

THE UNBEARABLE HEAVINESS OF TRAUMA

Levy, S and Lemma, A (eds) (2004) **The perversion of loss: Psychoanalytic perspectives on trauma**. London: Whurr Publishers. ISBN 1 86156 433 3.
xviii + 172 Pages.

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The notion of trauma is the stock-in-trade of psychoanalytic explanations of neurosis. It is also the conceptual origin of Freud's early psychological account of his first female patients' symptoms of hysteria (cf Breuer & Freud, 1974). As we all recall from classical psychoanalytic theory, trauma (or traumatic events and experiences) produces anxiety around which defences are rallied resulting in the formation of neurosis. Freud's (1940) view was that all neuroses were the result of infantile traumata, and consequently he had more to say about the early vicissitudes of psychosexual development than the traumas that befall us as adults (with the exception of war neurosis or "shell shock"). And yet there is something extraordinarily tame about the "normal" psychosexual traumata of neurosis compared to the mostly horrific traumatic events discussed in Levy and Lemma's **The perversion of loss**. The perversion could as easily apply to the violation of humanity that people inflict on each other, politically, socially, and interpersonally.

The trauma referred to in the nine papers of this edited collection range from political oppression, torture, rape, child sexual abuse, interpersonal violence and brutality, child burn victims, and even the generalised politics of anxiety after 9/11. While at one level it is clear what trauma means in both common sense conceptions and in the psychoanalytic literature, surely there are different epistemologies of trauma depending on whether we are talking about the existential anxiety of living in a "war on terror" era, or considering the trauma after a violent rape. If as the editors suggest in their opening chapter that a "traumatic event is not simply understood as an external experience, a random life incident superimposed on an individual. Instead it is re-interpreted in the mind in terms of a relationship with an internal object" (p3), would it then not be useful to theorise how *different* "external experiences" are re-interpreted by the traumatised person, both in terms of their previous relationship/s with the external (traumatic) experience and the psychological history of their internal object relations? I am not suggesting that there aren't similar internal psychological processes that take place following trauma, no matter the nature of the trauma, and in fact this collection admirably demonstrates this, but there is a danger in homogenising or generalising the

effects of trauma and thus missing some of the complexities of re-interpretation and internalisation associated with *substantially different* traumatic events and experiences.

The editors do admit that their text “is fundamentally a psychoanalytic text, applying contemporary ideas in psychoanalysis to the complexity of trauma” (pxvi), and yet they also say that the process of trying to make sense of the trauma “is not only an internal affair, but also depends on external factors, in particular aspects of the person’s social and cultural background and how they engage in society” (p3). And while many of the authors are aware of the social context of their work, there didn’t seem to be any real engagement with the social world of trauma and how *this sociality* is internalised and / or transformed in its encounter with our internal objects. Most of the clinical cases and vignettes presented by the various authors in this collection seemed to remain at the individual level with little attempt made to explicate and unravel the dialectical relationship of the social, the individual, and the intrapsychic. The two papers that did try to extend the analysis of how the “dialectic between internal and external processes informs and shapes our thinking about trauma” (Levy & Lemma, p5) were the papers by Michael Rustin (Chapter 2: Why are we more afraid than ever?: The politics of anxiety after Nine Eleven), and the only South African paper by Louise Frenkel (Chapter 9: ‘I smile at her and she smiles back at me’: Between repair and re-enactment: the relationships between nurses and child patients in a South Africa Paediatric Burns Unit”). Both papers, in very different ways, think about social and organisational “institutions” that are necessary to contain our anxieties. Rustin is concerned about the undermining of “containing social structures, and spaces for reflection within them” (p35) post-9/11, and the consequences that this has for how people (don’t) deal with their fears and anxieties. Frenkel’s concerns are much more specific and relate to how the organisational rigidity of a hospital ward – namely the paediatric burns unit under discussion – makes it very difficult for the nurses to contain the fear and suffering of their young patients, not to speak of the toll (trauma) that this kind of work exacts on the nurses themselves.

