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The Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma as a Disruption of the Dialogical Self

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This article is framed as a statement of conclusions derived from a doctoral research process I conducted. The research involved an exploration of the intergenerational transmission of trauma in the lives of mothers and their adult children. The impact of trauma on families can be seen in the various ways in which disruptions in the mother’s emotional experience, and in her capacity to contain her child, influence the child’s internal world (K. Lyons-Ruth & D. Jacobvitz, 1999; M. Main & E. Hesse, 1990). Working from a relational psychoanalytic and attachment theoretic conceptual framework, I consider the intergenerational transmission of trauma in terms of dissociation as the primary psychic defense that manifests in the inner and relational lives of survivors of trauma and their children. Dissociation is framed as a simultaneously intrapsychic and intersubjective process and is defined as a disruption of internal dialogue between conflicting self-states. I explore the disruption of dialogue with reference to G. Dimaggio’s (2006) dominant and impoverished narrative trends, identifying these as primary indicators of an intergenerationally manifested dissociative and avoidant process.

KEYWORDS intergenerational transmission, attachment, dissociation, dialogical self

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RELATIONAL PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF TRAUMA

This work is grounded in literature that emphasizes a dialogue between attachment theory and psychoanalysis (Fonagy, 1998, 1999, 2001; Steele & Steele, 1998) and views affective experience as located immediately in an intersubjective context (Stolorow, 2007). The intersubjective turn in psychoanalysis reflects a shift in focus toward mutual unconscious communication between selves, attending to the intersection between two unconsciously communicating subjectivities (Aron, 1996; Mitchell, 1988; S. Stern, 2002). Analysis of the intergenerational transmission of trauma is enabled by this theoretic system, which emphasizes the relationship as the primary focus.

Main and Hesse (1990) described disorganized infant attachment as a second-generation effect of unresolved loss or trauma, defined as a lack of conscious integration of traumatic events. An attachment figure characterized by unresolved loss or trauma responds in a frightened or frightening manner to the infant by demonstrating unpredictable, erratic, unempathic behaviors. This causes the infant to experience dysregulating fears, leading to disorganization of the infant’s attachment strategy (Main & Hesse, 1990). Furthermore, the infant, who exists in a condition of not having his or her internal states reflected by a containing attachment figure, may take into his or her vanquished self representations of the other as agent, a process that Fonagy, Target, Gergely, Allen, and Bateman (2003) described as the incorporation of an alien self. This incorporation, and the consequent intense projections that it sets in motion, has important implications for the intergenerational transmission of trauma.

D. Stern (1985) outlined the primary role of the mother as attuning herself to the affective states of the infant, allowing the infant to see that anxiety and distress can be digested, tolerated, and survived. The mother reflects her child’s distressful affects through empathic verbal and nonverbal mirroring, which the infant receives in a palatable form. Research into the intergenerational transmission of trauma suggests that mothers who have survived trauma are often unable to contain their infants’ painful affects, being too frightened of these experiences (Mazor & Tal, 1996). Instead the children of survivors often function as a psychic container for their mothers’ distressful affects (Abrams, 1999). Peskin (2001) described the process of children becoming “empathic rescuers” (p. 119) for their parents. The intrapsychic and relational consequence of this for the child is one of being isolated and abandoned in his or her distress and anxiety while shouldering a massive psychological weight.
DISSOCIATION AND THE DIALOGICAL SELF: A RELATIONAL PSYCHOANALYTIC FORMULATION

