



Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal

Official Transcript: Jorge Sierralta (Part 4 of 10)



Role:	Staff Psychologist
Country of Origin:	Peru
Interview Date:	17 October 2008
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.

The transcript of Part 4 begins on the following page.

Part 4

- 00:00 **Lisa P. Nathan: Is there an, an instant or an example of something that you don't feel so good about, that you think might help someone who does your job in the future to know? Something that maybe didn't go so well that you think someone else could learn from?**
- 00:18 I think it's because of our job, we need to be very neutral. Sometimes, it's in all organizations, so sometimes there is – because people don't know very well your role, so they might try to use you, or they might try – so I need to be v-, always very careful about writing emails, writing about, yeah.
- 00:47 So somebody who is not feeling good and comes to see me say, “Oh I don't feel good. Jorge just told me that I shouldn't come to office today.” And the person might use my, even yeah, my expression, my yeah, my verbal as an excuse not to come to office, or as an excuse to go on uncertified leave.
- 01:12 So I think this is something that I learned probably that I should be more careful that anything, yeah, anything what I – everything I say, people might take it as a completely true and, yeah.
- 01:28 So if I tell the person that, “Probably you will benefit from some rest,” the person takes it, “Oh, I need some rest and the counselor told me that I need some rest. So I will extend my leave. If I am on leave, I will extend and I will.” And yeah so it's – and also to, I think it's important that we do try to balance also our own life. I don't try to meet too much ICTR people outside working hours.
- 02:03 Sometimes, probably I try to avoid, I haven't – I created a network of people who are not ICTR and I feel more comfortable because there was a time that I used to attend some dinners and lunch and yeah, probably it was a way that people wanted to communicate with me their problems. So I remember I was eating, I was eating fish at somebody's place and the person start talking me, I mean, start talking to me about their own problems.
- 02:37 So I realized that it's, yeah, “I came here to, just to have a friendly conversation, not to hear about your problems.” So probably they see you as a 24-hours, yeah. And, and it happens in the missions also. This is something that, yeah, I have to deal with all the time, so.
- 02:58 There are times that I do family visits on Saturdays but in order not to – I take my daughter so always of the person you have, “You want me to see your family but can I take my daughter?” So, I try to balance also.
- 03:16 It's very important for us to balance family and, and, and work. Because it's a lot of tendency to – you give too much sometimes, yeah. Our job is to support people and you

might be easily, very easily involved in giving too much and then, yeah, and then you don't become objective, so.

03:43 LPN: Thank you. The last question I have and then we'll take a little break – I'm curious have you been able to go to Rwanda?

03:52 Yeah, I've been – I travelled twice to Rwanda. I provide sessions there also to staff on how to recover from a traumatic experience, what is trauma. I visit many of the genocide, yeah, places there.

04:15 I, I didn't, yeah – and there was a moment, there was one day that I wanted to leave that place. I felt that it was too much probably because one thing is to see on TV, to read the books, to hear about, but to go to the place and to see the bones of people and, and then to spend the whole day – I spend one Saturday just visiting all the places.

04:44 That was a little bit too much and it was Saturday and I was thinking, "If there was a plane on Sunday, I will leave on Sunday," because I wanted to go back to my – I mean here I have my family support, so it's . . . and sometimes I feel like, you know people sometimes try to cope with this, like they have different compartments.

05:09 It's, I remember one investigator, yeah, in Rwanda was telling me, "Jorge, if I do really feel, I don't, I don't feel anything when people tells me stories because I try to cut this from – a part of myself. So one part of me take the notes, listen to the stories, but the other part doesn't listen. So when I go home, I'd leave this part in the office and I go home and I don't feel."

05:42 But this is not completely true because it takes a toll after sometime and people do not realize. I used to – not here but in the previous mission – in Afghanistan I used to have a lot of people coming from the medical unit, with a lot of physical complaints. And when the doctor start talking to them, what happened to them, they realize that the person experienced a very traumatic event, a very traumatic, yeah, situation.

06:17 People normally do not connect what is happening to them to – and also on top of that, yeah, how do people, they drink, yeah. They do not connect that your drinking has been increased. They do not connect that your smoking habit has been increased. When I asked the same colleague who told me that he's just, he's just split into two that's why he doesn't – this is the way he tries to cope. And there's not anything wrong and he feels 100% okay.

06:56 When I start asking him, "So how is your sleeping?" He said, "Oh, I have days that I sleep well." "So how is your drinking?" "Oh, drinking is – I've been drinking more and more." Nobody connects this increase in drinking, yeah, because with the, with the probably – I mean, I must, this is hypothesis, yeah, but is anyway in a way the people try to relieve this stress, this tension that they, they have.

- 07:26 So it might be your health. It might be your drinking, your smoking, putting on weight, becoming more tense, and sometimes people become very irritable. And this is probably what sometimes now people face in the office because of this downsizing also that people are put under more pressure and conflicts tends to, yeah, tends to become, tends to pop up so – because the tolerance are, drops.
- 07:59 So, since the tolerance drops, yeah, people become more outspoken and sometimes, yeah, if – somebody was telling me, “I used to ask always a pen to my colleague, and not a big deal, but one day I asked a pen and the person explode.” So yeah, things like, the thing is everything is connected but people do, do not understand this connection, this connectivity, so.
- 08:31 **LPN: Thank you so much. This is wonderful.**