

Trauma, Science, and Society

Bessel A. van der Kolk,
Alexander C. McFarlane,
and Lars Weisaeth (Eds.)
**Traumatic Stress: The Effects of
Overwhelming Experience on Mind,
Body, and Society**
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Review by
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Bessel A. van der Kolk, director of the Trauma Center at Human Resources Institute in Brookline, Massachusetts, and associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School (Boston), is past president of the International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies and the author of two previous books on the human response to trauma and served as coprincipal investigator for the DSM-IV Field Trial for PTSD. ■ Alexander C. McFarlane, professor of psychiatry at the University of Adelaide (South Australia, Australia) and head of the Department of Psychiatry at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in South Australia, is president-elect of the International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies and conducts clinical work with victims of various traumas, including war, torture, disasters, and accidents. ■ Lars Weisaeth, professor of disaster psychiatry at the University of Oslo (Norway), is a frequent consultant to the United Nations and other international organizations regarding approaches to treating traumatized civilians and soldiers. ■ Anne P. DePrince, graduate student in clinical psychology at the University of Oregon (Eugene), is coauthor, with S. A. Quirk, of "Childhood Trauma: Politics and Legislative Concerns" in S. Contratto and M. J. Gutfreund (Eds.) A Feminist Clinician's Guide to the Memory Debate. ■ Jennifer J. Freyd, professor of psychology at the University of Oregon, is a fellow of several organizations, including the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (1989-1990), the American Psychological Association, the American Psychological Society, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Freyd is recipient of the 1997 Distinguished Publication Award from the Association of Women in Psychology and the 1997 Pierre Janet Award from the International Society for the Study of Dissociation. Freyd is author of Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse.

The combat veteran is told he is a coward. The woman is told she provoked her husband's violence. The child is told she made up her reports of molestation and rape. Van der Kolk, McFarlane, and Weisaeth speak poignantly to those who are blamed for their suffering, to the researchers and clinicians who work with individuals who have experienced trauma, and to society more in general. This book moves the reader beyond victim blaming into a setting where arguments for social responsibility for trauma and its effects are made on the basis of compelling scientific evidence. Falling somewhere between an edited volume and a monograph, well over half of the 25 chapters are authored or coauthored by one or more of the three editors. Additional authors include many of the leaders in the field of traumatic stress studies. From the acknowledgments with a dedication to Nelson Mandela for his courageous work to guide his country in healing to the closing chapter discussing future directions for science and society,

the editors have compiled chapters that cover a wide range of research and clinical issues, while reminding the reader that both the individual and society must play a role in addressing trauma.

Taken as a whole, the chapters delineate the state of the science that addresses the effects of violence on both the individual and society, as well as cover more specific topics such as the history of traumatic stress studies, acute reactions and adaptations to trauma, memory, developmental-social-cultural issues, and treatment. The book has a primary focus on posttraumatic stress reactions to trauma (presenting evidence ranging from the psychobiology and etiology of posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD] to PTSD treatment and even the debate over the classification of PTSD as an anxiety disorder). At the same time, like a small number of classic volumes in the field of traumatic stress (e.g., Herman, 1992; Janet 1889; van der Kolk, 1987), this book is remarkable for including not only this scientific and medical viewpoint, but

also the sociopolitical context in which trauma, its study, and its treatment occur.

Although the entire volume is valuable as a whole and the majority of chapters are individually superb, a few chapters stand out for their excellence and relevance to the entire field of traumatic stress studies. In their chapter "The Black Hole of Trauma," van der Kolk and McFarlane lay out a framework for PTSD rooted in an information-processing approach. The authors consider six issues related to information processing in individuals experiencing PTSD, noting the complexity inherent in PTSD. The discussion is informed by research stretching over the last 50 years and culminates in consideration of the implications these data have for clinical treatment. As is characteristic of the entire volume, research is presented in a manner that conveys compassion and informs action, be it in clinical practice or further research endeavors. In addition, the authors skillfully relate the chapter to the larger themes of the volume and pave a coherent path to related chapters (e.g., a later chapter on the therapeutic environment).

