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Editorial

The abused and the abuser: Victim–perpetrator dynamics

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From the beginning, humanity has been riddled with brutality. Slavery, human sacrifice, burning “witches,” publically punishing women for disobeying their husbands, religious massacres, legitimized torture, grotesque public executions, and what we would now call inhumane treatment of children (e.g., caning)—were not only common but sanctioned as central activities in the sociocultural foundation of most societies. Fear was embedded in law, morality, and culture. What we now look at as the relationship between abused and abuser were at one time simply the relationship between adults and children (DeMause, 1998), slaves and their owners, men and women, a perpetrator and his victim, and a prisoner and his jailer (Sar, Middleton, & Dorahy, 2014). Over the years, our views and values have changed (Pinker, 2011). In today’s Western culture, such actions and interactions are largely illegal, or their morality is strongly questioned, even though they occur with not uncommon frequency. Where brutal interactions do occur, they are thought to be the cause of *trauma*: a potentially irreparable injury to the person’s psyche, and a potential cause of mental disorders.

Modern Western culture holds human rights as a central value, which applies to *everyone*. A person of any age, gender, race, religion, or nation should be safe from degrading or violent treatment. We should all be free to make personal choices. Our bodies must be respected. Children have to be safe from harm. While these expectations are still very far from being reached, they do mark our values and laws. This in itself brings us closer to them than we have ever been before. It is a great achievement. A disturbing side effect of this achievement, however, is that where offences against human rights (e.g., child abuse, human trafficking, torture) continue to occur, they are characterized by greater and concealment.

Dickensian children could be hurt openly, as they were deemed someone’s property (and referred to as ‘it’). Generally, today’s children are better off; but where they are hurt, such behavior is hidden. Silence from perpetrators, witnesses, and victims create and perpetuate the hidden nature of abuse and human rights violations. The perpetrators of acts which are now both illegal and shameful do their best to keep their actions a secret. Witnesses are reluctant to get “involved” and demonstrate an unwillingness to register fully the perpetration of abuse and act on it. The victims themselves often feel too powerless, too shamed by their weakness, and too contaminated with the evil done to them to come out from the shadows. And very often, they also feel deeply connected to their abusers.

The perpetrators, their victims, and the reluctant witnesses form together a complex and highly emotive relationship, bound in secrets and silence. These are not strangers, but people often who know each other well and play central roles in each other lives. Disentangling their relationship from the harm which is done through the relationship is as painful as the harm itself, and very hard to reach. Shedding light on this complicated and charged relationship is the task that we have asked the contributors to this special issue to engage with.

Papers address the abused and the abuser from empirical (Gagnon, Lee, & DePrince; Krüger & Fletcher), therapeutic (Ross), and theoretical (Dorahy; Liotti; Sachs; Sinason; Solinski) angles, drawing on neuroscientific, cognitive, affective, attachment, relational, psychodynamic, betrayal trauma, and animal models, among others. Abused and abuser dynamics are examined primarily in child–adult relationships, with some attention also given to adult dyads (Miller). Topics still lingering on the fringe of the trauma literature, or those largely absent, such as mother–son incest (Haliburn), organized abuse (Salter), supervisory challenges in managing dissociative abuser dynamics (Chefet), ongoing incestuous abuse (Middleton), and sexual enactment in the therapy context as a form of safety (Kluft) are addressed. Reflections of a lived experience of professional ostracization associated with espousing the reality and effect of abuse are also shared (Masson). The uniqueness of bringing together such a collection of papers on the abused and the abuser in this special issue is reflected in this being the first ever double issue of the *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation*.

Cover-up dynamics and the dynamics of openness

In September 1897, a 41-year-old Sigmund Freud, in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess, who is considered by many to represent the closest male friendship of his life, famously renounced his “seduction theory” and thus positioned the about-to-be-born field of psychoanalysis solidly in the province of Oedipal fantasy, an early and not unwelcome revision as judged by several of Freud’s peers (Masson, [1984](#)). The particular irony of Freud sharing his perspective about what he claimed were inaccurate recollections of childhood sexual abuse is that he was sharing them with a man who appeared to be an abuser. In the writings of his son Robert and daughter-in-law Elenore, Wilhelm Fliess is described as having “ambulatory psychosis”: “The child of such a parent becomes the object of substantially defused aggression (maltreated and beaten almost to within an inch of his life), and of a perverse sexuality that hardly knows an incest barrier (is seduced in the most bizarre ways by the parent and, at his instigation, by others)” (Fliess, [1956](#), p. xvii). Elenore describes her father-in-law as a man “who however charming to patients and acquaintances was a tyrant at home. His children were second-class citizens, from diet to schooling” (as quoted by Sulloway, [1992](#), p. 191).

