ResearchGate

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280570423

Danger and Deformation: A Social Theory of Trauma Part II: Disrupting the Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma, R....

Article *in* American Imago · June 2015

DOI: 10.1353/aim.2015.0008

CITATIONS
3

READS
264

1 author:

Jeffrey Prager
University of California, Los Angeles

40 PUBLICATIONS **286** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

All content following this page was uploaded by Jeffrey Prager on 30 July 2015.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file.

JEFFREY PRAGER

Danger and Deformation: A Social Theory of Trauma Part II: Disrupting the Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma, Recovering Humanity, and Repairing Generations

Introduction

One of the most pressing problems of our day, here and abroad, is the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next. As a sociologist and psychoanalyst, I have long resisted the notion that the passing on of traumatic injury, occurring in one generation, to the next is a matter of inevitability. Elsewhere I have explored the social scientific research on strategies that can disrupt this intergenerational process (Prager & Rustin, 1993; Prager, 2011). In this essay I continue this exploration, but now from the viewpoint of experiences and insights gleaned from my psychoanalytic consulting room, informed by my psychoanalytic education and training, and guided by my research that reveals the potency of the sociocultural world to shape even the inner world of individuals (Prager, 1998). This attention to traumatic transmission across generations will allow me simultaneously to reflect on what it means to bridge the discipline of psychology and sociology in a common intellectual and social project. I hope it also illustrates what it offers to practice psychoanalysis as an interdisciplinary theory and method.

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the University of Minnesota and at the 2014 Winter Meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association. It provides the second part of my critical exploration of the theory of trauma. The first part, which examined the concept of social trauma, appeared in *American Imago*, *68*(3), Fall 2011. A prior version of this article appears in an upcoming collection edited by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (Prager, forthcoming).

American Imago, Vol. 72, No. 2, 133–155. © 2015 by The Johns Hopkins University Press

Presenting the Past

Since my psychoanalytic training, I have been interested in the problem of trauma and how best to treat it. Psychic trauma is the result of an event or set of ongoing experiences that are so overwhelming for individuals that they prove impossible to process internally and contain psychologically. Specific protocols exist for the treatment of individuals when these traumatic events have just occurred: school shootings, sexual violence, the experience of imminent physical danger, etc. Yet, when the trauma has occurred well in the past, the necessary treatment changes. Traumas sometimes go underground for a time but, like PTSD, may resurface, triggering memories that prove to be more powerful than the individual who tries to contain them. Night terrors, intrusive memories, and flashbacks are all symptoms that can occur or recur long after the traumatic moment itself.

Two psychoanalytic axioms characterize an analytic approach to the treatment of trauma. First, trauma is a deeply personal experience, always a combination of an external event or set of experiences with an internal process of registering it, remembering it, associating to other dimensions of one's life triggered by it and, in this way, giving significance and meaning to it. Everyone uniquely processes the world—even traumatic moments. The challenge for treatment is to understand the singular meanings trauma holds for the individual. Secondly, and deriving from the first, is that simply treating the symptom does not solve the problem over the long term; only by recognizing and acknowledging its possible historical sources is it possible to disable its ongoing impact.

My interest in trauma, its relation to memories of the past and its capacity to disable individuals long after the event or experiences occur, began as a result of my first psychoanalytic training case. She was a young professional woman in her late twenties, who I treated in the late 1980s. Hers was a case of a recovered memory of having been sexually abused by her father at a very early age—a memory that was suppressed until about sixteen or seventeen months into our work together. I had no prior sense that this may have occurred but it did lead to her accusing her father, breaking off all ties with her family, and in many different ways decompensating in what had up to then been a very active, productive life and career. In addition, she expressed concern, for the first time, that I was perhaps not up to the task of treating her. She asked for permission to attend, in addition to her four times a week analysis with me, a "survivors group" organized as support for those who similarly experienced these recovered memories. For a time, she became nearly paralyzed and her capacity to lead her life was severely compromised. This case became the basis of my *Presenting the Past: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Misremembering* (1998).

