



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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A cultural psychological study of the narratives of the ex-politically persecuted people of Albania: Toward a national narrative.

Relevance and contribution to the field: This research fostered the emergence of rich and detailed narratives and group conversations in the participants' language. In the context of Albania's transition to a more democratic state and the global attention on restitution and apology to oppressed groups, the researcher hopes that the study will contribute to a model for national healing. The study led to insight regarding culturally based thinking and the cultural psychological interpretation of stress. The study's real contribution, however, will be in its benefit to the ex-politically persecuted. Participants indicated that telling their stories helped to relieve their stress, but they were more interested in having the collective story told outside Albania and specifically, to the U.S. government and to human rights organizations, because they feel that their human rights are still being violated. As the title of the dissertation suggests, the ultimate goal is a national narrative.

Approach and research methodology: The major approach was cultural psychology and the qualitative methodology used was participatory inquiry in the hermeneutic tradition (Herda, 1990). This methodology actively engages the participants with the researcher in the research process and focuses on understanding as a basis for action.

Although the dissertation required only 16 participants, the IREX grant allowed for expansion to 50. Individual interviews were analyzed for common themes that became the basis for group conversations. Journal writing, reflection, discussion, and informal research conversations were part of the research process. The researcher's husband Asllan Murati was a cultural guide and interpreter for all formal and informal interviews and group conversations. Approximately 60 informal research conversations were held in addition to the more formal meetings. The participants gave the researcher approximately 20 books that they had written and published about their experiences, as well as written statements, journals, poems, and videotapes. Two weeks in Kosovo also provided a rich context for observing the cultural traditions, recording supplementary narratives, and practicing the language. Research sites included Tirana, Shkodra, Mamurras, Pogradec, and Adriatik. Participants were included to represent the north and south of Albania, male and female, immigrants from Kosovo, and persons persecuted at various stages of the regime. One proposed site—Durrës—was not included since several participants there declined the invitation to be interviewed.

Research findings and preliminary conclusions:

1. **The class war continues.** Besides people's lives, political persecution in Albania took away education, religion, property, the right to bury and honor the dead, a chance for marriage, pensions, security for old age, health, and other things. Enver Hoxha's regime created two classes: communist and anti-communist. This class war continues. The ex-persecuted people feel isolated, separate, and hopeless about their future and the future of their children. Most of them are living at a level of what North Americans would call extreme poverty, and some are still living in bunkers and wooden sheds. They feel that no one believes and no one cares. They feel that they have never been honored for their suffering, not even in the period of democracy. Some ex-persecuted people were given money and apartments during the democratic period, but many more were not compensated. They feel that their class continues to be discriminated against. Specifically, they feel that:
 - their children are being prevented from entering the university;
 - they and their children have been unjustly fired from their positions;
 - their property, or a reasonable substitute, is not being returned to them;
 - the government is not telling them the location of the remains of their loved ones who were executed during the regime, even though this information is available;
 - the government has not paid them the amount promised to them on their "value cards;"
 - they and their families have continuing medical conditions untreated for financial reasons, conditions resulting from their imprisonment or internment; and
 - their pensions and other areas are targets of discrimination.

2. Relationship with the U.S. (Albanians use the term “America”). The ex-politically persecuted people describe a love and devotion to democracy and freedom. They never gave up hope that America would overturn the dictatorship and free them from the prisons and internment camps. They suffered for freedom; they suffered for America. A number of the participants reported having been persecuted only for making one statement about America, or for listening to the Voice of America. They also expressed feelings of disappointment, stating that America is now against them. They feel that the U.S. Embassy in Albania grants visas to the children of ex-communists, supporting the Albanian government that discriminates against them. They feel betrayed by America. Nevertheless, they still express a need for help, in their words, “America should put her hand on the situation.” After telling their individual stories, some including harsh torture, they shared deep reflections about what needs to be done to heal their collective wounds.

- The participants seemed to be preoccupied with daily political events and the lives and daily actions of politicians, including the American Ambassador. In fact, most Albanians seem to be thus preoccupied. This may be seen as a natural response, a kind of hypervigilance of post-traumatic stress at a national level, to 50 years of prolonged stress and to life-threatening events centered on the totalitarian rule of one man. The overthrow of democracy in 1997 seemed to recall the trauma of the regime for the ex-politically persecuted people. They have incorporated some of the horrific stories of that year into their narratives. The daily news broadcasts highlight meetings and informal social events in which the U.S. Ambassador is with Albanian government leaders, including the Albanian President. Even if the intention of American representatives is one of supporting Albania and the successful transition to socialism, the opinion of the ex-persecuted people is that the U.S. supports ex-communists. Many of the participants expressed a strong desire to see Albania progress and to be embraced by the European Union, but not under the present conditions of discrimination.