It is clear that right from the time that Freud announced his original theory regarding a sexual abuse etiology for hysteria in 1896, the abused and the abuser have been inexorably entwined. Like many abuse victims, it took most of his life for Robert Fliess to even briefly draw attention to the fact that despite the outer trappings of professional respectability, his father was highly abusive. The fact that Freud and many of his fellow early analysts were sexually abused as children did not stop mainstream psychoanalysis from de-emphasizing the reality of childhood sexual abuse (Middleton, [2016](#)).

Many abusers live among us hiding in plain sight, never publicly identified, despite abusing multiple victims over decades. This points to the existence of powerful long-term dynamics which cause the victims to remain silent. Common reasons for such silence are that victims have been threatened about the consequences of telling, that they have been convinced that they will not be believed, that they have already experienced poor outcomes from attempts to report ongoing abuse, that the shame occasioned by accommodating sexual assaults makes them extremely avoidant about speaking of what was done to them; or that some of the details of the abuse got buried behind a dissociative amnesic barrier. Of course, some victims are essentially captives or slaves and have little or no opportunity to tell anyone, and no one to protect them.

In his early theorizing, Freud gave particular importance to the “pleasure principle”—the notion that the central guiding characteristic of human functioning was the seeking of pleasure and the avoidance of unpleasure. Repeatedly putting oneself

who had witnessed the carnage of World War I envelop humanity, to seek an understanding of the compulsion to repeat trauma that went *beyond the pleasure principle* (1920), leading him to philosophical speculations about a “death instinct,” which when externalized, becomes the source of aggression. In evolutionary terms however, where the principle of “survival of the fittest” has such centrality, a “death instinct” for the human species proved hard to rationally integrate (Breger, 2000). Yet what continues to challenge social thinking, and is wrestled within one way or another in many papers in this special issues, is the compulsion to repeat trauma and victimization.

Ferenczi in 1932, engaging with the complexity of the dynamic involving the abused and the abuser, introduced the concept of introjection of, or identification with the aggressor (Masson, 1984), and over the years there have been multiple attempts to better understand the dynamics of repetition compulsion, the cycles of domestic violence, the nature of trans-generational trauma, and the dynamics between captor and captive, including the delineation of the “Stockholm Syndrome.” The latter does not require an actual hostage, but encompasses strong emotional ties that develop when one side intermittently harasses, threatens, beats, abuses, or intimidates the other (Dutton & Painter, 1981). Variations on this dynamic are associated with incest scenarios, cults, concentration camps, prisoner of war camps, the conditioning of child soldiers, or those perpetrating modern-day slavery—indeed with any enduring relationship where an abuser exerts physical/psychological control. Increasingly into the mix is a focus on the actions (or lack thereof) of witnesses or those indirectly aware of the abuser’s actions and the abused’s victimization. The Bystander Effect (anticipating others will respond) and a raft of other rationalizations designed to neutralize threats to the world being safe, just and fair, support and promote inaction.

Recent history has seen an important (if insufficient) openness of society to recognizing multiple forms of trauma, as well as progression of human rights and the related issues of sexual, racial, and religious/ethnic equality. The world has patchily become more democratic and an emphasis on human rights more prominent. The way in which the relationship between abusers and their victims maintains silence and acquiescence is the central reason for many grievous crimes never being reported. And even where they are reported, the victim’s attachment to their perpetrator is such that police and child protection authorities are frequently stymied in their actions. Indeed they may rationalize non-intervention on the basis that such victims are uncooperative, somehow active participants, or of such low value, as to not merit active assistance—in effect a powerless underclass.

As a backdrop to a special issue concerned with victim–perpetrator dynamics, it is useful to reflect on a world that has repeatedly found new ways to dismiss credible information about trauma and abuse, while society’s established institutions have on many occasions provided another shelter for abusers to access the vulnerable and collaborate with other abusers, while being shielded by processes that protect the institution and thus facilitate victims becoming expendable. Social media allows the possibility for like-minded perpetrators to coalesce and expand, creating more victims.

There are a great many examples from the last 120 years that followed on from Freud’s renunciation of his own so-called seduction theory which chart a progression in our understanding of trauma. Unfortunately, repeated regressions are also very common. A few selected examples are illustrative.

Bleuler’s construct of “schizophrenia” as laid out in his classic 1911 text (Bleuler, 1911/1950) effectively subsumed multiple personality disorder (MPD) (dissociative identity disorder, DID) as well as hysterical psychosis. By the 1970s, the use of the diagnosis “schizophrenia,” along with its presumed biological/genetic etiology marginalized any focus on trauma as an etiological factor in the causation of mental illness (Middleton, Dorahy, & Moskowitz, 2008; Ross, 2004). Early studies that demonstrated the widespread nature of intrafamilial child abuse had little impact. For example, in a study of 295 female middle-class hospital patients, Landis (1940) found that 23.7% had been sexually abused before puberty, 12.5% by a family member. The Kinsey Report (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953) included a finding that of the 4,441 white middle-class females examined, 24% had been sexually abused before puberty, 5.5% by a family member, and 1% by a father/step father.

