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TRAUMA IN CONTEXT

An informal survey of conferences, journals, special seminars and specialty programs at various psychoanalytic institutes leads to the impression that trauma has been increasingly “in.” However, it seems to be a different kind of trauma. The interest that had once been a staple of psychoanalytic discourse, and the traumas of childhood and development have given way to the traumas of adulthood (Boulanger, 2006). Developmental trauma, family violence and betrayal have been superseded by a focus on the violence strangers inflict on others based on perceived cultural or social identity. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that 9/11 as a watershed event in American culture has a bearing on this interest. Terrorism has become a dominating theme and the trauma it produces, a public event widely featured in the mass media. The interest of psychoanalysts in trauma today reflects both our being caught up in the same whirlwind of horrific events as everyone else including our patients and our growing recognition that this historical epoch may be one day described as the “age of trauma.”

Although terrorism and its intended traumatic effects have become a media extravaganza, trauma itself is the quintessential private experience. In trauma, the self is driven into a prison, in the most extreme, when it is accompanied by a conviction of total abandonment, trauma becomes a black hole that pulls the self into it. But just as trauma is privately endured, it occurs in a social context. The strain on the tie between the self and its world illuminate both.

The articles in this Special Issue will examine the relationship between trauma and culture. Hoffman (2004) notes that “it seems evident that cultural systems of meaning effect forms of inner pain (p. 47). She observes, for example, that the Western experience of trauma is alien to, for example, Russians for whom most of the 20th century consisted of one horror after another. However, Hoffman, in commenting that even if the Russian sensibility rejects the notion of the traumatized self as trivial or comic, it is also true that even as the idea of trauma is derided and excluded, widespread alcoholism may express an alternative adaptation to history. These articles will shine a light on individual’s experience in a wide geographical swath including Argentina, Vietnam, Hungary, Senegal, Germany, Israel and several American milieus.

A close reading of these articles will inform some of the following questions:

What is universal about the psychological processes of trauma, its mechanisms, processes and effects, across cultural divides?

What is particular about the psychological processes of trauma to a specific cultural context?

How does trauma shape the individuals relationship to their culture? What are the differences between the traumatized person remaining within, fleeing or losing culture?

How does culture shape the expression of trauma? How does it institutionally respond to trauma?

What are the vicissitudes of transference and countertransference when patient and therapist come together from similar and different cultural traditions? For example, does coming from the same or different cultures have a bearing on the therapist's ability to empathize, understand and bear the patient's pain? Or have a bearing on the patient's feeling understood? How does the interface of cultural identity of the therapist and patient, including their coming from similar or different backgrounds, shape the enactments within the treatment situation? In what way do cultural differences and synchronies cause resistances as well as pathways to healing?

Are there particular blinders that particular cultures impose on the experience or perception of trauma and conversely, do particular cultures make aspects of trauma more salient?

How does trauma limit or extend the boundaries of the cultural definition of human experience?

What bonds tie an individual to a culture that has been the source of suffering?

How does culture transmit trauma from person to person and generation to generation? How does it shape the collective memory of trauma and how is the collective memory of a culture transformed by trauma?

Ultimately, trauma takes all of us to the limits of the human experience. A recurrent theme throughout these papers is that trauma reshapes our core system of meanings: whether we are victims, observers or arguably complicit in its perpetration. The reader should be forewarned that case material is powerful and will have the effect implied in Hoffman's (2004) title, after such knowledge....

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Guest Editor

REFERENCES

1. Boulanger, G. (2006). *Wounded by reality: A contemporary psychodynamic understanding of adult onset trauma*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Analytic Press.
2. Hoffman, L. (2004). *After such knowledge*. New York: Public Affairs.

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