



Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal

Official Transcript: Jorge Sierralta (Part 5 of 10)



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| Role: | Staff Psychologist |
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| Location: | Arusha, Tanzania |
| Interviewer: | Lisa P. Nathan Donald J Horowitz |
| Videographer: | Nell Carden Grey |
| Interpreter: | None |

Interview Summary

Jorge Sierralta talks about his role as a psychologist and social counselor for the United Nations and reflects on the challenges of working with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. He discusses his work as a counselor at the ICTR, including the mental health education and support services that have been introduced. Sierralta describes various coping mechanisms employed by Tribunal staff as well as the stigma associated with seeking counseling.

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Part 5

- 00:00** Donald J Horowitz: Dr. Sierralta, My name is Donald Horowitz. I'm a judge from Seattle, Washington and I'll be doing the second part of the interview. And it may be, I'll jump around a little bit because there were some questions that raised some other questions. I want to talk about, for a minute, about something you were just talking about which is the increase of irritability among people.
- 00:23** DJH: And one of the people we interviewed talked about that as well – I mean not a psychologist but somebody who works in, in the system here. And then that person said, “But the worst part is when I stopped being irritable I went numb,” and I guess I'd like to ask you about that, your observation of that issue, if there is one.
- 00:48** But I was saying because of the pr-, additional pressure . . .
- 00:52** DJH: Yes.
- 00:52** . . . and now, the additional pressure is of uncertainty. People don't know – “My contract is going to end in the December, it's going to end in January, it's going to end. Do I need to send my kids to school here or do I need to send them back home?” And the tension increase, yeah. It's the general tension increase, so the tolerance decrease.
- 01:19** So reactions are different. Some people might become irritable. Some people might be, might become a little bit more aggressive, yeah. Some people might become indifferent, yeah, less motivated, careless. So some people might become sick more often because of, of the tension, yeah.
- 01:47** DJH: This person was talking about listening over time, because of her job, to the descriptions of the, of the acts that were committed, and she said at a certain point she just couldn't, couldn't feel anymore and that sh-, she became even more worried at that point. Have you seen some, some cases like that?
- 02:10** Yeah. There is a point – I think, we do all have a capacity to absorb certain information and to process because it's not only the information that goes in, but the processing. And I believe, because it's like in a sponge, so there is a limit that you can, of water that you can put inside. So probably I believe that the person was just, yeah, reached a limit.
- 02:40** Might be also, might, probably the person was also reaching a limit of burn out also that, yeah, can't take anymore, so.
- 02:51** DJH: Well, this brings us to some other experiences you've had. You, you've been in some, I guess the word might be interesting but some difficult places before. I wanted – but before that, you mentioned being in, in school with a – and you graduate-, in, in the-, what was probably then, was it the Soviet Union then or (_____)?

- 03:08 It was the Soviet Union, yeah at that time.
- 03:10 DJH: Yeah. When did you graduate?**
- 03:12 I graduate in 1994 . . .
- 03:15 DJH: Okay.**
- 03:16 . . . in end of May 1994 and the genocide started in, in April 6 or just was, just before the graduation and the final exams, yeah.
- 03:29 DJH: And you had this Rwandese man, person who was your roommate.**
- 03:33 Yeah, yeah and until now we c-, we do communicate, yeah, so we keep c-, yeah.
- 03:37 DJH: Your s-, your, your (_____)?**
- 03:39 He's, yeah, yeah. He's also a psychologist because we graduated from the same university, the same faculty.
- 03:45 DJH: And where is he practicing?**
- 03:47 He's practicing in Denmark. He's now living in Denmark.
- 03:51 DJH: In a private practice or . . . ?**
- 03:53 No, in a hospital, yeah, in a hospital, yeah.
- 03:56 DJH: So that your – part of your education was during the years of the Soviet Union and part was past when the Russian Federation be-, came, is, is that correct?**
- 04:06 Yeah, it was a big collapse so, so sometimes I, my, yeah, people, it was a big collapse of this belief system.
- 04:15 DJH: Mm-hmm.**
- 04:16 So there was also a huge increase on cardiovascular problems and, yeah, diseases and when the Soviet Union collapsed because of the, yeah, the change happened so – in a very short time and, yeah, and unexpected.
- 04:36 DJH: And the first job you went to, for, for, before the UN, you were with the American Red Cross, I think you said.**
- 04:42 No, I worked for the Russian, the Russian Red Cross.
- 04:45 DJH: The Russian Red Cross.**
- 04:46 Yeah.