When Leontine Young published “Wednesday’s Children: A Study of Child Neglect and Abuse” (Young, [1964](#)), she describes her research beginning “almost by accident” when she read case records in the public child welfare department of a small midwestern city and “discovered this nightmare world within a world” (p. 4). Yet despite widespread press reports including accounts of 662 cases of severe child abuse published from January through December of 1962 in US newspapers that involved incest and other forms of child abuse, such reports failed to ignite much scientific study, despite the fact that 178 of the children died as a result of their injuries. While the “Battered Child Syndrome” (Kempe, Silverman, Droegemuller, & Silver, [1962](#)) entered the literature in 1962, the profound psychological effects of trauma was something repeatedly avoided. The publication of DSM-II (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) coincided with the [1968](#) Tet Offensive in Vietnam. It replaced “gross stress reaction” with “(transient) adjustment disorder of adult life.” There was one reference to combat—as “fear associated with military combat and manifested by trembling, running, and hiding” (American Psychiatric Association, DSM-II, [1968](#), p. 49). This was categorized as equivalent to an “unwanted pregnancy.”

When Bowers and co-authors (Bowers, Brecher-Marer, Newton, Piotrowski, Spyer, Taylor, & Watkins, [1971](#)) wrote about the therapy of MPD, there was little reason to believe that a dissociative disorders field would form or that their paper would be other than another orphan.

Holroyd and Brodsky in 1977 opened another window into the complexity of victim–perpetrator dynamics when they reported on a sample of 1,000 psychologists. Of the 70% who completed the survey, 12.1% of male psychologists and 2.6% of female psychologists acknowledged having had erotic contact with at least one opposite-sex patient. The same year saw the publication of Rush’s feminist analysis, “The Freudian Cover-up,” no less than 80 years after Freud retreated from the field of researching child sexual abuse. Seven years later Jeffrey Masson, armed with access to key correspondence from Freud to his then friend, Fliess, extended the examination of the relevant evidence as to why Freud abandoned his seduction theory when he published, “The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory” (see Masson this issue).

DSM-III was published in 1980 and it included as entities with diagnostic criteria, borderline personality disorder, MPD [which was renamed DID in the DSM-IV], and post-traumatic stress disorder. A fledgling coalition of those aligned with the psychological processes of traumatized veterans and researchers who incorporated a feminist perspective was in evidence. Important books and papers soon came out on issues related to the sexual mistreatment of children and its impact, including within the sacrosanct confines of the family (e.g., Herman, [1981](#); Russell, [1986](#); Yates, [1982](#)). But again these largely failed at the time to ignite widespread scientific interest in abuser–abused dynamics.

The year associated with the introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, saw the publication of the first comprehensive texts on the diagnosis and treatment of MPD (Putnam, [1989](#); Ross, [1989](#)). By this time, a brewing challenge was evident for the dissociative disorders field. There was a renewed focus on therapeutic boundaries, the nature of human memory, and influences on it. The trauma field found itself having to scientifically address with urgency the challenges of what became known as the (false) recovered memory debate. An organization (the False Memory Syndrome Foundation) came into existence claiming that no one “forgets” major trauma and alleging that large numbers of practitioners were practicing a form of therapy that created false memories of abuse that had never in fact occurred. At one level it assumed that therapists were capable of wielding enormous psychological power—manipulating the minds of patients to convince them that major sexual traumas had occurred in their childhood. But it became apparent that where individuals initially recovered memories of past sexual traumas, therapy was not the usual precipitant and the degree to which memories can be truly completely created appears to have been inflated (Brewin & Andrews, [2016](#)). Those whose trauma involved betrayal seemed more likely than others to experience amnesia for their childhood trauma (Freyd, [1996](#); Middleton, De Marni Cromer, & Freyd, [2005](#)). Elliott and Briere ([1995](#)) reported that a history of “complete” memory loss was most common among victims of child sexual abuse (20%), while a substantially higher proportion of such victims had significant amnesia for particular details of their traumas. This indicated, as did later research, that ongoing child sexual abuse required a profound adaptation on the part of the victim in respect to living with their abuser.

The year 1992 marked the publication of Judith Herman's classic integrative text, "Trauma and Recovery," (Herman, [1992a](#)) as well as her initial description of "Complex PTSD" (Herman, [1992b](#)). The same year saw the first major book dealing with the US Catholic Church child abuse scandal (Berry, [1992](#)). The Catholic Church became a focal example of the role institutions can play in the widespread sexual abuse of children, a role that is the antithesis of their reasons for existing, but now uncovered, has much to teach on how institutions and the abusers' standing within them can be incorporated into the abuser–victim dynamics.