The self is conceived of here as primarily relational and dialogical and as located within the intersubjective surround (Howell, 2005; S. Stern, 2002). This construction of self observes the link between healthy dialogicality and secure attachment. The theory of the dialogical self describes the self as constituted by multiple self-positions, each interacting dialogically with other selves internally and intersubjectively (Bromberg, 1998; Davies, 1998; Hermans, 2002; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Howell, 2005; D. Stern, 2003). Bakhtin (1981) conceptualized subjectivity as polyphonic, framing consciousness as a sustained dialogue between selves. This polyphony manifests relationally as the core self, the “I,” interacting differently within a shifting relational context. For Bakhtin the self speaks with multiple voices, each articulating a unique subjective quality. An important feature of the dialogical self relates to the notion of conflict as existing in the spaces between the disparate self-positions (Holquist, 1990). The multiple self manifests in the form of a self-self and self-world relationship that has states of conflict and psychic tension at its core (Bromberg, 1998, 2001, 2003). Bromberg suggested that the establishment of a link between conscious and unconscious processes is a developmental achievement facilitated by the ongoing provision of a secure attachment. If early experience is not reflected by an emotionally attuned other it may become dissociated, particularly if that experience is too painful to be borne alone. In relation to this developmentally oriented construction of dissociative process, dissociation is described as the presence of not-me components within the self that exert an ongoing influence on lived experience. Dissociation becomes a part of a traumatized individual’s ongoing way of being and relating. It is important to note that on the one hand, dissociation as a response to trauma is grasped as a defensive deletion or vanishing of the self from the moment of traumatic rupture, such that the overwhelming affects evoked are not felt to their full and frightening intensity. On the other hand, dissociation emerges as an unconscious relational process extending beyond the traumatic experience (Howell, 2005). It is this form of dissociative process that is being considered in terms of the intergenerational transmission of trauma.

As a process located within an intersubjective surround, dissociation implies a disconnection from human contact, in which part of the self becomes “cut off from authentic human relatedness and deadened to full participation in the life of the rest of the personality” (Bromberg, 1998, p. 133). Attempting to dislocate from painful traumatic affect, the dissociative mind disallows dialogue within the self, between the affects, memories, and symbolic representations of trauma, thereby disrupting internal dialogue between
self-states. Dissociated psychic contents are therefore not integrated into the autobiographical narrative of self. Bromberg (2003) used the metaphor of self as *haunted* by the dissociated state. As an aspect of self that resides in a dark and hidden space, the inexpressible dissociated content finds tongue by forcing itself out into conscious experience through gesture and interpersonally located human action.

Bromberg (1998) described dissociation as the inability to *stand in the spaces* between painfully conflicted self-states, existing on a spectrum from health to illness. This situation introduces an intrapsychic constraint on dialogue, enervating and devitalizing the dissociation self-states. Self-states that are disallowed entry into ongoing intrapsychic dialogue become absent to the intersubjective surround. They cease to be and cease to relate. Ulman and Brothers (1988) observed the experience of intrapsychic deadness and described its correlates with relationship, in which the part of the self that is excluded from internal dialogue becomes deadened to relational participation. And so it can be seen that disruption of the dialogical self is at the same time disruption of relationship.

Robert Stolorow (2007) provided a conceptualization of trauma and dissociation in which I identify an important conclusion concerning the intergenerational transmission of trauma: “Trauma is constituted in an intersubjective context in which severe emotional pain cannot find a relational home in which it can be held. In such a context painful affect states become unendurable—that is, traumatic” (p. 10). Stolorow captures the primarily intersubjective conditions underlying the experience of cumulative trauma for the child within the mother–infant relationship. In such a relationship the mother is unable to offer herself as a container for the infant’s projections of severe distress. The mother’s internal fragmentation renders her unable to hold empathically and formulate verbally the infant’s emotions, and so she struggles to assist her child in the digestion and integration of feeling. This places the infant in a painful position of having to metabolize his or her own painful affective states. This process then takes place through the uncontained child’s mechanisms of dissociative defense. The absence of a *relational home* (Stolorow, 2007) for the infant’s feelings creates an experience of intersubjective dislocation, and it is through this that the experiences of the developing self remain unformulated and unvoiced in the intersubjective space.

**RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODOLOGY**

The study from which this article is derived explored the intergenerational transmission of trauma, analyzing the ways in which mothers’ histories of childhood interpersonal trauma influence their parenting and the relationships they have with their children.
The following research questions were addressed:

1. How is mothers’ trauma reflected in their parenting in the relationship with their children?
2. What are the unconscious effects of the trauma on the mothers’ relationships with their children?
3. What are the observable manifestations and unconscious expressions of trauma in children brought up by mothers who have a history of trauma?