04:47 DJH: And where was that?

04:48 In St. Petersburg, this is where, yeah, I, I, . . .

04:52 DJH: And what kind of practice was that?

04:54 I was providing psychosocial support to refugees.

04:57 DJH: Okay, from?

04:59 From different countries including Rwandese. Also when the Soviet Union collapsed there were about 20 million of Russians who were outside the, outside the Russian Federation so we used to get also Russians, yeah, who were, just, didn't have any status. And also a lot of refugees also because Russian used to be – they use Russia as a, as a bridge to go to the West.

05:25 It was more accessible and easier, especially when the Soviet Union collapsed because, yeah, it was very easy to (____), to go to Russia, so.

05:37 DJH: And after that, what was the next job?

05:40 Then I joined UNHCR. I was, I was a contractor with UNHCR, yeah, also working . . .

05:46 DJH: ICR being?

05:47 Yeah, yeah.

05:48 DJH: Tell us.

05:49 U-N-H-C-R, the United Nations Agency for Refugees.

05:56 DJH: Okay, yeah because the acronyms don't . . .

05:58 Yeah, yeah, the, the acronyms . . .

06:00 DJH: And how long had you, had you worked with the Red Cross before you went to the . . .

06:06 It was about one year and a half, yeah. And then I, I've, two years with, two years, with yeah . . . UNHCR.

06:16 DJH: UNHCR.

06:16 UNHCR. United Nations and, how is, United Nations, yeah. I need to remember what.

06:27 DJH: Okay, that's okay. Something about . . . it's about refugees.

06:29 Yeah.

- 06:30 DJH: And where were you located during that?**
- 06:32 In, in, in Russia, in St. Petersburg also.
- 06:34 DJH: Okay, okay. And . . .**
- 06:37 That was an implement so what happened that the Red Cross was looking after this refugee center that was – so the Red Cross was an implementing partner for this, the UN agency, so then just I moved to the, yeah.
- 06:51 DJH: Okay. And you worked there a year and a half, you said.**
- 06:54 There I also worked about a year and, and a half, yeah.
- 06:57 DJH: Okay, and then where?**
- 06:58 And then I moved to, to DRC, to Congo, Kinshasa.
- 07:03 DJH: Okay, to the Democratic Republic of Congo. And you were working for the UN then or . . .**
- 07:07 Yeah, for the UN also, yeah.
- 07:09 DJH: And you said that this sort of a crisis management job of some sort. Am I, I may have not stated that correctly.**
- 07:18 Yeah, there was a – it's a huge mission, it's a huge mission with a lot of military peacekeepers, yeah. And a lot of civilians, so we used to manage the well-being of all the staff, especially civilians – because the military, they use to have their own team, their own medical doctors and sometimes they will have even a counselor there, a mental health.
- 07:42 But they are trying that they, yeah, depending on the country, some of them will have, some of them will not have. So we used to provide counseling services but also there were many emergencies there so, yeah.
- 07:56 DJH: Emergencies, of what sort, like . . . ?**
- 07:58 Looting, yeah, looting. But, yeah, we have emergencies and a lot of looting to UN guesthouses, robberies, yeah. So . . .
- 08:10 DJH: And I – was there violence, and I don't mean just civilian violence but also military violence going on at that time . . .**
- 08:18 Was a military . . .
- 08:19 DJH: . . . that affected your staff?**