In short, if one is looking for a text that links the social, and the personal and intrapsychic dimensions of trauma, **The perversion of loss**, in my view isn’t it. However, if one is looking for a text that details clinical psychoanalytic work with traumatised people, where the therapists have a good and sympathetic understanding of the social and political *contexts* of their patients, then this collection offers many valuable insights. In this regard I would just like to mention a few of the ideas that I found interesting and useful. Lemma and Levy’s opening chapter (Chapter 1: The impact of trauma on the psyche: Internal and external processes) discusses four themes which they identify as central to understanding people’s responses to trauma: 1. Seeing trauma as an attack on attachment; 2. Trauma resulting in the breakdown or perversion of the capacity to mourn; 3. The fate of identifications consequent to trauma; and 4. The breakdown of symbolic functioning. The idea of seeing trauma as an attack on attachments makes sense of the detachment, withdrawal and suspicion that one sees in people after trauma. Lemma and Levy usefully point us to the fact that an attack on our attachments seriously compromises our capacity for dialogue, and this is noticed in the traumatised person’s struggle to give a narrative account of their trauma, to tell their story.

Many of the authors refer to the central work on Caroline Garland on the destruction of symbolic functioning as a central feature of the impact of traumatic events on the psyche, and hence it is useful to have Garland offer a summary on her position (chapter 3: Traumatic events and their impact on symbolic functioning). The breakdown in the capacity to symbolise has the effect of disrupting the person's ability *to think* about their painful experience/s, and this in turn results in problems of identification. As Garland writes: "When it feels as though something painful and unpleasant has been done to oneself, the movement is towards an identification with the object who is felt to have brought about that deeply unpleasant state of affairs" (p38). Another useful clinical paper was Susan Levy's "Containment and validation: Working with survivors of trauma" (Chapter 4). Besides the interesting and important discussion of the psychological processes of containment and validation in working with traumatised people, she presents "three broad descriptive modes of personality response" (p56) she has observed in her extensive work with survivors of torture, namely, profound personality breakdown; interpersonal breakdown; and psychosomatic illness. She illustrates each of these three modes with rich case material. These descriptive modes can be useful as a way of making sense of complex clinical material as long as they remain as broad descriptions of people's experiences, and don't become "classificatory or diagnostic" in any way.

For me the most interesting and theoretically challenging paper was that by Alessandra Lemma entitled "On hope's tightrope: Reflections on the capacity for hope" (chapter 7). **The perversion of loss** is worth buying for this chapter alone! The idea of hope, and the characteristic of good objects being tolerance and reflexivity are central to her argument about recovery from trauma. Lemma says that "hope can be thought about as the activation of an internalized relationship with a good object" (p109), and what this good object relation can bring about is our ability to "bear to think about the more extreme and less palatable aspects of emotional life" (p109). So internalised good object relations and hope are inextricably linked as a psychological necessity for the person to work effectively with their trauma (traumatic past) that gives hope for the future. This fascinating and complex analysis by Lemma reminded me, in a different context obviously, of Ron Aronson's (1983) remarkable analysis of 20th century disasters (in the idiom of this review, *traumatic* events for millions of people) – Stalin's gulag, the Nazi Holocaust, and US America's Vietnam – in his book **The dialectic of disaster: A preface to hope**. His argument is that unless we face the dialectic of the disasters of our political history, we foreclose the possibility of a future with hope. The resonances between Lemma and Aronson's ideas are suggestive of a rapprochement between the unconscious and socio-political dimensions of trauma.

Finally, one cannot fail to be moved and deeply appreciative of the dedicated and difficult work that many of these clinicians undertake in their commitment to working with very seriously traumatised individuals. While most of the case material / vignettes were interesting and illustrative, they were also very difficult to bear, and especially the case discussed by Joanne Stublely, and the work on a Paediatric Burns Unit discussed by Loiuise Frankel. Joanne Stublely's case (chapter 6: Bearing the unbearable: Melancholia following severe trauma) involved a 36 year old woman whose estranged husband had kidnapped their two children (a boy of nine and a girl of seven). This woman found her ex-husband and their two children in his petrol-soaked car, and watched helplessly as he set the car alight, killing all three! As Bion once remarked

such situations are not conducive to thought. The brutality and unbearableness of some traumatic events seem to destroy more than our ability to think. How does one recover from such an assault on the integrity of what it means to be a person? Our humanity is severely tested under such circumstances, and yet as the work in this collection demonstrates, we have to keep on keeping on.

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