



Eric Wolterstorff: Social Trauma

Relational Implicit February 2012

Dr. Eric Wolterstorff's specialty is social trauma, meaning the impacts of threats, disasters, deprivation and violent conflict on the capacity of societies to adapt to the world, regulate and nourish themselves, and develop. His work is based in the intersection of psychology, trauma, culture and group behavior. Wolterstorff studied body-based approaches to healing trauma and added to Peter Levine's body of work. In his dissertation, he describes relationships between the neuropsychology of memory and trauma in individuals and groups. He has applied his methods to families and organizations impacted by trauma. Wolterstorff is currently writing a textbook on social trauma for an international relations series, and completing a proposal for a ten-year national healing project for Rwanda. Over the past fifteen years, Wolterstorff has led professional trainings and consulted in the United States and Europe.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Relational Implicit* project (<http://relationalimplicit.com>).

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge Prengel: This is a conversation with Eric Wolterstorff. Hi Eric.

Eric Wolterstorff: Hi Serge.

S P: So. You're interested in social trauma. What does that mean?

E W: Social trauma is concerned with how societies: looking at what are the dynamics at work in societies that have been subjected to traumatic events or extreme, sustained stress. So: war, natural disasters and so on.

S P: Hmm. And you apply a framework that's not just society, but you're interested also in theories and systems. So there's something that's more of a preoccupation that therapists can relate to.

E W: Let me give it a little context for the work right here. So psychoanalysts a number of times in the last century talked about social trauma, or in particular cultural trauma. Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, before the First World War broke out, talked about this. And before the Second World War in 1939 he wrote *Moses and Monotheism*, which explored this idea more: what happens when you traumatize a culture and how is that trauma transmitted across generation. My interest came when I read a book by a psychoanalyst Immanuel Velikovsky, who many people know from *Worlds in Collision* and talking about early religions, that much of early religious writings were accounts of global catastrophes. And he had some very interesting ideas. When I read his book, *Mankind in Amnesia*, I thought "I'll bet these things can be modeled." I got very excited about that. That was in 1995 and all of my work since that has been efforts to model and create tools to understand and work with societies subjected to stresses and traumas. Now, that's meant two things. Theoretically, I went out and got my PhD, which was interdisciplinary. My dissertation was a speculative model of how groups respond to threats, and I was looking at the neuropsychology literature, the traumatology literature, the family therapy literature and a lot of work with social theory and work

with social insects, and how to model large scale behavior. So that was the theoretical path. Now there are a lot of people with bad theories, and a lot of people with good theories that don't have a practical application in the world. So I took what were to become these models, and I asked "How would this affect individuals who have been traumatized? So I applied the models to individual therapy and I got really good results. I trained some other people, and I began to apply these models to families and other people, and again—this has been a lot of work: about five years for each of these things—and had a good deal of success. Then I founded a crisis consulting firm that began to work with businesses and other organizations going through traumatic events. For example, working in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, creating tools to work at that level. The past three years, I have begun to turn my attention to national problems. Like problems of healing in Rwanda, and various things like that.

S P: So you started from an interest in big crises and social trauma. Went into an understanding of it that you found ways to actually apply to individuals, to family systems, to groups so in a way the model was scalable and verified by the results that you were obtaining. And then applied it in these different circumstances.

E W: Exactly.

S P: So, from this place, how do we use an operational definition of trauma that we can use to connect people from the trauma they're familiar with in a small group to the larger kind of social trauma that you're dealing with.

E W: Okay. Well, where we're going to be in a few minutes, the moment that we're getting to, is an ability to look at a society around a particular issue and see how subgroups form in a society, and how to work with each of these subgroups. That's what we're going to be in in about ten or fifteen minutes. So let's walk ourselves through a series of three steps to get there. I'm presuming that most people listening to this are quite familiar with individual responses to stresses or traumas and healing processes and so on. So, when we work as a therapist with a client, there's some degree of trust or safety within the relationship; and we do some form of exposure therapy, with an adequate amount of skill, so we can help that traumatic experience to integrate. And there should be a lessening of symptoms and so on.

S P: Mhm.

