

"Unrest" at UCT: Psychological sequelae of police action

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Introduction

In the last week of April 1987, police reacted to student demonstrations at the University of Cape Town by invading the campus. This paper explores the psychological implications of police action for those students who were involved as victims and/or witnesses of this violence.

During the past two decades there have been intermittent clashes between police and protesting students at UCT. The protests have traditionally been confined to the grass embankment below campus and above the freeway. Over the years an informal protocol developed - police armed with sjamboks and teargas guns would arrive soon after the demonstrators sat down with their banners. The police usually grouped on the opposite side of the freeway. A period of negotiation with student leaders or university authorities would follow. Students would usually refuse to leave the area, a warning to disperse would be issued and students would leave the area. Police would withdraw soon afterwards. On the majority of such occasions no violence would be used by either side. On a few occasions teargas, batons or quirts were used to force the students to disperse or a number of students were arrested. There have been exceptions to this pattern - notably the student march to Athlone in 1976 and the dispersing of a demonstration in 1985, where police chased students using teargas and quirts against protesters.

Seen in a wider context of police action against opponents of Apartheid, action against students at "white" universities has always been relatively restrained and within the limits of the law. Among students a widely held assumption was that as long as you stuck to the informal protocol, you would not get hurt or arrested. It is because of this tradition that the police action during April 1987 came as a surprise to the students and staff of UCT, and the psychological sequelae among students have to be understood within this context.

On Friday, 24 April, students demonstrated in solidarity with striking South African Railway and Harbour Workers Union (SARHWU) members. This demonstration took place on the grass embankment and was dispersed by police with teargas. On Monday, students prepared to demonstrate again after a mass meeting. For the first time police came onto campus. A helicopter hovered metres above faculty buildings, police vehicles drove around the campus, the library and lecture theatres were invaded by armed police and groups of students and staff were beaten and chased. A few students were bitten by police dogs and at least ten were wounded when police ambushed a small group of students and opened fire with shot guns. On Tuesday approximately 1000 students and staff held a placard demonstration on the embankment. Police closed the freeway to traffic and after about an hour of peaceful protest, stormed the demonstrators from behind and dispersed the crowd using sjamboks. 18 people were arrested and at least 9 were injured seriously enough to require medical attention.

Psychological implications of the "unrest" on campus

"It wasn't just a physical invasion on campus, it was actually an emotional invasion as well" (quote from student)

A violent confrontation must be understood as having psychological implications for those involved. Psychologists and psychiatrists utilise the notion of a "post-traumatic stress disorder" to describe the effects of external stressful experiences on individuals who witness or are the victims of these events (DSM-III, 1980). Research on stress related to violence has focussed on areas like the effect of war on soldiers, the effects of natural disasters, and the psychological implications of civil unrest on adults and children (Gibson, 1986). The post-traumatic stress disorder has also been applied to individual experiences of trauma like rape, physical assault, detention and torture.

In South Africa there has been an increasing focus on the psychological effects of the present political crisis on the people of this country. Research arising from academics and community organisations (involved in providing support for the victims) have focussed on two main areas: the effects of violence in the townships on adults and children (for e.g. Straker, 1986); and on the effects of detention and torture (for e.g. Foster, Davis and Sandler, 1986; Detainee Counselling Services, 1985). The term post-traumatic stress disorder has been used in both these contexts to describe the psychological effects of these experiences.

The events on campus are clearly an example of a stressful event which brings with it psychological implications for those involved. Despite the fact that it was an acute example of violence in an increasingly violent society (and seems irrelevant in the context of experiences of township residents), highlighting the students' experiences can only add to mental health workers' understanding of these issues.

Interviews were carried out with 15 students (3 women, 12 men) involved as witnesses or victims. In order to tabulate quantitative measures, checklists (based on categories drawn from the post-traumatic stress disorder) were also utilized. Of the sample, 8 students were physically assaulted (4 shot, 4 beaten with sjamboks).

Emotional responses at the time

During the attacks on students, emotions experienced ranged from shock or surprise (reported by 73%), to panic and fear (reported by 53%), to feelings of powerlessness (73%) and a predominant experience of anger and frustration (87%). Students who had been involved in demonstrations before were expecting some response from the police, but many were shocked at the extent of the violence and the fact that the police had actually come onto campus. This was clearly related to a shattering of expectations concerning the informal protocol of action between police and UCT students:

I could not believe that they'd actually come on to campus. It was a really peaceful protest. I was really shocked by the whole thing.

What I was amazed at was that they went as far as they did, and that evoked the horror ...

Feelings of surprise/shock were related to the nature of the attacks, that is an unexpected attack from behind on Monday, and the use of plain-clothed police on Tuesday, for example:

I was probably confused. It was completely unexpected. If I had been taunting one of the "boere", maybe I would have had very different emotions. But the fact is I was just sitting there peacefully and the next thing I was running without any time to think ...