Data collection aimed to elicit relational and intrapsychic themes emerging intergenerationally, revealing thematic links between the experiences of female survivors of trauma and their adult children. The mothers participating in the research process were survivors of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse in childhood, both within the context of their families and beyond. A racially, socioeconomically, and culturally diverse sample was sought through an invitation to participate that was placed in various local publications. Six dyads were interviewed, each constituted by one mother and one adult child (18 years and older). Data collection involved an intake of general historical information in order to elicit both the history of trauma as well as the broader context of participants’ lived experiences. This was followed by a series of unstructured interviews with the mother and adult child separately that were flexible, open ended, and shaped as a dialogue between the researcher and participant (Haggman-Laitila, 1999). Hollway and Jefferson’s (2000) free association narrative interview method was used, in which the participants are invited to tell their story from their own creative frame of reference. Participants were also invited to share written material, including their thoughts and reflections following the interviews.

In the interviews I asked the mothers to describe their experience of trauma in terms of how this has impacted on their relationships with their children. The following are examples of questions asked at the beginning of the interviews: “Could you describe your sense of the ways in which your traumatic experience has affected you since its occurrence?” and “I’d like to learn about some of the most difficult moments which you have experienced as a mother. Could you tell me about this?” Interviews with adult children explored their experiences of their mothers, their perceptions of the relationship they have with their mothers, and their knowledge of their mothers’ trauma.

Analysis of data was grounded in a synthesis of narrative and phenomenological hermeneutic methodology (Day Sclater, 2003; Giorgi, 1975, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1988). Following the extraction of relevant themes from the data I wrote initial reflections, first on my subjective, embodied, and relational experience of participants and second on my initial interpretations of their narratives. Narrative analysis included attention to the tone in which the story was told and the specific words used, observing such aspects as
linearity, gaps in the narrative, and narrative idiosyncrasies. To the extent that the shape and texture of the participants’ narratives was prioritized, this research has theoretic correlates with Adult Attachment Interview research (Diamond, 2004; Sagi-Schwartz, Koren-Karie & Joels, 2003). Such research holds a central place in explorations into the intergenerational transmission of trauma, having established the links between attachment disorganization and its correlates in adulthood in the form of unresolved trauma or loss (Main & Hesse, 1990). In the following sections I consider these conclusions from a relational psychoanalytic perspective and in terms of the theory of the dialogical self.

DISSOCIATED AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE AND RELATIONAL AVOIDANCE: THE IMPOVERISHED NARRATIVE AS A DISRUPTION OF INNER AND INTERSUBJECTIVE DIALOGUE

The second half of this article discusses case material derived from interviews with the mothers and adult children who participated in the research. I describe the dissociative and avoidant defense that manifests in the adult children’s narratives, revealing the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Dissociation is viewed as a defense against awareness of intolerable, anxiety-arousing, and painful self-states (Bromberg, 1998, 2001, 2003; Davies, 1998; Howell, 2005; D. Stern, 2003). I conceptualize this defense as a process of disrupted internal dialogue in which communication between conflicted and ambivalent self-states is disabled.

When I asked the mothers to describe their internal relationships with their painful histories, one of the central themes that emerged related to avoidance as an intrapsychic and relational defense. The descriptions were of silencing, secrecy, a need to “hide away” and “crawl into a hole.” Associated with this was a sense of aloneness experienced when in the company of the other that came from being only partially seen and known. One of the mothers, Margaret, reflected on this in the following passage: “I know that I was, as a child, and as an adult now, very lonely; sort of very disconnected. There’s a feeling of, um, solitude, in and amongst so many people.” Margaret is a single mother of two teenage boys. Her traumatic history relates primarily to her experiences of her severely autistic older brother, whose unpredictable behaviors posed a significant threat to her safety. Added to this was Margaret’s experience of her own mother as “hating” her and treating Margaret in a persecutory and darkly punitive manner. The quality of aloneness that Margaret describes in the passage here is associated with an internal and relational avoidance in which the truths about her traumatic history were unknown because of a sustained defensive avoidance. Margaret described feeling painfully isolated by this condition of being unseen and unknown.
Danieli (1985) described the *conspiracy of silence*, observing the conscious cooperation within the families of survivors to keep the traumatic history housed in a dark space. One of the adult children, Hanna, suggested the following:

Bruce: You know that your mother has entered this research because she feels that she can describe her childhood as traumatizing.
Hanna: Yes.
Bruce: How do you make sense of that?
Hanna: Well I don’t really know, ’cause that she also hasn’t spoken to us about. I didn’t really know that she had a traumatizing childhood before this. We don’t really talk about that sort of thing. We have more shallow conversations. I don’t really want to hear about all of that actually.

The imperative within families of traumatized mothers to maintain silence is linked in this article with the disruption of the dialogical self, considering this disruption in terms of the ways in which narrative is influenced. Dimaggio (2006) commented on two narrative trends, both reflecting disrupted internal and relational dialogue: the impoverished narrative and the dominant narrative.

Dimaggio’s *impoverished narrative* is defined by absence, thinness, and incompleteness in the narrative. It is conceptualized in the attachment literature in terms of the Disorganized/Disoriented pattern of attachment, which is associated with unresolved loss of trauma (Lyons-Ruth, Yellin, Melnick, & Atwood, 2003; Main & Hesse, 1990). This pattern reflects the experience of trauma survivors in which, as Harjula (2002) suggested, “the rhythm of speech breaks, words disappear; a hole is torn in speech” (p. 198). The impoverished narrative is associated with dissociation, with trauma-related memories, thoughts, and feelings being formulated in a fragmentary and nonlinear manner (Van der Kolk & Visler, 1995). The interviews with the adult children demonstrated this, with participants giving brief, fragmented, or unrevealing responses that created the impression of defensively motivated hiddenness. The following passage is taken from an interview with Michael, the 19-year-old son of a woman (Margaret) who had experienced severe psychological abuse by her mother in childhood: “She did say one time that her childhood wasn’t good, wasn’t really a proper upbringing, but I’m not too sure. It hasn’t really been a problem for me so I haven’t really thought about it.” Michael’s description demonstrates the resistance in the children of survivors against thinking about thoughts and feelings that relate to, on the one hand, their mothers’ traumatic histories and, on the other hand, the impact of these histories on the children themselves. He demonstrates a defensive resistance to thinking and asking about his mother’s history in the following response to a question that I posed.
regarding the extent to which his mother shares her history with him: “My mother tells me what I need to know. So I really don’t look for any more information. I don’t find it interesting if it doesn’t affect me.” This defensive resistance was specifically the case for the children whose mothers had concealed their trauma. The children’s understandings of their mothers’ histories and their experience of their mothers’ negative affective states were described in a fragmented, incomplete, or hazily articulated manner. One can see this in the following passage, taken from the interview with Hanna. Hanna’s mother was physically and emotionally abused by her (Hanna’s) grandmother. Hanna describes here her experience of her mother’s intense anger. Her struggle with formulating her experience can be seen here and is noticed in relation to a desire to disconnect from her feelings:

Um, . . . I suppose like what I feel is sort of like . . . but sort of like uh, like my heart, like . . . like you know I get like a shock, and I sort of just don’t want to feel it anymore.

The fragility and thinness of Hanna’s description indicates a defensive avoidance in the narrative structure in which there is dissociation from the tension evoked when she reflects on her experience of her mother. The notion of narrative impoverishment captures the texture of her description and reveals a disruption in inner and intersubjective dialogue.