Speaking directly to dynamics involving the abused, the abuser, and those that bear witness or have knowledge of what has occurred or is occurring, 300,000 Belgian citizens in 1996 marched in protest at perceived cover-ups by police and compromised politicians concerning the serial killer and paedophile, Marc Dutroux and his accomplices. In 2000, there was the initiation of a Royal Commission into sexual abuse of children by members of the Irish Catholic clergy. Two years later the Archdiocese of Boston was the focus of worldwide attention as it became apparent that in excess of 10% of its priests had been involved in the sexual abuse of children (Sullivan, [2002](#); France, [2004](#)). In 2008, the case of Josef Fritzl attracted global attention. He imprisoned his daughter Elisabeth in an underground cellar for 24 years while treating her as a sexual slave who bore him seven children. This brought with it an unprecedented focus on cases of ongoing sexual abuse during adulthood from around the globe (Middleton, [2014](#)). The fact that this form of extreme and enduring abuse (which frequently has a trans-generational dimension), could have been reported on in a piecemeal fashion for a century and a half before the first scientific investigation into populations of such victims, is illustrative of the ineffectiveness of child protection agencies and police in substantiating such abuse, even when there have been repeated notifications, as well perhaps as caution from a trauma field still assimilating the lessons of the Satanic Ritual Abuse Controversy and the so-called memory wars. It also speaks of the effectiveness of perpetrators (themselves frequently the victims of similar abuse) in maintaining high levels of control of their victims. Such victims frequently had not been permitted to develop enough selfhood to establish ownership of their own bodies or to feel other than fused with their primary abuser (Middleton, [2013](#)). Thus, further complexity is added to the abused–abuser dynamics.

In 2011, "Operation Rescue" was publicly revealed, involving an international police operation that destroyed the largest paedophile-oriented network in world history, one that had in excess of 70,000 members (Casciani, [2011](#)). The following year, there was global exposure of the (mainly) child sex abuses perpetrated by prominent TV personality, charity supporter, and friend of Prince Charles, Jimmy Savile, who had amassed some 500 victims over a period that extended beyond 50 years (Middleton, [2015](#)). In January of that year, the Australian Federal Government formally announced the establishment of a Royal Commission into the way institutions in all Australian states and territories had responded to complaints of child sexual abuse. It has become the most far-reaching national inquiry of its sort ever undertaken. In July 2014, the British government, under sustained pressure from various politicians, and appreciating growing public concern, announced an unprecedented public inquiry into the processes that resulted in minimal or no investigation of the alleged organized sexual abuse of children involving 10 current and former MPs. A second broader inquiry was established to examine how for decades there was an apparent suppression of allegations of child-abuse involving public officials (Middleton, [2015](#)). These inquiries have staggered, faltered, and still not fully taken shape to offer smooth and effective functioning. In that same year, a commissioned report by Professor Alexis Jay found that at least 1,400 girls, some as young as 11, were left unprotected from abuse by gangs of men, mostly of Pakistani origin, over a 16-year period, as authorities were too afraid to reveal the existence of a race issue. More than a third of the children were already known to child protection authorities (Brooke & Infante, [2014](#)), another example of the sort of institutional betrayal focused on by Freyd and her colleagues (Freyd & Birrell, [2013](#), Smith & Freyd, [2014](#)).

The capacity for dissociation enables the young child to exercise their innate life-sustaining need for attachment in spite of the fact that principal attachment figures are also principal abusers. Those who abuse long term, frequently extend their abusive activities to include fellow abusers, who in turn exert additional pressures on their victims to maintain silence. Such structures, whether they be familial multigenerational networks or based around work mates, churches or other institutions, paedophile rings or child prostitution businesses, may be difficult to fully document, let alone disassemble, due in part to the victim's strong attachment to their principal perpetrator. This apparent loyalty speaks of a real need to understand the

construction of self-perception and identity, the nature of shame and its capacity to erode selfhood to the point that any form of assertive action gives way to dutiful compliance, the psychology of betrayal, and the ways in which sexuality can become a very live issue for the therapist, are pivotal concerns. We are informed by a history in which abuser–abused dynamics have been central to the cyclical pattern of much domestic violence, where making public utterances about presumed abuse that go beyond the available data has proven to be immensely problematic, and yet where we need to be very nuanced in understanding the history of much of society’s reflex denial, a denial voiced loudly by many abusers but also on occasions by the abused, and those who witness, or know of the violation. This special issue tackles such issues.

We are very grateful to our authors for grappling with this complex topic and for the depth and creativity of their thinking, to Jennifer Freyd and the JTD for allowing us to produce a double issue, and to the Cannan Institute for its generous support. We very much hope that this issue will inspire further thinking, debate, and research into the thorny complexities of relational abuse.

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