

The couple as social microcosm: Some reflections on the impact of loss and difference on reparation in South Africa today

Andrea Hill and Sylvia Poss

Abstract

This paper addresses the question of reparation in South Africa. The central hypothesis is that in South Africa current traumas or losses such as the recent the xenophobic attacks may activate a 'shared unconscious phantasy' of irreparable damage inflicted by Apartheid on the collective psyche of our nation, thereby blocking constructive emotional engagement. A brief couple therapy intervention by a white therapist with a black couple is used as a 'micocosm' to explore this hypothesis. Specifically, the impact of an extreme current loss when earlier losses have been sustained, the impact of racial difference on transference and countertransference, and the possible impact of a shared unconscious phantasy on emotional engagement is considered. It is suggested that facing the actual damage caused by Apartheid, as well as exploring our own unconscious phantasies of irreparable damage in times of loss could move us to a more conscious and productive grieving; a working through of the depressive position.