

The contested territory of
psychological trauma and its
implications for psychological
treatment of survivors of sexual
violence

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Essential and timeless

- An essential and timeless universal pattern of response to trauma, which underpins our modern day understanding of psychological trauma, exemplified by the diagnostic category of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- “people have always known that exposure to overwhelming terror can lead to troubling memories, arousal and avoidance...and the introduction of the PTSD diagnosis has opened the door to the scientific investigation of human suffering” van der Kolk, Wesiath and van der Hart (1996)

VS.

- No linear reading of history – lenses through which trauma was viewed (philosophical and theological) fundamentally different to the modern day medical model – “the invention or discovery of traumatic memory” (Young, 1996)
- “the study of war trauma becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the sacrifice of young men in war. The study of trauma in sexual and domestic life becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the subordination of women and children...Advances in the field can only occur when they are supported by a political movement powerful enough to legitimate an alliance between investigators and patients to counteract the ordinary process of silencing and denial” (Herman, 1992)

Key debates

- Is the aetiology of post traumatic symptoms physiological or psychological in nature?
- Physiological route leads to search for organic markers
- Psychological route medicalises and pathologises responses to traumatic events

Physiological route

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Crile



Cannon



Pavlov



- Roots in Darwinism developed through the work of Crile, Cannon and Pavlov
- Fear seen as phylogenetically transmitted memory of pain which precipitates a fear/flight response. Adaptive arousal, but with excessive activation leads to traumatised state
- Classical conditioning – development of phobias (avoidance) or state of learned helplessness

Psychological route

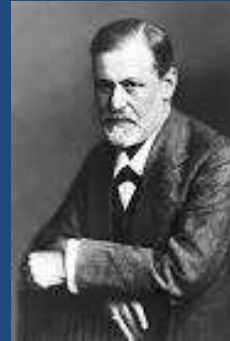
- Charcot



- Janet



- Freud



- Ferenczi



- The sense of self constituted through recalling and reflecting on past memories
- The need to maintain a balance between remembering too much and remembering too little to develop a self we can narrate

A trauma timeline

- Emerging feminist movement to assert reality of sexual violence.



Bertha Pappenheim

- Break in interest on psychological impact of trauma until WWI and WWII



Abram Kardiner, M.D.

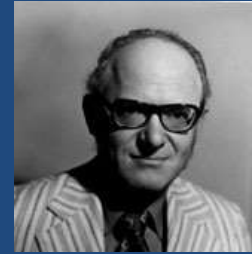


Trauma timeline continued:

- After WWII interest in trauma dwindles
- The Vietnam War ultimately forced a return to a consideration of the centrality of the effects of external trauma on the human psyche



Post Traumatic Stress Disorder



- Robert Jay Lifton
- Chaim Shatan
- 1974 work on new edition of DSM begins
- Drawing on the work of Selye, Freud, Janet, Kardiner, an overarching frame was proposed linking civilian and combat related responses to trauma
- A new classification of PTSD was proposed for inclusion in the DSM III and was accepted for including in the final version of the DSM III (1980)

Feminism and PTSD



- Vietnam anti-war movement coincided with birth of second wave feminism
- By 1970s feminists were foregrounding the socio-political nature of sexual violence
- This led to a growing focus on the psychological impact of sexual violence
- Rape Trauma Syndrome ultimately subsumed under PTSD

The dilemma

- By drawing on the emergence of a broader trauma rhetoric and discourse, formalised by PTSD, feminists were able to emphasise and give credence to the devastating impact of rape

BUT

- Rape victims are now defined by the traumatic experience of rape as psychologically damaged and able only to attend to that psychic injury

Implications for treatment: the personal is political

- Only some people (at worst half of survivors) develop post trauma symptoms
- A focus on symptoms post trauma serves to support an emphasis on individual responsibility for recovery
- It also focuses on the individual victim rather than on the broader socio-political context which not only enables the rape of women, but also profoundly informs the ways in which the suffering of victims of sexual violence is constructed and maintained