E W: Now there are different classes of traumas. One class includes populations in which a number of traumatic events happen in what I call in-groups. So this would be traumas that happen in a family setting, or in a school setting, or a summer camp setting, where we can't get away. So, look at the territory of Judith Herman's captivity drama, or Leon Terr's Type 2 Trauma. We store the memory of these events differently, which is to say we store the memories of the different roles people played who were present. So, concretely, there's a family. Let's say in the family there's a father beating the son, and the mother doesn't intervene, goes into another room, and the little sister is hiding and afraid. This has happened a million times. So if we're working with the young man, and let's say this happened in a regular way or a repeated way, he's going to be storing, this boy who's grown up to be a man, is going to be storing not his experiences as a Victim, but he's going to be storing what he imagined were the experiences of, what was going on inside his father, the Perpetrator, inside his mother who left, why did she leave? His little sister who's going to be watching, do nothing. These are all stored, and the way that they show up as symptoms is that when

we create these traumatic reenactments in our life we recruit people around us who present these various roles. This is a variant of the projective identification mechanism. So let's stay here for a moment before we go on, because there's a very big problem that happens in the field. Which is, many of us are familiar with the problem that we can get therapists who identify as wonderful, healing caretakers and clients who come in as Victims and get caught in a loop where there's an unconscious collusion that the therapist is competent and that client is incompetent and they can get stuck in this thing. The field has talked about this for the last fifty years. But there's a second level of collusion that shows up even when we solve that—we solve that problem when we offer to empower our clients and we help them to grow in the relationship so the client can integrate not only the Victim aspect of what happened to them, but also they can be empowered and integrate a potential Savior aspect. So this is really good, but one of the things that is quite typical in my experience, when therapists are working with clients around traumas, is that the Bystander and the Perpetrator are seen as "bad" and we lock them out of the office. I've had clients that could only work if the door was locked or if they could only work if the door was open. Because we've got to keep the Bystander and the Perpetrator away, then we're in enough safety to do the work. That's fine if our first two steps in working are to integrate the Savior role and the Victim role. But if we stop there, then the client has still not integrated the Bystander or the Perpetrator roles. And they will continue with this form of projective identification and enter into relationships like that are traumatic reenactments, which can really be a shame. All of this work and the most dangerous of the symptoms remain, the ones that most likely lead to retraumatization.

S P: Just let me summarize what I'm so hearing. So since we think about a trauma situation in a group setting, there're several actors, several roles, and all of these roles are included in some form in the memory of the Victim. And that true healing is about having a resolution that integrates all the roles as opposed to simply dealing with the Victim.

E W: Exactly. And I'd like to add two things. One is that that perhaps it wasn't the boy who grew up to be a man who came into the therapy, perhaps it was the sister or the mother who comes in with Bystander trauma. Or perhaps the father comes in because he's tired of tearing his family apart and he can't control his rage attacks. So the client could come in with any of the roles, but typically, the Victim role. One other thing that can happen here that can be a really unfortunate, insidious, side effect, is if we're working with someone who's had a lot of trauma and we're working them over a period of time, and that person is in a relationship. Probably, before they came in to see us as therapists, they were projecting on their partner the Savior, Bystander and Perpetrator. Now they're coming in to get therapy and we don't know any better as therapists and we'll work with the Savior and the Victim roles. By doing that and by empowering our client and also as therapists holding the Savior role, as time goes on we reduce the Savior transference the client is having onto their partner. Which leaves their partner only with Bystander and Perpetrator, transference.

S P: Mhm

E W: And so it's a very old story that people can come into therapy, they're getting work to heal, and then they discover all of these problems in their marriage or with their partner. Of course, many times the problems are quite true. But what could be happening is that actually we're pulling away, sort of stealing the positive transference with the partner and leaving only the negative transference—nothing has objectively changed in the marriage but the marriage is now being torn apart because our client who only has negative transference has left their partner. And they could lose the greatest support in their life. So this is an implication.

S P: It's a very nice way to summarize the unintended consequences, the reverse consequences of the therapist as a Savior is to actually steal that part of the projection that the client would have, say, on their spouse or on a resource in their environment. And then weakens their environment.

E W: Exactly. Now, this takes us to the second step. So this basic dynamic, though not talked about in terms of PTSD was talked about for decades by the family therapy specialists and in that literature. If we take these four post-traumatic roles of Savior/Victim/Bystander/Perpetrator, they correlate very, very nicely, and for a very good reason, with, for example that Bowen in *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* calls the caretaker, the over-functioning one. So the Savior becomes the Caretaker, the Victim becomes the Identified Patient, the Bystander becomes the Distancer (the person in the family that leaves the room whenever there's tension); quite often the father. And the Perpetrator becomes the Outsider, who could be the black sheep in the family. And so these patterns after enough repeated traumas, in traumatic environments regardless of the original Victim, Savior, Perpetrator or Bystander, can be perpetuated in family systems as habits.

S P: So people learn their roles.

E W: Right. So that's step two. So now we take the next step, which is, societies do the same thing, and Bowen talked about this. And in many ways my work is about trying to go out and rigorously model what this next step is of how this dynamic shows in societies and what we can do about it. So that's the set up for where my work is.

S P: So in a way you're going to take us through these four roles, showing how they happen at a societal level.

