

The Complexity of Traumatic Experience –

Clinical Case Example

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The following clinical vignette is from an initial consultation in which a nine year old boy described his experience of his father's unexpected early morning violence. It highlights the extreme complexity of the child's experience, the multiplicity of traumatic moments, the layering of psychodynamic attributions, the emergence of affects associated with changing appraisals, and the interjection of intervention fantasies accompanying both appraisals and affects. The violent episode occurred within the context of a pending marital separation, as yet unannounced to the children. The child knew his father had been experiencing severe occupational difficulties, and had also been aware that his father had been depressed for several weeks, but had refused treatment.

Section I. Before Personal Injury

Initial Appraisal

Awakened by his mother's screams, he fearfully imagined that an intruder had entered the house. As he heard shuffling noise in the hallway that moved closer to his door, he felt "a lot of fear;" "I felt my heart beating and I wanted to shrink back into the wall." At first he did not recognize his father as he entered the boy's room, assuming still it was an unknown intruder. He then felt a momentary relief, thinking, "Oh, Dad's here," assuming he was there to protect him.

Section II. Under Personal Attack

However, he then became terrified in seeing the unusual look of detachment on his father's face and hearing him making a grunting sound, like the start-up sound of a lawn mower. As the father approached, the boy had entertained two fantasies, first, that he wished he had kept his baseball bat close at hand rather than in the closet and, second, that he wished it had been one of those mornings when he had to get up early for his sports team practice, so he would have been out of the house. (When he was four, he was afraid of robbers and, indeed, kept the bat near his bed, but had subsequently retired it to the closet.) As he spoke in the interview, he elaborated on the fantasy of getting to his bat in the closet and throwing it at his father, expressing the fearful consideration that if he had hit his father, but did not disarm him, his father, in retaliation, would step away and throw the knife at him, possibly striking him in the chest with the sharp, not the blunt end.

Violation of His Physical Integrity

As his father raised his hand in a menacing manner, as if preparing to strike him, the son continued to harbor his first thoughts of an intruder and momentarily thought his father to be part of a conspiracy. He yelled, "Daddy stop, don't hurt anyone, don't hurt mommy or. . .," his sister. Suddenly he felt totally physically helpless to protect himself through words or action. With a sense of passive resignation, he then experienced a marked diminution of his fearfulness, while becoming singularly focused on the physical sensation of being stabbed by his father, actually cut behind the head and ear by a knife. His father then quickly left the room, and the boy became aware of the blood on his clothes. Scared and left to his own imagination because he could not see the wound, he tried to tell himself it was not too serious.

Section III. After the Cessation of Violence

Being Alone

Just after his father left, he yelled, “Mom, can I come out; should I stay; are you all right?” He recounted yelling at least five times. He said, “I could tell she was hurt, but I didn’t think she was dead.” He kept praying, “Please answer.” When she did not, he suddenly felt scared again, his heart pounding so loud he could hear it. He feared she was in shock or hiding. He wanted to run and leave the house, but he knew the safe thing to do was to stay in his room. Still maintaining his conspiracy thoughts, he feared that ‘someone’ might be waiting outside the door. Above all, he wished that he could just hold on to his mother’s hand.

He said it was weird that, up to this point, he had not thought about his sister getting hurt. After he saw her fearfully running outside past his window, he suddenly felt badly that he had forgotten about her in his worries for himself and then for his mother.

Reunion With Mother

Although badly injured herself, his mother did come to his room, and took him to his bathroom to try to stop his bleeding with a towel. The scene in the bathroom felt strange, and interlude of unreal calm in contrast to the preceding violent moments. He felt confused. He asked her, “Mom, who did this to me, was it Dad?” She answered, “I think so.” In the interview he added, “I knew it was Dad, but I did not want to think so, and my mother wanted to protect me from thinking Dad tried to hurt me.” As his Mom sat on the toilet, he focused on the expression on her face, perceiving her to be surprised, frightened and angry. He saw a lot of blood on the towel and, for the first time, seeing his bloody ear in the mirror, knew he was really hurt. As they got up and left his room and went out into the hallway, his mother put her arm around him; he felt

“real scared” and kept looking behind his back for his father. He identified this walk down the hallway to the front door as his most frightening moment, for the first time requiring him to muster his courage. His mother told him that she had called 911. Although worried for himself, in this waiting interval, he also felt ineffectual to help with his mother’s neck injury; he could only hope the ambulance would get there soon.

Arrival of the Police

Indeed, it arrived within minutes. Although he wondered where his father was, he felt immediately less scared once out of the house. The police also soon arrived, and he related that it felt good to tell the police what had happened. He wanted them to know, even though “I was not proud.” He had the additional disturbing thought that his father wanted to die, but he did not actively think of his father committing suicide.

Rescue and Hospital Care

His sister returned with the arrival of the police and paramedics, and, for the first time, he saw that her hand had been badly cut. He, his mother and sister were then transported to the hospital. He recalled a good feeling of being in good care as he was put on the stretcher and taken into the ambulance. His wounds were sutured in the emergency room, while his mother was taken to surgery. He and his sister then had a protracted wait during the mother’s surgery before being informed that she would survive and physically recover. It was only much later that he found out that his father had gone to the back of the house and stabbed himself, and was now in a prison hospital.