The feature that made this case especially interesting was that, as she recounted her memory to me, I discovered I was not especially persuaded by her account and found myself having grave doubts as to its truthfulness (though never did I think this was a conscious fabrication on her part). At the same time, as a result of her memories, I became far more aware of the "recovered memory movement" that was spreading throughout the country, and for particular reasons actively circulating around our work together in Los Angeles. Accounts of recovered memories, mostly by young women, of being abused as children, sometimes by a close relative, sometimes by groups of men, sometimes in satanic cults, were becoming almost commonplace stories in newspapers and television around the country. While some of these memories indeed were accurate, many accusations that followed were retracted. Towards the very end of our work, there emerged a counter-movement, with the False Memory Foundation at its heart. This group insisted that not all "recovered" memories were in fact true, documented by the number of "retractor" groups created for people who came to believe their original accusations were incorrect. But "false memory" was hardly an idea that had any currency when my patient remembered her abuse.

To make a very long and complex story much briefer, by the end of our work together, she no longer believed that the abuse had happened as she had remembered it. In my view, very powerful psychodynamic forces were operating at the time, alongside the presence of a very powerful sociocultural recovered memory movement. Together, they led her to identify her father from a long time ago as the source of her contemporary difficulties. It might have resulted, too, in my acceptance of her version of the past that, I believe, would have ultimately been detrimental to her. *Presenting the Past* was so titled to emphasize the role that present-day factors both inside and outside the consulting room play in the unfolding self-understanding of the person in treatment. The challenge is to appreciate the role that the two play as the work together progresses. The book was intended, in some measure, to alert analysts that in order to be good at their craft, they should not ignore the environment around them: they need to be attuned to social trends and collective understandings that, without sufficient awareness, may influence—sometimes in a detrimental way—the dyadic relationship itself. In this book, I brought to psychoanalysis my sociological appreciation of the power of a collectively formed unconscious to exert a coercive effect on individual thought and behavior. I made the case that analysts cannot simply bracket out the contributions of the cultural world to the analytic process.

Repair and Recovery as Psychological and Social Processes

This work moved me toward a new set of more sociological research questions, also about trauma, history, and the role of contemporary society in responding to them. I became interested in the question of *social redress,* i.e. how contemporary societies address their own traumatic pasts and attempt to overcome fundamental rifts between victims and perpetrators that, when they persist, undermine the possibility of social solidarity. This topic seemed to grow naturally out of the terrain I had carved during my analytic training. But here I wanted to bring psychoanalytic knowledge to a political sociology, and turned to the ways in which certain psychoanalytic understandings of trauma might inform collective responses to various kinds of social trauma.

I became especially interested in the Republic of South Africa that, in the early 1990s, was in the process of dismantling the apartheid regime. The country was attempting to forge a new social and political order characterized by racial equality and universal freedom. It was an extraordinary moment, partly because of how unexpected it was, and partly because of the African National Congress' recognition that for the nation to survive and thrive completely new kinds of efforts had to be undertaken to acknowledge the nation's traumatic past and the wrongs committed and, further, to promote in the here-and-now forgiveness and reconciliation between Africans, English, and Afrikaaners. Their insight, in the end, was no different than the psychoanalytic one: one ignores the past at one's own peril. They knew instinctively that without acknowledgment and understanding of the wrongs committed in the past to members of the nation, the past might well continue to be lived *as if* it were the present. Fear and hatred, inherited from past experiences and expressed through a form of revenge politics and violence turned outward could infuse the politics of the present unless it could be successfully disarmed.

Let me describe the challenge they faced in the following way. In a parable recounted in a lecture by the Slovenian social theorist and psychoanalytic thinker (and humorist) Slavoj Žižek (2005/2010), a man finds himself admitted to a mental hospital because he believes himself to be a piece of grain. Working there intensively with a psychiatrist, he comes to accept the fact that he is not what he fears, and once having conquered his delusion, he is released. Shortly after his departure, however, he hurriedly returns and reports to the psychiatrist that upon his leaving he came upon a chicken and suffered a panic attack. Attempting to reassure his former patient, the psychiatrist reminds him that he is not something to be eaten and therefore need not worry about the chicken. "But," the man responds, "I know I'm not a piece of grain, and you know I'm not a piece of grain. But," he continues, "I don't know that the chicken knows that I'm not a piece of grain."