E W: Right. So let's just start with the easiest, you know we can talk about over-coupling and under-coupling. A threat happens in a society, let's say when Hurricane Katrina hit NOLA, that impacted the country as a whole. Or right here (in New York) at the anniversary this weekend of the 9/11 attacks. So with the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, when that occurred, in both those cases, we responded as individuals all across the country. So the initial response is an individual response. So our response could be any of five responses are (including the four roles from before). We've got the four responses, plus we've got "rational", which means that people respond to the threat appropriately (as opposed to what I'm about to list are the other possibilities). The Savior response is to run and try and help. Now, that's usually a good response, but it's not *necessarily* a good response. Because if we have a critically important job, and we stop doing to run and try and solve another problem, we can create more problems. For example, if an ambulance drives crazily through traffic to try and save someone, and they cause four wrecks along the way, they've cause more damage than have solved by saving the one person.

S P: So very clearly an example of how something that's normally useful, to be a Savior, can actually, if in a jerk reaction, not be in reality and therefore be dysfunctional.

E W: Right. And Savors will tend to become fixated on one or a handful of problems, of threats, and what's good is that they are working on a problem. And they're helping society by solving that problem. But they will tend to lose the ability to assess how important their threat is related to other threats. So, there's a very big example of this happening right now with the Tea Party talking about debt and the long-term financial stability of the United States. They're talking about other

things too, but let's pick that one theme. That's true, the debt is a threat. But how do we balance that against the need for federal deficit spending to kick start the economy? How do we make trade-offs? We could list eight or ten other things that might be as or more important than the debt. And when we become fixated on a particular position, the question becomes "Does this problem need to be solved?" The answer's yes, but that's the wrong question. We have to weigh, we have to prioritize where we spend our resources. We have to do that in a balanced, prioritized way. And when we get stuck in the Savior subgroup, we can kind of have blinders on, and we can over-prioritize our own cause and under-prioritize others.

S P: Yeah.

E W: So that's the mildest of this sort of subgroup trance.

S P: I like by the way when you call it a trance. That feels very much like a way to capture the fact that it's not focused on reality, but it's something intervening to filter reality.

E W: Right. So when behavioral economists talk about risk aversion, for example. Then they're talking about how people have the propensity to attach too much importance to a risk or too little importance. I don't think I phrased that accurately, but if the person making a decision did the math, then they would probably make a different choice than the one their instinct or their first assessment tells them to do. They'd be inappropriately cautious or inappropriately risky. That's like what happens in the Savior trance. They apply too much weight to the particular thing they're focused on. So, when we have more stress in a system, then a second group forms, a second subgroup forms, which is the Victim subgroup. And the Victim subgroup feels that they're unable to solve the problem, but they feel the problem is very important. So they cast themselves at problems that are much larger than they can solve. This is the typical profile of a non-profit organization or an NGO. They take on problems that are immense. We're going to solve, you know, we're going to stop malaria in Africa. Well, for the Gates Foundation, that's probably an appropriate goal in terms of size. But for anyone else we're overwhelmed by attempting to "boil the ocean," as the phrase goes. So the Victim subgroup tends to feel overwhelmed. There are too many things. If we listened to Pacifica Radio, for example. (which is an activist, left wing radio station, or radio network), they're going to be talking about corruption and problems all day long. And one can get more and more anxious. And actually lose capacity to do something by living too long purely in that world of what's going wrong, because it can be overwhelming.

S P: Yeah, so you're not talking about Victim just in the sense of a factual, this person was the Victim of this, or that sort of thing. But you're talking about a role where there is re-traumatization by focusing on things that are impossible to solve. Therefore constantly recreating the sense of powerlessness.

E W: Right, that's right. So I'm going jump the punch line: If somebody says "what do we do about these trances?" —one of the things we do is that we attempt to recruit people from one subgroup into the next. And they can only move one subgroup at a time, as will be very obvious. But we can move Victims to Saviors, and one of the ways we can move Victims to Saviors is instead of trying to solve fifty problems, or track fifty problems, which is overwhelming, narrow your lens down and accomplish *something*. Though it's smaller, accomplish something. Because that accomplishment is going to be helping everybody. So they can move from Victim to Savior.

S P: Beautiful.

E W: When there's even more stress or trauma in the system, we start to move into the passive responses. So the next one is the Bystander response. And it's can be expressed as, "I don't know what to do." So people stop wanting to hear about the threat; it's too upsetting. You talk about global warming with a lot of people and there's often just this shrug, "What can I do? Want me to not drive my car? What difference is that going to make?" And there's this sense of collapse. It's like, "This thing has momentum and I can't do anything about it at all." This characterizes most peoples responses about most threats—which is different from a Rational position. It can look similar but it's completely different. The Rational person is paying attention to what all the various threats are. They do their best to prioritize, and then they put their resources into the priority. And the other things they listen, and they know the threat is real, they don't turn away from the bad news, they say, "Right, but we're prioritizing *here*." Whereas the Bystander has very little capacity. They say "I don't want to hear about it." Thus, they can never prioritize.

