools that there was an epidemic of alcohol and substance abuse in many indigenous communities in North America.

Q8 Wow. Has Iran experienced any cultural traumas?

Well, this topic is huge but let me give you one example of our culture being compromised and the continued effects. When Alexander the Macedon conquered Iran his forces were responsible for destroying many revered monuments, burning religious shrines and relics, and massacring Zoroastrian spiritual teachers. Given that the faith was pretty much an oral tradition, this damaged its proper transmission and our capacity to heal ourselves. Also, on a cultural level, the Greeks of that time were the embodiment of what we might today term "toxic masculinity" and they infected Iranian culture. Iranian men were shamed for being what the Greeks considered "effeminate," in part because, traditionally given our Zoroastrian heritage, women and men had a relatively egalitarian relationship. For example, there are records of Greek men noting with surprise and actually disdain that Iranian men wouldn't make major decisions without first consulting their wives. For the invading Greeks, women were no more than chattel, secluded and excluded from public life. So, you could see how the Greek domination over a period of two centuries might have distorted Iranian beliefs and practices around gender and the necessity of covering women for example.

Now, the Arab invasion and conquest was even more brutal and damaging to our culture. I'm not going to go into detail here. It's a dicey subject but what's clear to me is that Iran has yet to reckon with the truth of the brutality and continued damage to our culture. History continues to be written by the conquerors. Just like it served the American settler population to demean Native Americans and their culture in order to justify stealing their lands and exploiting them, those who colonized Iran set upon destroying elements of the pre-Islamic Iranian culture and also disseminated a great deal of misinformation about it. They painted themselves as bringing a superior culture and religion that the Iranian population willingly accepted, when the truth may be anything but. And over the centuries, they've succeeded in brainwashing many Iranians that this was the case. Historically, those dedicated to propagating this false narrative discriminated and committed genocide against Zoroastrians and others who could speak to a different truth.

Q9 Here's an important question, Dr. Abadian. Why is it important to surface these old traumas? Shouldn't we just move on?

The point of bringing up these old traumas is not to generate negativity towards, for example, our Arab and Muslim brethren, any more than my earlier work with Indigenous Peoples was meant to create tension between them and those of us who reside on this land now! We are one human family – this is what people have to understand – we've got to learn to get along. **The fact of the matter is, however, that if emotions and issues are not resolved productively in one generation, trauma can fester and is almost certainly going to be passed down to the next generations.** The point of this discussion is to become more aware so that we can heal ourselves and our cultures and create more vibrant, life-giving cultures going forward for everyone.

Also, it's not like our *entire* culture is damaged. Iranians are an incredibly resilient people, and at this time, our culture like many cultures, is a mix of really great and healthy elements and not so healthy elements. It's important that we distinguish what's healthy and life-giving from what's not, so we can eliminate and replace the specific elements that really don't serve us.

Q10 How does the damage to our culture show up today?

Let me give you a few examples as broad brush strokes.

Okay. Because in trauma, people feel trapped and helpless to do anything about being violated – as I've said before – over time, traumatized people can come to see themselves as perpetual victims of aggression at the hands of unjust powerful forces that they bravely endure. This is the story of current Iran, and more generally Shi'a Islam, no? Of course, there's some truth to it, but one will never break out of this dynamic if that's one's primary view of reality. And I speak from a place of compassion and respect: the Iranian people as a whole deserve to move on to a more life-giving narrative. Do we always want to be struggling against the odds?

Again, trauma can set people up to act out victim-perpetrator cycles, meaning that people who identify themselves as victims can potentially become offenders. Our prisons are filled with people who, feeling victimized, felt justified committing crimes against others. How much of current Iranian culture justifies acts that perpetrate violence? Against women, against children, against Israelis, against so-called infidels, etc. etc. etc. *Ad nauseum.*

In other words, traumatic beliefs really disempower us – I want to drive this point home – because we see ourselves as victims; but alternatively, trauma can also *falsely empower* us by telling us that we are justified in victimizing others.

The collective disempowerment shows up, for example, in prevailing beliefs that humans are pitiful, sinful and powerless. We need some outside force to save us (from ourselves), whether that be the 12th Imam, some savior, or Artificial Intelligence. The preoccupation that some people have with conspiracy theories reflects these disempowered narratives. Trauma causes us to give away our power and our responsibility to become change agents who are capable of transforming our circumstances.

Another typical tell-tale sign of trauma is a kind of deep pessimism. One aspect of this pessimism is a mistrust in human goodness and nobility, and the belief that people are at core bad and they need to be controlled. This belief pervades virtually every aspect of culture from how we raise our children – for example, the belief that children need to be molded and punished to make them behave properly – to the insistence that people can't be trusted to be good or to learn, and therefore need an authoritarian political or religious order to manipulate and manage them.

Traumatized people tend to feel dissociated from their bodies, and unsafe in a world they see as being dangerous. They can start to view the entire material reality as being somehow corrupt and tarnished, and these beliefs really begin to permeate their spiritual orientation.

These are just a few examples of cultural damage – there are many more. What's interesting is that beliefs like these are radically different than those of our Iranian ancestors.