3. Cultural factors. Living in a family context and spending large amounts of time with participants revealed that the cultural factors associated with family name, devotion to family, and cultural beliefs and practices associated with death were paramount. The main concerns of the ex-politically persecuted were for their children and for the remains of their loved ones who were executed. As the class of ex-politically persecuted becomes older, they want their suffering to matter. They want the world to know about their suffering and contribution to democracy. They want to make sure that their children are educated. They want to mourn for their dead in the way that Albanian culture prescribes. They do not seek revenge for what happened, but they expressed some anger at seeing some of their former torturers and executioners in high government ministry positions. They want justice by trial for those who killed and tortured them.

Overall, the strategies and stress of persecution and the polarization of Albanian culture into the two classes created two separate cultures. Each class, the ex-communists and the ex-politically persecuted, continues to think in its separate cultural psychological way. The researcher cannot generalize to the entire Albanian population, but the population involved in the present study, as well as the Albanians included in the informal interviews, is divided very clearly into two classes. As the participants expressed, communist thinking continues in Albania; it is difficult to change. Even though the government has changed, the thinking has not changed. The ex-persecuted are still considered to be “the enemy.”

Suggestions for future research agendas: One more set of interviews at the site of Lushnje, a center of political persecution; continued interviews and group conversations with Albanians who were not politically persecuted; interviews with persons who tortured, prosecuted, or otherwise participated in the persecution, to include Ramiz Alia (ex-President during the regime after Hoxha’s death) and Nexhmije Hoxha (the wife of Hoxha); interviews with high government officials and public figures; clinical and cultural psychological studies of Albanian individuals who have symptoms of psychological trauma; research on the continuing trend toward emigration; cultural factors associated with corruption and the perception of corruption; and research toward establishing accurate records on the truly persecuted class (making sure that such records will not be used against this class).

Recommendations for the U.S. policy community:

- The U.S. should be aware that the love of democracy, particularly American democracy, was the main reason for the execution, imprisonment, and political persecution of many--perhaps hundreds of thousands--of Albanians. Listening to Voice of America broadcasts was the precipitating factor in many cases. Albanian ex-politically persecuted people still look to the leadership and expertise of the U.S.
- The most concrete and culturally effective help that the U.S. can give is to influence the Albanian government and/or assist in the following:
 - Establish a permanent national document containing the names of all ex-persecuted people and make it available to the U.S. Department of Justice, the American Embassy in Tirana, and Albanian social service agencies for cases of political asylum, economic and scholarship programs, and other official purposes. A list can be obtained from the list of the national societies in Albania and verified by an independent board of ex-politically persecuted people.
 - Make a public and formal statement of moral support and honor;
 - Hold a formal national ceremony and/or build a memorial to acknowledge and honor the suffering of this group, together with ex-President Sali Berisha and leaders of other political parties and public figures (if possible, include Ramiz Alia and Nexhmije Hoxha);

- Provide some form of financial assistance to members of this group, including pensions for ex-political prisoners equal to Albanian war veterans;
 - Institute a payment schedule for the unpaid letters of value now held by this group;
 - Relocate into appropriate housing ex-politically persecuted people who are still living at the Party School (Shkolla Parti) in Tirana and other unsuitable dwellings;
 - Investigate university admissions policies and practices that might prevent members of this group from receiving a higher education;
 - Re-instate university scholarships for a given number of children of this group;
 - Grant visas for higher education programs in the U.S. to a given number of the children of this group;
 - Investigate complaints of unfair firing of members of this group, or influence employers to hire them, to include positions within the government, ministry directorates, police officers, and other positions of public trust;
 - Review procedures used for granting U.S. visas and lotteries granted for emigration to the U.S. and the possibility of giving preference to ex-communists, after the list of truly persecuted people has been compiled (perhaps a random sample of names of individuals over the past five years could be verified against the list);
 - Locate the remains of those people who were executed in political prisons or elsewhere in Albania during the communist regime; determine if information about the location of the remains is being withheld from the public;
 - Support the ex-politically persecuted people to obtain the land/property that was taken from them by the regime (or in obtaining acceptable substitutes if the land has been sold to third parties);
 - Include a seat in Parliament for representation of this group at the national level;
 - Review the possibility of consolidating all societies and institutes for ex-politically persecuted people and give them meaningful duties;
 - Open a Social Welfare unit with caseworkers (the University of Tirana has a School of Social Work) to review the health, education, and economic needs of all ex-persecuted families;
 - Make available individual and group counseling sessions to those who suffer from stress related to their persecution;
 - Conduct free and fair elections in Albania;
 - Influence the Albanian government to remove from high government positions any person who participated in the torture or execution of ex-politically persecuted people.
- U.S. Government representatives, both those who work in Albania and those who visit Albania for short missions, should occasionally meet with individuals

from this group or with representatives of the ex-politically persecuted societies. This would serve a therapeutic, humanitarian, and peace-keeping function. Americans should be aware that, by meeting only members of the present government, many of whom are ex-communists, U.S. representatives are perceived as supporting the continuing persecution of the ex-persecuted class.

Reference

Herda, E. (2000). Research conversations and narrative: A critical hermeneutic orientation in participatory inquiry. Westport, CT: Praeger.