To Witness and Heal: What Science Can Do to Respond to Human Rights Abuse

These are stories of despair and hope, and of what science can do to help.

N.A. was a prisoner in Tehran. One day a guard led him to a prison wall known to be an execution site and told N.A. he would be killed. The guard turned the man toward the wall, pulled his hair and pushed a gun barrel against his skull. N.A. heard the gun cock, the trigger slide, the hammer snap forward. But the gun was empty. When N.A. was freed and resettled in the United States, he tried to drown his memories in alcohol.

Mrs. Trinidad Herrera, a community organizer in the slums of Manila, was arrested by Philippine authorities, stripped, and wired to an army crank telephone. Her interrogators applied electric shocks to sensitive parts of Herrera’s body until she signed a prepared confession of illegal acts.

These people—and tens of thousands of other individual men, women, and children—are at the heart of two new books written with the support of the American Association for the Advancement of Science’s (AAAS) Science and Human Rights Program.

Serving Survivors of Torture, by Glenn R. Randall and Ellen L. Lutz (AAAS Press, 1991), is the “first systematic overview of treatment approaches” for health professionals and other service providers working with this troubled population, according to Douglas Johnson, executive director of the Center for Victims of Torture in Minneapolis.


Both books reflect “program emphases that have been part of [the AAAS Human Rights Program] from the very beginning,” says program director Audrey Chapman.

Glenn Randall is a physician in Los Angeles who also works with torture survivors. Ellen Lutz is the California director of Human Rights Watch. It took the couple 5 years to research and write their book, Serving Survivors of Torture.

“There are next to no services for survivors of torture,” says Lutz. “This book is a practical manual based on research with a wide variety of torture survivors that should provide a solid introduction to what any health care provider can do to help.”

The book’s 11 chapters and five appendices define the problem, describe what physical and psychological ailments are likely to afflict the torture survivor, and discuss ways to document and treat the person’s trauma.

Obstacles abound, say the authors. Survivors rarely identify themselves as such, and their stories are often difficult for Americans to listen to or even believe. There are cross-cultural barriers as well, such as the tendency of some Asians to feel they are responsible for their suffering because of their karma. Nonetheless, the need is real. Since 1945, more than 2 million immigrants and hundreds of thousands of illegal refugees have entered the United States, many from countries plagued by human rights abuses.

“These persons are at an increased risk for... infectious disease, malignancies, strokes, and heart disease,” write Randall and Lutz, “and are prone to psychosomatic complaints, depression,...[and] post-traumatic stress disorder.”

While Randall and Lutz want to help individual survivors of torture, the authors of Human Rights and Statistics want to gather individual stories into larger, quantified accounts that can document—and perhaps help stop—human rights abuse on a large scale.

The book’s two editors write that “an individual case, although irreducible in its importance, does not evidence a pattern or policy. But in combination with other cases, it creates a moral imperative....”

Thomas Jabine is an independent statistical consultant who has worked with the United Nations. Richard Claude is a political science professor at the University of Maryland. Together with 22 other experts in the fields of political science, public health, law, forensic anthropology, and statistics, they suggest ways to develop and analyze statistically credible data on human rights abuses.

The book’s “unique contribution,” says Chapman, lies in its attempt to “operationalize human rights and make it possible to monitor their abuse.”

Operationalizing human rights isn’t easy, of course. As political science professor Robert Justin Goldstein writes in chapter 2, “Human rights abuses may be as diverse as ‘banaging’ in South Africa, congressional antisubversive investigations in the United States,[and] house arrests in South Korea.”

What’s more, gathering data in the shadow of restrictive regimes is arduous, if not downright dangerous. Even when reliable data can be acquired, how should it be interpreted? For example, low figures for political prisoners may in fact reflect conditions so oppressive as to stifle all opposition, notes Goldstein.

And yet, though not perfect, statistics can make a difference in the struggle for human rights, claim the authors, who provide examples ranging from lynchings in the United States to burials of the “disappeared” outside of Buenos Aires. The final chapter lists 29 human rights databases already available to researchers.

For more information about the new books, contact the AAAS Science and Human Rights Program, 202-326-6790.
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