This parable, in part, captures the special difficulties faced by nations when political leaders attempt to address the problem of past traumatic injury; it is what makes the political sociology of social redress especially challenging. In the parable, the man is having difficulty overcoming his delusion that he is a piece of grain and, outside the safety and security of the mental hospital, cannot maintain his hard fought psychological gains forged with the psychiatrist. He comes running back for protection. But in real life—in South Africa, in the United States, and in many other countries across the world—the man's experience with the chicken might not be so far fetched. Though not true, the chicken might indeed think of the man as a piece of grain—something to feast on or abuse—and might have the power and authority to treat him as such. Chickens might attempt to eat the man. Indeed, does this not describe apartheid in South Africa and racism in the U.S.? No one was capable of seeing the other for what he or she truly was: simply another human being.

What might be delusion in the consulting room, what I might have described in *Presenting the Past* with respect to my patient as delusional ideation, becomes in the real world the power of projection in the form of racist beliefs and the enactment of traumatic actions toward the other (Prager, 2014). When we think of the power of racism and the beliefs of the inhumanity of others because of differences in language, complexion, national origin, or ethnicity, it is apparent that the parable, in fact, describes a more tragic, real, common situation than initially might meet the eye. The chicken may very well think of the man as a piece of grain; who is to say that this man was wrong for seeking cover back in the mental hospital?

In 2013, I was invited to speak at an interdisciplinary international conference in South Africa entitled "Engaging the Other: Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition." This conference has met every three years since the end of apartheid and each time has selected a theme that goes to the heart of the problem of nation building in the aftermath of its tortuous history. This year's theme identified a critical challenge to South Africa's future. Since apartheid ended in 1994, it is now recognized that this horrific legal arrangement will become increasingly a narrative of a past that younger citizens of South Africans either distantly remember or have never known themselves. Yet the traumatic injuries of the past live on across generations, as hatred, distrust, and fear continue to characterize relationships within families and the various groups within the society. Thus, the theme of that conference was how to break apartheid's enduring legacy both for those who lived through the system and for those who never lived through it but now experience the reproduction—not necessarily intentional or conscious—of various forms of psychic trauma themselves?

Apartheid's harm (like racism here in the United States) has been inflicted on *all* South Africans (though, of course, in different ways). I characterize those afflictions as a national psychic trauma. In the same way that it has been well established that the victims of abuse are more likely to become the perpetrators of abuse at another time in their life, that violence exacted typically yields violence enacted, I argue that a nation built upon anti-human premises and which flourishes for a time inflicts traumatic injury on the entire nation, on perpetrator and victim alike. Suspicion and mistrust of the other, the anxiety of harm being done to oneself, guilt and shame, fear of the eruption of uncontrollable rage by oneself or by others constitute the psychological constellation of experiences that unify all members of the nation, victims and perpetrators alike. If not addressed, there can be no assurance that these feelings based upon trauma will ever disappear. The new South African ruling elite implicitly acknowledged the harm and injury done to all members of the society. They also recognized the likelihood these harms would be inherited by subsequent generations. They understood that dramatic intervention by the government was immediately necessary to address the problem of traumatic injuries so they not get passed on from one generation to the next.

The entire world celebrated the end of apartheid and watched hopefully as the country struggled to forge a new path. Many of us had been witness to South Africa's efforts to establish a more just society, one not divided by racial category or by brutal practices of subordination and exclusion. We were inspired by its commitment to enact policies for a more inclusive civil society and stable democracy, and by its dedication to overcome the moral stain of a shameful past. The world has also paid attention to the formidable challenges, setbacks, and leadership failures faced by the nation in recent years, and the various economic, political and social challenges with which it is confronted. But the fact remains that the South African political experience is unique. There is really no parallel to South Africa's effort peacefully to preserve democracy while explicitly acknowledging that the entire political and social system had been upheld by a system of tyranny and brutality that itself had few rivals in the twentieth century. It had been a democracy maintained through an elaborate system effectively dividing the entire nation into either real or potential victims and real or potential perpetrators.