Together with shock, was the experience of fear, specifically related to anticipating detention and arrest. After the initial shock and fear/panic response, the overriding experience of students was that of anger, outrage and frustration. For many, the experience of anger was associated with a feeling of powerlessness:

I felt a total helplessness. I'd say that was my predominant feeling the whole time ... We were a group of students who were witnessing something that was hurting us. We were innocent and the people being hurt were innocent. Yet there was nothing we could do.

I felt really powerless - that was the major thing. Here they come cruising onto our campus, armed to the teeth and there's nothing you can do about it. There's a complete lack of power as basically we were experiencing the end point of state power.

The feeling of not being able to respond, or to defend oneself against the greater power of the police, was a particularly frustrating and negative experience. Many people felt a strong desire to protect themselves by responding in some active way to the police. The desire to respond aggressively was reported by 73% of the sample and expressed as follows:

In the heat of the moment, most people who were there wanted to get back at the police ... I'm sure if we were armed at that point there would have been a lot of shit !

If I had a gun, would I have bumped that guy off ? I actually think I would have, which is kind of worrying ...

Post-stress response

Most students, even those who had been through similar experiences, found that the confrontations on campus had some effect on their daily routine, feelings and behaviour, for the days immediately following. All of the responses reported are present within the psychiatric formulation of the post-traumatic stress disorder (DSM-III, 1980).

- Recurring images of the event/s and preoccupation with thinking about them was reported by 73% of the sample:

I woke up this morning thinking about it. It's been coming back to me during the day. It's one thing hearing about it and seeing it on a screen, but to actually be in it, is something different.

There is this one policeman I keep seeing - short, fat character - his whole face fills his visor and his nose pushes up against it. This image just keeps recurring.

Preoccupation with the events was also illustrated by the desire to verbalize them and to express what they were feeling (reported by 73%):

I haven't talked about anything else for a week and that freaks me out as well. You just can't escape it. You can't escape thinking about it, talking about it, dreaming about it. Everything is related to it ... the horror, the violence.

That night, I specifically made a point of bringing up the issue. It had been bottled up inside of me all day.

- Lack of concentration was reported by 93%. The compulsive thinking about the events was cited as one reason for this:

On Monday (after the Friday events), I had to give a tut and I found it unbelievably difficult. I found that even while I talked I just had these images of the police and the teargas.

I spent 15 hours writing an 8 page essay and everytime I would get over one section, then suddenly this whole thing would come flooding back ...

Lack of concentration was also related to a general lack of interest in their normal routine, including work and recreation. 53% of the sample reported feelings of disorientation and experiencing their daily routine as irrelevant, for example:

Everything's changed. It's as if I've been in a tumble dryer. I feel a total lack of direction, of meaning. I'm not what I normally am. I feel as if something inside me has been severed. It's a feeling of detachment. Everything just loses significance. I can't find interest in anything.

Everything else seems more important than your own life. Your normal life becomes small and irrelevant by comparison. I can't believe that people are just normally going to lectures. It just feels bizarre because everything feels upside down.

There is a feeling of incredible disparity in terms of your lifestyle. What am I doing here? Being on campus, I just could not carry on working. I could not help thinking that I should be doing something else, rather than studying.

- Anxiety related responses, like tension, nervousness, irritability and restlessness were experienced by two-thirds of the sample:

I would not have noticed, but I've been told that I've been quite impatient with people, arguing over details that I wouldn't have normally argued about.

Last night my housemate said "you're behaving so strangely". I had been through a crisis earlier in the year and she said it was like how I was then.

For some, the irritability was related to feelings of frustration with individuals, on campus and off, who were not concerned with the political situation in the country:

I work at a restaurant. I look at the people around and I just want to go up to them and shake them. There is an impatience with them - they must open up their eyes.

For four interviewees, the heightened anxiety stimulated an increased use of substances like cannabis, tobacco or alcohol, in order to relax. Exaggerated startle response was also common (reported by 53%). Interviewees described the experience of being easily startled by sudden noises, especially those sounding like shots (e.g. car back-firing):

I'm like a live wire. The slightest thing sets me off into this feeling of panic and terror.

I can understand how people get shell shocked. I've almost dropped on my stomach a couple of times.

- Sleep disturbances, related to increased arousal, including nightmares, late night and early morning insomnia and sleeping too much, was reported by 73% of the sample (two of these were injury related).

- Emotional lability and mood disturbances were reported by a third of the sample. Most interviewees described an intensification of their emotions. For some there was a depressed mood, while others described emotional fluctuations:

I have been feeling really depressed. I don't know if its a function of actually being hit. I just felt, in a sense, an emotional mutilation ... I think it stems from not being able to respond - from helplessness.

- Fantasies, particularly violent ones, related to responding to the police, were reported by a third of the sample and were often shared with friends:

I said to a friend today "I think I should buy a gun". Of course it was a fantasy !

I would love to see that helicopter blown out of the sky !

