

Review of: "Viewing trauma as a developmental process emerging from chronic repeated experience and reiterated meaning-making mental processes"

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I support the arguments presented in Professor Ed Tronick's paper. I am familiar with this modelling of trauma, and I am aware of existing fields of literature which could be cited in support of what is written here. The emphasis that is placed on meaning is consistent with the work of Victor Frankl (1946). This is the principle that most trauma can be tolerated if we can find a way to make it meaningful. That is, that when all other choices are taken from us in an oppressive and traumatic situation, we still have the freedom to choose the stance that we take towards that experience (Frankl, 1946). The idea that we develop, adapt, and grow in response to trauma is supported in research conducted into Post Traumatic Growth. Richard Tedeschi has taken a lead in this area and the book Tedeschi et al. (2018) is a useful resource. These explorations open the possibility that trauma is a part of our healthy learning processes. There is the idea that a trauma can accelerate our learning, so that we experience ourselves as 'mature beyond our years' (Weiss, 2014).

I support Professor Tronick's use of neuroscience, but I would like to see some reference to the broader philosophical perspectives that I outline above.

Professor Tronick takes an empirical science perspective, looking at the human from a position outside of that state of being. This creates the illusion that humans exist as things, separate from their environment, that they are knowable outside of the progression of time. This creates some problems in the formulation of what is understood to be sexual abuse. Philosophy helps us to understand that the notion of the 'rational adult decision maker' is necessary for the functioning of our contemporary societies. Without this concept, we cannot hold people to account. Promises and related transactions would collapse. Functioning social relationships rely, however, on a retrospective construction of choice. We do not know the consequences of our choices when we make them, and whether they were right or wrong can only be decided with hindsight. Much conflict and debate in human affairs attends to questions of what people did and what they intended, because someone needs to be held to account for what has happened. While at the same time, it might not have been possible to have predicted what happened.

In contemporary societies, the difficulties we encounter in holding people to account have resulted in the requirement to assess 'mental capacity.' A four-year old is not thought to have the capacity to choose to be touched sexually by an adult, and they might not experience that touch as traumatic. I am troubled by the possibility that supposedly neutral and objective scientific approaches might lead to moral relativity. However, within these frameworks, capacity will be assumed

at a given older age. Then if permission is given, touching is not considered abusive. This means that if an adult person chooses to enter a sexual relationship, giving their consent, they cannot complain if they are used and abandoned, even though that experience might feel traumatic. Trauma is not then always to do with the personal experience at the time, but in the way that the event is given meaning afterwards. Those who have reported an experience of rape to the police, often find that the legal process is more traumatic than the rape.

Clearly it does not help when a person has experience sexual touching before they are able to understand what this means or to make informed choices about it. If we do not help our children to make choices over what happens to their bodies, how can they take responsibility for themselves? If we fail to help them experience and make sense of their emotions, as important responses to what happens to them, how will they learn to know what they want? I know from my counselling work and my lived experience that children are often managed and controlled, they are not adequately inducted into the freedoms and responsibilities of adulthood. It is then a difficult emotional process for an abuse survivor to take ownership of the truth that they did not choose to be abused, and to understand what this means. How is it that they can now be held to be responsible for their choices, when previously, their choices were taken from them? The notion of alexithymia makes sense as a failure to experience oneself as a free choice-making agent, in a society where others hold that expectation.

I support Professor Tronick's observations on learning theory, and that violent chastisement is problematic. I recall seeing a mother instructing her child not to hit his brother on the head. This was performed by rhythmically hitting her child on the head while reciting 'don't-hit-people-on-the-head'. The mother was performing an action while claiming that this action should not be performed: highly paradoxical and confusing for the child. Children have a strong grasp from an early age on what is fair and what is unfair in human interactions. As adults we continue to wrestle with philosophical notions such as utilitarianism and deontology.

Trauma is of course a metaphor borrowed from medicine and applied in psychology. It implies damage, and this paper is useful in questioning this narrow framing of the experience. Austerity is an associated notion, which turns our attention towards the chronic nature of some life-difficulties. Yes, as the paper explains, these relational and social situations which have a biological impact on the body. Yes, this might be mediated by individual traits and psychological dispositions.

Historic and cross-cultural perspectives are useful and there are influential philosophers who introduced the notion of the 'individual and adaptive human' in Western cultural thought. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, for example, observed the need for a harsh childhood. They argued that children must encounter hardships and challenges, if that is, they are to develop into adaptive and successful adults. If we do not expose children to the truths of existence, how will they learn? Yet a practice of shielding children from harsh realities as crept in. It is likely that in collectivist societies other dynamics are at play.

One last minor point: I suggest that it is unhelpful to use the expressions 'the unconscious and conscious.' These have specific and problematic meanings in psychodynamic theory and are unhelpfully adopted to construct psychological dualisms in everyday talk. I find it is more helpful to use the term 'preconscious,' to indicate that there are phenomena that we have not yet brought into our awareness.

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