While the narrative accounts focus on these features of the past, another story could be told describing the psychological damage that continues to reverberate in South Africa through subsequent generations. The question becomes how might that generational transmission be disrupted. Implicitly, the leaders understood the ongoing salience of the categories imposed by the socio-political world that divided the South African population—Africans, English, and Afrikaaners, even victims and perpetrators. The categories were all a consequence of actions of the socio-political world's making and they remained a problem for the entire public. To disarm the collective traumas resulting from these divisions, a *public* tribunal was necessary to acknowledge and recognize both the psychic and the material damages incurred as a result of this tripartite division of South African society. The conference I attended, nearly twenty years after the end of apartheid, was recognition that their efforts in 1994 were not entirely successful. Admirably their attention has now turned to disrupting the generational transfer of those original traumatic experiences onto what they refer to as the "born free" generation, and so on and so on. What we know about South Africa today, however, is that despite some remarkable successes, the past still haunts the present.

The Conundrum of Time

A survivor of the European Holocaust describes her worry as a first-generation survivor about passing on her experience to others. She writes, "Hitler is dead. Still, he may yet achieve his goal of destroying us if we internalize the hate, mistrust, and pain, all the inhumanity we were exposed to for so many years…I am afraid we might have come out of it lacking the human capacities we had before…to hope, to trust, and love. Have we acquired the wisdom to prevent such a terrible outcome?" (as cited in Bar-On, 1989, p. 5) In a quite different context, J.M. Coetzee writes in 1991, just prior to the collapse of apartheid in South Africa:

> It is not inconceivable that in the not too distant future, the major protagonists having agreed that apartheid has been "dismantled," the era of apartheid will be proclaimed to be over. The unlovely creature will be laid to rest, and joy among nations will be unconfined. But what is it that will be buried? The more cautious among us may want to draw lines between apartheid legislation, which indeed can be dismantled, apartheid practices, which cannot be dismantled but can be combatted, and apartheid thinking, which is likely to resist coercion, as thinking generally does. The sensible course for future governors of South Africa to follow may be to concentrate on liquidating apartheid practices and to ignore apartheid thinking, allowing the latter to lead whatever forms of subterranean life it chooses as long as it does not emerge in action—treating it, in fact, very much as sin is treated in modern secular societies. Unfortunately, thinking does not always remain in its own compartment: thinking breeds action. There is thus reason to reopen the coffin and remind ourself of what apartheid looks like in the flesh. (p. 1)

Coetzee's point is an important one. In time, South Africans will only know *of* apartheid, not apartheid itself, and each generation will be more and more removed from its legislation and practices. The dehumanization that occurred during the apartheid era, certainly for its victims and for the persecutors as well, will be remembered only through various narrative forms. For a while, they may include first-person stories and both publicly sanctioned and unsanctioned or non-formal personal narratives. These will be institutionalized through laws making discrimination by race or ethnicity illegal, including an explicit distinction in the Constitution between past injustices inflicted and the new reality of the Republic of South Africa. But Coetzee, of course, is correct in stating that apartheid thinking, an especially virulent form of racism, does not die easily, that it generates action whose consequences are passed on over time.

Racism, shared both by victims and persecutors, becomes inscribed psychically and even bodily by all social members, and wittingly or unwittingly gets passed on long past the last survivor of the apartheid era dies.[1] Each generation stands to receive this past trauma of racialized distinctions, now and experienced as new: thinking becomes action. The result is a *life constricted by perceived difference*, specific perceptions dominated by strong echoes of the past. Long after apartheid's demise, the country is still required to reckon with what Derek Hook describes as racism's "psychic density…its extraordinarily affective and often eruptive quality, its visceral or embodied nature, its apparent stubbornness to social, historical, discursive change" (2004, p. 672). This, for South Africa, is the legacy of trauma. Like many other countries who struggle with their own version of a constricted humanity, South Africa continues to confront apartheid's generational ripples: distortion, suspicion, fear, violence, and hatred. This describes the challenge of breaking the cycle: how to insure or instate a full-blown humanity for all humans, what the Holocaust survivor captured as the capacity "to hope, to love, and to trust."

Disrupting Cycles of Destructiveness

In what follows I offer three propositions that may stimulate thinking about strategies for breaking historical cycles of destructiveness. Based upon both my clinical experience and my sociological research, I describe individual psychological trauma and the challenges it poses for treatment—for those who experienced the trauma as well as their descendants. It should be noted that these claims are offered against the backdrop of the knowledge that we are asking of trauma's sufferers and their impacted descendants, in the end, to forgive the unforgivable.

