

*Trauma's Legacy
Psychology 607, Winter 2004,
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February 92, 2004:

February 9 Topic: Betrayal Blindness, Politics, and Ethics

Discussion Leader: Rose Barlow

I'd like to hear your thoughts on the relationship of betrayal trauma theory to politics and ethics. It seems like we've already discussed situations of political betrayal blindness—leaders not wanting to see, the public not being educated about what their leaders are doing, etc. I found this passage, which I thought was very relevant. It's from an article in *Smithsonian* about Baghdad:

In a neighborhood of stucco houses, the headmistress of the Noral Shan primary school told me, with apparent sincerity, that she was angry about the destruction of Saddam's regime and was grieving for him. She described him as a father figure to her as well as her nearly 1,000 students. I asked her about the horrors that Saddam had wrought on his people, such as the murders then coming to light with the discovery of mass graves. "I do not believe it," she said, adding: "And if he did kill those people, they deserved it."

[...] "People love Saddam because they are afraid of him," my driver, a 42-year-old man named Ali, explained to me. "This is a very strong kind of love. We are always afraid to say our feelings."

What do you think it will take in order for the Iraqi people to stop being afraid? In another part of the article, the headmistress says they are teaching their children to forget what happened under Saddam's rule. To what extent is this a good idea?

→ It seems related to traumatic attachment: need to be attached to the abuser, therefore the self is bad. Does the U.S. have some sort of official policy about what is taught in Iraqi schools regarding Saddam? (probably not...)

What happens to a family when an abusive father is suddenly gone? It probably depends on the circumstances. Is the U.S. *also* an abusive father? (Iraqis don't see us as liberators.) If one abusive father is merely replaced with another, perhaps generalized amnesia is the best response. If the situation changes, though, it could be empowering for the family and make it ok to talk about things.

If there are limited resources available for higher-order thinking, then you have to react with emotions (cognitive dissonance and focus on survival needs).

The American media seem to portray the Middle East in a skewed way. Who owns the media? No alternative viewpoints presented. It seems that, more and more, there is censoring of the news due to marketing concerns.

What possible betrayal blindness exists in our own lives? We are all adults, and somewhat cynical about political leaders. Are there people or institutions that we as a group depend on and trust (FDA)? Who depends on us?

→ Even scientific journals show signs of censoring and the influence of advertising. What are the motivations for the observers, not just the oppressed, to have betrayal blindness?

Power differentials: can you have betrayal blindness in a relationship where the power is totally equal? (Does such a relationship exist?) Maybe thinking it's equal is part of the blindness! "Love means never having to say you're sorry." (Lots of implications for therapy.)

There are lots of power differentials in academia.

Here is the article about lack of hierarchy at Cambridge:

<http://chronicle.com/prm/weekly/v50/i22/22a03201.htm>

If you took away all denial, would there still be hierarchy? Is there still dominance? Perhaps increasing communication decreases both denial and the strictness of hierarchies.

When is it ethical to lift someone else's betrayal blindness (BB)? Is it better that they not know what happened to them? The Blease and Freyd paper also raises the issue about the costs of *not* asking about trauma. What would happen to our society if we all asked about childhood abuse?

→ If they are still in the situation, let them keep their defenses. If they do have power currently, you might try to lift the blindness. Perhaps it's unethical *not* to make people aware, because denial perpetuates abuse.

How do you lift BB? Logical argument is not the way. Again, lots of implications for therapy. Should we be neutral? (no...) Acknowledging a therapeutic mistake acts out a powerful counter to denial. Therapy is about having a good relationship, not about having an agenda. "Therapy means having to say you're sorry."

Helen Garrod's case: Reading her description of why she decided to bring a lawsuit years later, she says, "Then in January 2001, I "snapped" or "switched" -- it was sudden and quite disturbing, like Ms Angry Betrayed had just stabbed Ms Deeply Attached in the back." Why did it require violence against herself in order to make her story public? Could it have something to do with why she is still a member of the party she brought a case against? Do you think her anger and betrayal towards the Labour Party were affected by the oppression she felt in society as a disabled person?

→ simultaneous love for the abuser and anger at the abuser—it's hard to have both at once. There seems to be intolerance in this country for ambivalence, for both loving *and* criticizing at the same time.

More stories about Helen's case:

<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/labour/story/0,9061,783201,00.html>

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/newspaper/0,,173-397683,00.html> (username anonymous, password anonymous)

Speaking of people who felt betrayed by a political party, how do you think the disastrous mess of the 2000 presidential election influenced Bush's subsequent approval ratings (for unrelated matters)?

→ I was thinking a lot about cognitive dissonance here. Maybe we feel in need of a powerful father figure to protect us. Lloyd DeMause: *The Political Life of Nations* (<http://www.psychohistory.com> has chapters online; fascinating reading).

Birrell and Freyd quote the Dalai Lama as saying that compassion arises from “the inability to bear the sight of another's suffering” (B&F p. 15). Given that we can't do relational therapy with an entire society (or can we?), how can we take in the sight of atrocities in the world and turn to compassion rather than dissociation and denial? “every moment is the ethical moment...” (p. 16)

→ Is it right to try and impose *our* view that we *must* get rid of denial? Maybe it's really ok to have an agenda, even if just for public health reasons. There are different types of denial, of course.

Education is sorely lacking in a lot of ways. “Healthy relationships” education in middle and high school doesn't include information about parenting. Can we teach in schools about the intergenerational effects of child abuse, without making it personal? Definitely teens need to be taught about asking before initiating physical contact. Talking about things, in general, helps those with less power. Not talking about sex perpetuates power differentials.

Articles about Antioch College's ask-before-you-kiss policy:

http://www.antioch-college.edu/community/survival_guide/campus_resources/sopsap.htm

<http://www.holysmoke.org/fem/fem0064.htm>

<http://www.thelantern.com/news/2002/10/31/Campus/Defining.Rape-311816.shtml>

here's an interesting backlash: <http://www.menweb.org/throop/falsereport/antioch.html>
<http://www.ysnews.com/history/>