[Q11 Well, how do these trauma beliefs in our culture differ from those of our Iranian ancestors? What do you mean by that?](#)

One of the unusual characteristics about ancient Iranian culture is that we have traditionally been “lovers of humanity.” What I mean is that we had a very different view than those who saw humanity as being at core depraved or untrustworthy by nature – which I consider a trauma belief. Of course, our Iranian ancestors were well aware of our human foibles and capacity to be violent and self-serving, but they chose to focus on our cooperative and benevolent capabilities. Now, why do I say this? Our ancestor's favorable view of humanity was demonstrated by at least two things:

First, all human beings were considered as having a divinely ordained “freedom to choose.” We were encouraged to choose our thoughts, our words, and our actions towards the more progressive and generative path. This freedom came with responsibility, of course, to make these choices from a place of greater truth and clarity. We were not given a list of “thou shalt nots” but were encouraged to connect with our Higher Awareness ourselves and make our decisions after contemplation. We were trusted to learn our way to wholeness.

Every being was considered to have this innate freedom of choice and that's why we, unlike the majority of people of those time periods, did not support the practice of slavery. Nor did we traditionally oppress women or people of different faiths as we do now. This belief in humanity's nobility was in stark contrast with the more trauma-based mistrustful belief that humans needed to be controlled and manipulated.

Also, traditionally, our culture considered us as being partners with the Divine in establishing the right rule and paradise here on Earth. This paradise would come about as we evolved and aligned our thoughts, words, and actions. We were taught it would be up to all of us, and not some distant messiah promised to the desperate and the disempowered.

Another big contrast with the more trauma-based belief systems that consider material life as corrupted, is that traditionally, our ancestors actually celebrated the beauty, color, the sensual delights – the glory of material life on Earth as it was considered something good and wholesome. We can more easily resist taking the wrong path by living joyfully. Traditionally all our ceremonies, like the still-existing Nowruz traditions, were celebratory: We always found ways to rejoice and savor the gifts of the seasons, the natural world, and our connection to it.

Right now, we see that our Iranian culture has a kind of split personality, if I can use that term. It has within it, elements of both kinds of belief systems – the trauma-based as well as the more ancient, hereditary cultural DNA I just described.

Q12 Can you say more about the impact of “trauma-informed” beliefs? Why does it matter what we believe?

Our beliefs are just thoughts we repeatedly have that become habitual and automatic – there’s nothing necessarily true about what we believe when you think about it.

Our beliefs act like filters: they allow certain kinds of information to be absorbed, but not others. And humans tend to filter out anything that contradicts what we currently believe to be true. This has been called the Velcro-Teflon effect: Information/evidence from the outside that fits one’s pre-existing beliefs stick like Velcro, while those that don’t, glide right off like Teflon. In the end, we come to notice and see those things that confirm our beliefs and narratives, even when they may only be partial truths.

So, you might be asking “Why’s that important?” Because our beliefs and narratives become powerfully self-referential and self-reinforcing. What I mean is that our beliefs create experiences that just confirm what we believe to be true. What we focus on tends to become our reality, *self-fulfilling prophecies*: For example, if you believe that people are untrustworthy or that life is unfair, then you’re likely to continue to recreate experiences that confirm those beliefs and not see the opportunities that arise that may contradict those beliefs, nor see possibilities to change those circumstances.

Now, as you do that, you’re not only re-traumatizing yourself but you’re likely to perpetuate trauma into the future – you are likely to infect others with these trauma narratives, especially in the ways you raise and educate your children.

Q13 So, what’s the antidote to our cultural trauma?

Part of the antidote is individual renewal, but another is cultural renewal!

No culture is static. All vibrant cultures are alive and changing. We have to go through a process of consciously choosing. We have to assess what’s precious from what’s expendable – what no longer serves us. As we evolve, we have to decide which elements to keep – what cultural elements are precious and to be held close; AND also, be willing to get rid of those elements, as hard as that may feel, that are not life-enhancing and constructive – that are trauma-based and traumatizing. We may also create *new* cultural elements!

It's also important to realize that not all attempts at renewal are the same. After experiencing collective traumas, it's not unusual for communities to instinctively try to renew their culture in an attempt to refresh and heal themselves. But, not all attempts at renewal are reparative or healing.

In fact, historically many attempts at cultural renewal have been the basis for mass atrocities and human rights violations because the individuals who orchestrated these were themselves damaged people. *And that goes back to what I was telling you earlier about victims becoming perpetrators.* So, their attempts at renewal were not done from a healed place but from a

traumatized consciousness, and the results were disastrous. Hitler's Germany, Milošević's Serbia, Daesh, and even the authoritarian Islamic Resurgence in Iran are all examples of this instinctive drive to heal and renew culture.

So, what do we do? Well, to begin with, if you've experienced trauma and are still affected, you need to release any shame or stigma, please, and find yourself a good somatic therapist or other modality to help free yourself. There are a lot of good people out there now who can help.

That's very important work and I've spent years doing that work personally. In fact, I've got a book coming out on my own personal journey that may be helpful to others on theirs.

Once you've done that work, it's important to come together collectively and make the necessary social and cultural changes. My expertise is in this next step, which is to focus on developing people's capacity to exercise leadership and become change agents and social entrepreneurs. The muscle I help build is the capacity to step out of any story of limitation and victimization, for people to see themselves as powerful creators in their lives and be able to help evolve their communities. These are the people more likely to exercise ethical leadership in ways that uplift humanity and repair culture and not retraumatize themselves and others. But again, healing is the first step and I offer a step beyond that, to teach people to step into their leadership capacity.

Thanks again for the gift of your time and the opportunity to share my views today. If you'd like to continue the conversation, I'm excited to have you connect with me via my website: www.sousanabadian.com And if you'd like, you can subscribe to receive my newsletter to learn about upcoming opportunities to enhance your capacities. After all, we are the ones we've been waiting for.