- 08:21 Well, there was a military violence. Also there was a – yeah, many of our peacekeepers also they witness atrocities and there was a time, you know the UN operates on different chapters.
- 08:37 DJH: Yes.**
- 08:39 So yeah there was a time when the, our troops they, they could not, they could not enforce, they could not provide the real support, the, the real military support that they are trained in. You know, a military is trained to act, not to observe and that creates a lot of tension on military who are working in peacekeeping operations when, yeah, they are not able to, to act, to react.
- 09:14 So it happened in, in Congo, yeah, that many of the, of our military, they witness atrocities very similar to what happened in Rwanda. I will say very similar, and they could not do anything. Because the UN operation is Chapter 6, Chapter 7 – so that time it was a Chapter 6. So on the Chapter 6 you observe and you use your weapon only under self-defense, but . . .
- 09:46 DJH: And then how long were you in, in Congo?**
- 09:49 I was there 24 months, so almost completely two years, yes, ten days before two years.
- 09:55 DJH: And then you went where?**
- 09:56 I went to Afghanistan.
- 09:59 DJH: And how long were you in Afghanistan?**
- 10:02 More, a little bit more than three years.
- 10:04 DJH: Okay. And . . .**
- 10:05 So, while I was in Afghanistan, I, there was, you know we had the, the earthquake in Pakistan and also a couple of incidents so while I was in, in Afghanistan I was also requested to go to Pakistan to provide assistance also after the earthquake in, in Pakistan.
- 10:27 DJH: And where were you in Pakistan?**
- 10:29 I was, I travelled to different areas to, yeah, to, to different . . .
- 10:32 DJH: Near where the earthquake was.**
- 10:34 Yeah, all – to all the affected areas of the earthquake, yeah, so.
- 10:37 DJH: Okay. So near what town that would . . .**

- 10:41 Muzaffarabad, Mansehra, (___), yeah.
- 10:46 **DJH: Okay. And describe what you – the work you provided. The . . .**
- 10:53 Our job was more of a psychological assessment, yeah, the needs assessment. Because what happened after a critical incident, a huge critical incident, the UN sent a lot of staff. So we go there to assess, to make an assessment: “Okay, what might be the needs? How many counselor we need to deploy?” If it’s a catastrophe that will involve thousand of thousand of UN staff, so we need to assess, “Okay, how many people will . . .”
- 11:31 And our job is just to make an assessment and to make recommendation because then later on normally what the, the, the unit, which is in New York, what they do is they hire local, yeah, so they try to find local resources so, to put in place a support system.
- 11:54 **DJH: And was that true the whole three years you were in Afghanistan?**
- 11:57 No, no, no, no, no. It was the, I was, yeah, the whole three years, 37 months I was in Afghanistan. So I travel to Pakistan on three times yes, so was . . .
- 12:10 **DJH: So that’s what you just described.**
- 12:12 Yeah.
- 12:13 **DJH: Okay, and when, when you were on your regular duty, if you will, in Afghanistan, what kind of, what kind of work did you do?**
- 12:20 Oh, we used to do a lot of emergency because there used to be a lot of explosion. There was a kidnapping of national staff also and a lot of threats, so threats had been increased and the intensity of the threats.
- 12:40 So people used to – yeah, our staff they, they just live in a, in a compound so it’s a lot of isolation, also problems that people live alone so we (___), we do support them also with this long distance family relationship.
- 12:58 We provide sessions on alcohol abuse and, and yeah, if, during the crisis, crisis – When I say crisis, is an attack to a convoy, you know, riots. Riots, you know, riots is something that is difficult to describe. You have thousands of people around, around you throwing stones, burning your house, so we have riots also. We have a lot of, a lot of collateral damage.
- 13:40 Collateral damage is when the UN is not a target but because you are next or you are close, yeah, because they target at normally the, the, the Army but if you’re vehicle is next to that vehicle or if they miss the target, then you might be a target of opportunity. This is what they call target, yeah.
- 14:05 **DJH: Okay, and you – after that three years you – is that when you came to . . . here.**

14:11 I came, yeah, here, yeah.