S P: But you know, in all fairness, we live in large societies where the decision making is something that can feel remote and hard to grasp. For example, a political decision process can be very alienating. So it's understandable that most people can feel in a position of Bystander in front of things that are pretty big crises.

E W: So the great challenge, exactly, is to mobilize this passive part of our culture, this socially or politically passive part of our culture, to find little, tiny steps that we can take to become more involved. So in the 1980's, there was this very strange conflation between picking up litter and helping to solve environmental problems like the destruction of rainforests. People said things like "Yeah, you know, I'm really concerned about things like pollution and the rainforest, so I'm going to join a litter campaign." Now, because I was educated about this (the environmental cause was big for me in the 1980's), I found that conflation childish. And it took me years to understand that that was actually a very, very good intervention because it took people one step forward: I can clean my street!

S P: Yep.

E W: One step at a time. Then, when people take one step, they're going to feel a sense of accomplishment. Then they take a second step, then they take a third step, and they do more and more. At a certain point they start to get hungry and learn more—and they get overwhelmed, and you've successfully moved them to the Victim stage! Now you've got somebody who cares and they're an activist and now they feel overwhelmed. Now we going to help move them from Victim to Savior.

S P: And I really appreciate it, by the way, in the way you're explaining it, you know, like a funnel, where people can go from one group to the next and it makes more and more sense talking about it.

E W: Yes. The last and most severely traumatized subgroup show up as the Perpetrator subgroup. These are people who feel as if there is no hope. So they break the social contract. So after Hurricane Katrina, these are people who loot—there was probably looting after 9/11, though I imagine that that's not part of the narrative. The narrative is we came together as New Yorkers. But there had to have been some looting. In New Orleans there was a lot of looting. In Africa, Sudan couldn't work out its problems between the south and the north. And we had massive perpetration

going on. So the solution at that point was to say “Let’s split the country in two.” And so the Perpetrators can actually become their own group (the north). And that’s one way that we sort of deal with Perpetrators: We expel them. And then it’s no longer our problem. But we can’t do that as often anymore, as we become ever more interconnected. So, for example, with global warming, we can’t expel anybody. We have to find a way to work on that problem together. If the Chinese did everything perfect, and if the United States continues to burn coal (I mean, we consume 25% of the world’s total yearly energy consumption), the United States alone could drive the whole global warming trend over the century. The United States could be perfect and somehow become a zero carbon society, and the Chinese, alone, could drive global warming over the edge. So we can’t actually push the Perpetrators out with big, interconnected problems. We don’t have that option, because we’re in a closed system. So we have to figure out how to integrate these people who’ve been so severely traumatized that they’ve broken the social contract and they say, “I don’t care about the threat. I don’t care if the ship goes down. I’m going to get the best raft that I can and steal any provisions and let the rest of you die.” We’re losing that option as a species as we despoil the planet. So we have to find out how to engage with the people in this role and create a dialogue so that we can move them to the Bystander role where they’re not actually Perpetrators against other people. Then they’ll not be willing to help but they’ll stop doing damage.

S P: Mhm. So, I assume that when you say that it’s not necessarily through gentle persuasion but it can also be a form of societal rule and enforcing rules. The same way we can force Perpetrators not to commit crimes by having police and justice and so on.

E W: Yes (laughs). Yes, yes. This could be a very long conversation. But, so the big answer is “Yes.” Another thing that it is important to remember with this, is that it doesn’t really serve to be only be right about what the problem is—so to know what the factors are that lead to global warming. It doesn’t only serve to be right about the solution—if you’re sitting on the answer to a kind of algae that can create as much oil as petroleum. It doesn’t matter if it’s only you. Enough people in society have to have that opinion in order to recognize the problem, or the a solution, and for people start to embrace the solution. So there has to be enough agreement in order to make the thing happen. Which sometimes means forcing other people’s behavior.

S P: Mhm, mhm. You know, as we are coming to the end of the conversation, I think it will be very clear to people who listen, this, that we’ve barely begun to scratch the surface of social trauma. But I think you’ve done a wonderful job in setting a background for it. So is there something else that you might want to add as a transition to people who want to know more about this.

E W: Yeah. I guess the big lesson is, it’s not that hard to learn a basic set of tools to be able to realize what’s going on and to figure out ways to help. And if you do that, you can really empower yourself to have much more of an impact on making a change in the world. We’re are expanding a website (shiftingculture.com) dedicated to social trauma, and resources to help. We will provide, refer or link to resources for you: other readings, explanations, all of this material is going to be there for you with avenues to learn more.

S P: Beautiful. Thank you, Eric.

This conversation was transcribed by Alex Curtis.

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