1. Trauma is a memory illness. Healing can only be done in the present. Trauma victims, to paraphrase Sigmund Freud, suffer from their reminiscences. Psychic trauma has its origins in some event or series of events in the past (days, weeks, months, years ago), remembered after the fact. It manifests itself *symptomatically in the present,* triggered by a memory that typically remains unconscious. Ordinary timeliness suddenly gives way to timelessness, and the painfulness of the past is felt as if it is occurring now (Stolorow, 2007; Prager, 2006). Trauma is typically not felt by the trauma victim as a return to the original moment or moments of danger; it is not an actual return to the past. Rather some experience *triggers* a reminder of the feelings of helplessness, or of fear, or of being overwhelmed, transforming the present suddenly from benign to both dangerous and affectively unbearable. The here-and-now is itself felt to be unsafe. Intrusive memory, in short, is the symptom that requires immediate attention. As Cathy Caruth describes this feature, "the traumatized person, we might say, carries an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (1991, p. 4). Traumatic memories reflect the failure of defensive strategies to contain them and the challenge is now how best, as Laura Brown stated, to "re-tell the lost truths of pain among us" (Brown, as cited in Caruth, 1991, p. 8).

Stated differently, trauma, as psychic illness, cannot be known until it surfaces in various symptomatic behavioral forms: suicide, homicide, various forms of other kinds of anti-social behavior, intrusive memory, psychic paralysis or shutting-down, and various expressions of repetitive interpersonal incapacity. Either as an unconscious re-creation of the past or as earnest effort to ward off its painfulness, these responses can have the unintended effect of helping to create an outer reality that conforms to the dangers of the past and confirms it. The traumatic past continues to intrude on current-day perception and shape interaction between oneself and others, between parents and their children, and even between oneself and individual representatives of various institutional orders—teachers, bureaucrats, clergy, bosses, politicians, police, etc. An interaction with someone in authority, for example, may trigger the memory of having been demeaned, diminished, or endangered in the past. Un-metabolized remorse or guilt for past actions can also complicate interactions in the present, obscuring demands of the present by repetitive efforts to re-do the past.

The trauma sufferer holds little or no capacity to distinguish whether the feeling is a product of real present-day actions or whether interaction has triggered powerful memories and feelings of past abuses now transposed onto present-day sociality. Trauma *possesses* the individual; the individual is not in possession of his or her history. It is often impossible, as Coetzee comments, for thinking *not* to be transformed into action. As Jonathan D. Jansen (2009) characterizes it in his marvelous book about social change in an Afrikaan school just before the end of apartheid and while it was occurring, *Knowledge in the Blood, indirect knowledge* often creates a reality-on-the-ground where the imagined past is re-lived and re-created as if it were the present.

Following the end of apartheid, South African leadership appreciated the necessity to provide an institutional apparatus to combat apartheid's lasting traumatic effect on South Africans. They understood the necessity to ensure that power and race relations were not simply inverted, that memory not be employed as a vehicle of revenge and flight, where what was done to one group would not now be done to the other. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was an inspired effort and likely a necessary one for, to paraphrase Coetzee, "reopening the coffin, and seeing what apartheid looks like in the flesh." It was designed, of course, to promote healing for the first generation, those who had lived and suffered through various traumatic experiences—either as victims or persecutors—as a consequence of the apartheid system. There was no precedent, either in South Africa or in the world, for the form it took—equating truth with justice (and amnesty), and relying on no existing institutional apparatus, either governmental or religious, to achieve its intended goals.

Thousands of pages have been written criticizing various aspects of it and second-guessing certain choices made, and likely just as many describing both the incomplete implementation of its ideals and its failure to produce a society that functioned as it had hoped or imagined. Nonetheless, its originality as a transformational institution between the nation's apartheid past and its new beginning, I would say, lies elsewhere. The public testimonies produced as the central feature of the TRC represented recognition that the apartheid past had to be *remembered*; yet it needed to become a memory sharply distinct from the new Republic's present. The categories of victim and perpetrator had to be *retired* by the end of the hearings; apartheid thinking required demarcation from a post-apartheid citizenry as post-apartheid survivors—neither victims nor perpetrators—collectively forged a new society and a new politics.