As a final statement regarding the impoverished narrative as a defensively avoidant disruption of internal and relational dialogue, it is suggested that the children’s narratives reflect the disruption of a capacity for mentalization. The impoverishment in the narrative reveals in the children a limited capacity to think about their own thoughts and the thoughts of their mothers. I consider in relation to this the implications of avoidant tendencies on the children’s capacity to narrate subjective experience, emphasizing the disruption of mentalization. Fonagy (1998, 1999, 2001) conceived of mentalization as a reflective function by which one self comes to know the thoughts, feelings, desires, and fantasies of another self. As a form of internal dialogue, mentalization is disabled by a dissociative disruption of internal and relational dialogue. Fonagy (1998, 1999, 2001) has contributed to understandings of the ways in which the relationship between infant and mother enables the transmission of traumatic experience. Fonagy (1999) has shown that the reflective capacity of mentalization is associated with secure attachment in infancy and adulthood and has emphasized the centrality of this concept to research into the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Fonagy’s conception of mentalization clarifies the process by which the capacity for mentalization in the mother begets the same capacity in the child. Through being in relationship with a mother who is able to hold her own and her infant’s mental and affective states in mind, and
reflect those states, the infant is able to come to know his or her own experience. The child exists in a meaningful relational context in which he or she can come to know inner experience through the mother’s internal reverie. In the absence of this relational holding the child may develop a disrupted relationship with his or her internal states. The following passages, taken from interviews with two of the adult children, reflect the pattern of the disruption of a capacity for mentalization in the children of survivors:

I basically just block it out. I don’t take note.

I try to just ignore it completely basically. I think like, if I don’t know about it, it won’t affect me. It’s about trying to make my life easier. So if I don’t have to worry about something else then I can focus on what I need to.

There’s not much family issues that have gotten through to me that could affect me in a negative way. I’m aware of it but I didn’t really read into it much. I don’t really want to get involved with that. So, you could overhear a conversation or two, but ignore it because it’s like none of my business, so I wouldn’t read into it. I never really dug deeper. You don’t worry about it. It was okay.

In these passages one can see the children’s defensive indifference and implicit resistance to thinking about their mothers’ experiences, and their feelings about the reportedly unremarkable impact of these experiences on their own and their mothers’ lives. The children revealed a defensive resistance against interpreting the potential meaningfulness of significant parts of their lives. This trend is reflected in narratives that are qualitatively impoverished.

**DISSOCIATION AND RELATIONAL AVOIDANCE: THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE AS A DISRUPTION OF INNER AND INTERSUBJECTIVE DIALOGUE**

The second narrative trend that Dimaggio (2006) described is the *dominant narrative*, which resembles Lysaker and Lysaker’s (2002) *monologue* and Stern’s *narrative rigidity* (D. Stern, 1997). This narrative tendency manifests in the exclusion of significant psychic contents through the overemphasis of one particular narrative theme. Lysaker and Lysaker (2002) defined *monologue* as the dominance of one narrative theme over other themes. The monologue represents a psychic content that is more tolerable to the self and is therefore allowed exclusive entry into internal and relational dialogue.
D. Stern’s (1997) narrative rigidity, similarly, describes the emphasis in a narrative of one part of self to the exclusion of other parts, which evoke inner tension. This creates the illusion of self-coherence and integration, assisting the self in defending against awareness of painful internal states through disrupted internal dialogue.

The interviews with the mothers and their adult children revealed disrupted dialogue through narrative dominance. The reported disruptions of trauma-related memory in the mothers’ stories represent the disrupted dialogue between current and historical versions of self. The traumatic history represents a component of the self that the survivor desires to annihilate through holding it in a psychically disconnected space. As one of the mothers, Sylvia, suggested,

I never lived in the past. I let it go. I would just let it go. I never looked back. I didn’t ever think of the death of my mother. I self-destructed to hide away from, I don’t know, I just didn’t want to face what happened. I’ve been really killing myself, slowly; my real person. Not my body, but my mind.