Political consciousness

They try to beat your beliefs out of you. In fact, it doesn't work. They just intensify those feelings. They politicize you even more. (quote from student)

The experience on campus was not only traumatic, but one which precipitated changes in individual's political belief systems. These changes were strongly related to the feelings of anger and powerlessness experienced at the time. Students felt that they could now identify with the experiences of oppressed people in the country, which lead to increased support for their struggles:

There are people living in the townships like this all the time ... I keep remembering that moment when I saw those "boere" coming towards me - that's how it must be living in the townships, walking out and seeing the "boere" and wondering if they've come for you.

What was happening here is just a small part of what's happening in the whole country ... What we experienced is what a lot of people in this country experience.

For once I felt like I was really on their side. I feel more for their cause now.

The emotions of anger and the desire to respond to the police actions, also facilitated a new understanding of violence. Being the victims of a violent action allowed them to understand, not merely in a theoretical sense, but in an empathetic sense, how being violated can lead to the desire to defend oneself or to respond in a violent way. This personalised understanding of violence stimulated in all interviewees, the need to re-evaluate their attitudes towards violence within the political struggle:

I just felt really angry ... I still don't think that I'm capable of picking up a stone and hurling it, but I can really understand and identify with people who did feel that because I was starting to feel really violent at the way they were treating us.

You begin to understand why people do turn to violence and that's something I haven't been able to justify before. I'm beginning to understand more ... not rationally, but emotionally I can understand why.

I try to cling to ideas of non-violence but when things like this happen, it becomes realistically difficult to hope for that. It has resulted in a narrowing of choice. I still don't see violence as being the answer but there's difficulty in seeing anything else.

This kind of thing shocks one out of being academic about violence !

Following both the emotions experienced at the time as well as the disturbances in normal life following the events, changes in political attitudes and motivation for action were reported by 100% of the sample. For those already concerned about the political situation, the experience spurred them on to greater involvement:

On Friday, I came very close to just chucking up everything and getting seriously involved. But I think it is better if I stay and finish my studies. It's forcing me to realize that I can't just sit around ...

It's had an effect on my motivation, not my direction. I've been kind of involved here and there, but now I'm really far more keen to actually get involved with leadership and planning. It's too psychologically clean to say: "the boy was beaten and now he's ready to fight". But the motivation is certainly there to a larger degree than it was before.

Those not involved in organisations or who were doubtful of their political position, were motivated to feel more opposed to the present status quo and to desire more involvement in challenging it:

To a large extent I had been fence-sitting before. Now there is no question about which side I'm on.

I'm taking sides now. I've always been pretty 'blase' about it: "It's not my struggle. I'm just a 'whitey' on the sidelines." But now I realize that the abuse of police of their power is not only directed at blacks, but at the community as a whole, at any one who challenges them.

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The central psychological aspect within these changes or reinforcements in attitude, appears to be the personalisation of intellectual ideas which was inherent in the experience:

On a fairly intellectual level I've felt the same way up here that I feel now very much down here. Whereas before it was based on ideology, it is now very much a gut feeling

You grow up in a liberal family, school ... one believes in things without actually believing in them. But when you're confronted with the reality, with things one has only heard about, you suddenly have to believe in what you profess to believe. It's far more real ... I don't believe I really had integrity before.

Associated with these changes in political attitudes, was the effect on students' attitudes towards the forces of "law and order". Extreme negative feelings towards the police and state authorities emerged. Any credibility or legitimacy which the police might have had was seriously undermined:

A month ago, I would have said perhaps that troop assistance is needed in the townships. Now I feel that it is a menace there, because I know what they do.

I've always had a fairly negative view of them, but I suppose I'm waking up to the fact that they can really take the law into their own hands ... this has certainly come a long way towards strengthening my negative feelings.

I never knew that the police did incite violence until I saw it. They were really being provocative ... They can't tell me that they're here to keep the peace. I just won't believe that anymore.

The experience served not only to undermine the police as peace-keepers or protectors, but to construct them as the enemy:

The perception of the police as enemy is emerging for me. Now I'm identifying them as the enemy. I'm taking sides.

Conclusion

It has been shown that events on campus, April 1987, where students were the victims and/or witnesses of violent confrontations, had implications for their psychological well-being and political consciousness. Many of the characteristics of a post-traumatic stress disorder were present in some form for all those interviewed.

It is evident that the emotions of anger, powerlessness, fear and shock experienced at the time, as well as the post-stress effects, had implications for the attitudinal schema of those interviewed. Liberal and radical views about the S.A. situation were reinforced, and motivation to actively challenge the status quo was reinforced or invoked.

Students were stimulated to re-evaluate their attitudes towards violence as a means of political struggle and defence against police action. The overriding attitudinal outcome was an increased support and/or understanding of violent action within the present political context.

Negative attitudes towards the police were stimulated or increased in intensity. On many levels, the direct experience of state violence personalised the political situation and experiences of the oppressed people of this country for those interviewed.

It is the process of personalisation, the interpretation of theoretical/academic knowledge into emotional experience, that can be seen as central to the changes in attitude and belief structures reported here. In a real sense, the actions of the police did not have the effect of silencing student protest. Rather they served to intensify this site of resistance.

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