Van der Kolk walks the reader through the psychobiology of traumatic stress in his chapter, "The Body Keeps the Score." He reviews extensive research on neurohormonal changes related to traumatic stress in the context of theories of emotion and trauma and considers the impact traumatic stress has on the brain and limbic structures in particular. He closes the chapter with current research in the area of neuroimaging. Specifically, van der Kolk discusses data that suggest there is a lateralization of brain activity during traumatic memories in the right hemisphere, notably the nonverbal hemisphere of the brain. The data presented inform not only research into the psychobiology of PTSD, but also clinical issues related to how memories may or may not be verbally accessible. This chapter also ties nicely into other chapters, such as one on memory for trauma.

The closing chapter written by McFarlane and van der Kolk summarizes the essence of the volume. It calls for action informed by the sociopolitical forces that necessarily influence all of science, and particularly issues related to trauma. The authors address the inherently political nature of trauma and call for recognition of biases in the practice of science. As exemplified by the entire volume, we are struck by the compassionate and respectful tone taken by the authors when they note,

There are aspects of the experience of trauma

that cannot be captured in medical and scientific models, but that go to the core of what it is like to be human—how we see ourselves and our relationships to our fellow human beings. (p. 573)

Van der Kolk, McFarlane, and Weisaeth define trauma as an overwhelming stressor, and the chapter contributions are driven by this definition. Much of the discussion in this volume deals, either implicitly or explicitly, with the assumption that traumatic experiences are high in arousal and fear or terror. We suspect that the definition used by the authors may not satisfactorily capture the breadth of traumatic experiences. Arguably, traumatic experiences can fall at different points on dimensions of terror or fear (corresponding to threats to life—things that actually can cause bodily harm) and social betrayal (corresponding to degree of betrayal and threats to social relationships). Some traumas can be high on both dimensions, including many of the types of traumatic experiences with which this volume is concerned (e.g., the Holocaust, some combat experiences, and much childhood sexual abuse). However, some traumas that lead to forms of traumatic stress are high on only one dimension. For example, a natural disaster would be high in terror, but not in social betrayal. On the other hand, molestation by a trusted caregiver may be high in social betrayal, but not high in terror (Freyd, 1996, in press). Arguably, traumatic experiences that fall at any point on these dimensions may lead to sequelae discussed in this volume, such as memory disturbance.

From this viewpoint, the definition of trauma as an overwhelming experience does not capture events that are high in social betrayal alone. Sequelae, such as memory disturbance, rising from traumas that are high in social betrayal likely involve different cognitive and neural systems than events that are high in fear or terror where there is memory disturbance. We would argue that there are probably multiple processes that underlie posttraumatic stress responses, some of which related to fear and others related to attachment and betrayal (Freyd, in press), and that the book would have been more broadly applicable to a wider range of traumas had the roles of attachment and betrayal been more fully considered (as was the case with van der Kolk's classic 1987 monograph).

Van der Kolk, McFarlane, and Weisaeth have made an invaluable contribution to the field of traumatic stress studies, and psychology in general. We highly recom-

mend this book to researchers, clinicians, students, and all of those committed to understanding and taking responsibility for the effects of trauma on the individual and society.

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The Damage Done and Utopian Dreams

Nick Crossley

Intersubjectivity: The Fabric of Social Becoming

London: Sage, 1996. 188 pp.
ISBN 0-8039-7903-7 (hardcover);
0-8039-7904-5 (paperback). \$65.00
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Tod Sloan

Damaged Life: The Crisis of the Modern Psyche

London: Routledge, 1996. 157 pp.
ISBN 0-415-04351-4 (hardcover);
0-415-04352-2 (paperback). \$55.00
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Joel Whitebook

Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory

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