Sylvia is a single mother of three, in her early 40s, who experienced severe neglect from a very early age, was repeatedly sexually abused from the age of 9, and witnessed her mother commit suicide by throwing herself under the wheels of an oncoming train. As with the other mothers, her participation in the research represented an act of communication of her traumatic past in which she included a previously disavowed part in her self. Through the interviews a dislocated self-state was allowed entry into the story of the self. The traumatically injured self-states, which she experienced as “robotic” and “numb,” became included as an affectively alive part of the self in the interviews. This process reflected the mothers beginning to engage differently with their dissociatively disavowed self-states. The interview was an act of communication between the mothers’ present and historical selves, located in the relationship between researcher and participant. In terms of the mothers’ relationships with their children, however, it was noted that their historical selves, being defensively excluded from intrapsychic dialogue, were simultaneously excluded from the relationship with the child. Just as the historical traumatized self represented a not-me component in the mother, it represented a not-you component in the child’s experience of their mother, a component that either was not known at all or, if known, was defensively disavowed in the children’s narratives. The entry of the mother’s painful emotions into the relationship between mother and adult child represented an indigestible experience for the child. The children’s response to this was one of negating the intolerable parts of the mother. This manifested either in the form of a desire to not know these parts of their mothers or in their efforts to keep the mothers’ traumatic history and painful affects
in an unformulated state in the narrative. Parts of the adult children’s self that contained painful affect, grief-laden memory, fear, and ambiguity were excluded from intrapsychic dialogue. Consequently these parts of self were defensively deleted from the narrative. These self-states, being inaccessible to internal dialogue, were similarly inaccessible to the intersubjective space. They could not be felt, could not be thought, were not articulated, and could not be known. As with Dimaggio’s (2006) dominant narrative, the parts of self that contained unambiguously positive self- and affective states were emphasized, vanquishing painful and frightening psychic contents both from the intersubjective space as well as from the child’s inner world. For example, Margaret’s son Michael disallowed in his narrative any descriptions of his mother as an emotional being, describing her instead in terms of her work-self, as a “professional person.” The following passage, taken from an interview with Tamsyn, whose mother, Toni, had survived repeated sexual abuse that began before the age of 6, reflects this:

I adore my mom. She’s the best mom I could ever have wished for. I think she had such an amazing way of being a parent. She’s just amazing as a person. I adore her. I mean I still view her as my mother but you know. It’s always this thing of, if you and your relatives weren’t related, would you want to actually be friends with them? I would definitely choose my mom as a friend.

The passage exemplifies Tamsyn’s pervasive need to foreground unambiguously positive descriptions of her mother and banish signs of conflict or pain in the relationship. Considering Tamsyn’s experience of her mother, note the following passage, in which Toni describes the experience of deadness, numbness, and absence to experience:

It came with the deadening. Just shutting down. And I don’t remember it. I don’t remember half of growing up. I don’t remember half of being married, and I don’t remember ‘cause I think I was like sleepwalking or something.

Toni’s experience of being absent to her inner life has notable implications for her being emotionally accessible to her child. Toni’s being in the world in a manner that reflects an ongoing dissociative process in her relationships could have impacted profoundly on her capacity to stay attuned to her daughter’s affective states. Tamsyn struggles to think about and communicate her experience of her mother as emotionally inaccessible and relationally misattuned. Her narrative reveals a dominance in which the version of her mother as “amazing” is foregrounded, excluding other more painful thoughts. Avoidance, as a primary defense against knowing, manifested in the adult children’s narratives in the form of dominance in the narrative
(Dimaggio, 2006) in which certain intrapsychic and relational experiences were disallowed from entry into the autobiographical narrative.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has demonstrated the transmission of a dissociative intrapsychic and relational theme from female survivors of childhood interpersonal trauma to their children. Through an analysis of narratives that was structured by a triangulation of phenomenological hermeneutic and narrative methodology and guided by insights derived from relational psychoanalysis and attachment theory, the participants’ patterns of avoidance and dissociation were demonstrated. These emerged primarily in the form of disrupted dialogue, manifesting in dominance and impoverishment (Dimaggio, 2006) in the narratives. The narratives were rigid and unyielding and concealed unpalatable experience. Such experience could not be held self-reflectively, was unshareable, and so could not find a relational home between self and other.

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