The genius of the TRC was that it created a *liminal* moment in the history of the nation—neither past nor present, neither really public nor private, but a moment in time that itself had neither a past nor a future. For that moment, time was suspended. Only when time stood still could a traumatic past be clearly and sharply demarcated from a new future, when all individuals might become in possession of their pasts. All testimony was public testimony, not only within earshot of those who attended the hearings but also broadcast by radio to the whole country. It would have been difficult not to hear the proceedings: as such, all became a South African community of listeners, neither victims nor persecutors but post-apartheid co-equals.

The aspirations of the TRC, of course, were utopian and it is easy to describe in detail the ways in which it failed to achieve these unattainable goals. Nonetheless, the insight behind the formation of the TRC is a profound one, speaking directly to breaking the cycle of destructiveness that results from a traumatic past. It is not the past that needs to be *forgotten* in the present; rather, the emotional potency of traumatic memories of the past requires *disabling*. The American psychoanalyst Hans W. Loewald captures this transformation when he describes therapeutic work in the consulting room as transforming a patient's sense that he or she is possessed by *ghosts* from the past into a feeling that, while knowing about his or her *ancestors,* the patient is clearly distinct from them. "Those who know ghosts," Loewald writes, "tell us that they long to be released from their ghost life and laid to rest as ancestors. As ancestors they live forth in the present generation, while as ghosts they are compelled to haunt the present generation with their shadow life" (1960/1980, p. 249). In order for present-day South Africa not to be haunted by its apartheid past, South Africans must acknowledge their tortured history, and thereby feel freed of their ghostly revenants and enabled to acknowledge and confront their ancestral legacies. A living history, not a haunted one, allows for life to go on.

The TRC implicitly understood that apartheid's legacy, after its abolition, might become a memory affliction dominated by these ghosts. Its repair required apartheid's survivors themselves to take possession of the past and establish themselves now as free from its hold. As the nation transforms itself by denouncing its shameful past, all of its members similarly need to take possession of their own pasts. Today's citizens must clearly demarcate themselves from their discriminatory and exploitive ancestors. Only then can memory lose its hold as a haunting and ghostly presence.

2. Traumatic transmission across generations often occurs unconsciously and affectively. Certainly, healing remains a challenge for those who have come after, beyond those immediately impacted by trauma. Traumatic experiences live beyond those who are the direct recipients. We know how new generations, in fact, can unwittingly *inhabit* a past that preceded them, can be *carriers* of it, can continue to live it, reproduce it, pass it on, and at the same time imagine or think themselves free from history. We know that persecution and victimization in one generation typically get enacted, like a haunting, in the next. We know that violence toward and fear of others becomes communicated, both overtly and covertly, between parents and children: that whole sub-cultural communities are constituted on the basis of shared, painful histories on the one side, and fears of violence, retaliation, and infiltration, on the other. We know that communities of distrust, alienation, and hatred persevere even when legal and institutional measures are implemented to dismantle those collectivities. Paradoxically, even amid good intentions and explicit efforts to protect the next generation from the violence and human destructiveness of the past, the same patterns often prevail and similar, inhumane re-enactments occur from one human being to another, generation after generation after generation.

How does this transmission occur? Studies of the children of Holocaust survivors reveal some of the unconscious processes at work that keep ghosts of the past alive (see, for example, Bergmann & Jucovy, 1982; Herzog, 1982; Auerhahn & Laub, 1998; Felsen, 1998; Kogan, 1995; and also, on Bosnian adolescents exposed to war, Layne, Pynoos, Saltzman, et al., 2001). As a consequence of their parents' experience, children differentiate less completely from their parents, see themselves as protectors of their parents rather than *vice versa*, and tend to inhibit their own impulse to establish independence and autonomy. Identity development, in short, becomes severely hindered because these children have not been able to experience themselves as persons occupying a particular discrete location in time and space. Nanette C. Auerhahn and Dori Laub, for example, in summarizing extensive research on Holocaust survivors and their children, write:

> [w]e have found that knowledge of psychic trauma weaves through the memories of several generations, marking those who know of it as secret bearers…Furthermore, we have found that massive trauma has an amorphous presence not defined by place or time and lacking a beginning, middle, or end, and that it shapes the internal representation of reality of several generations, becoming an unconscious organizing principle passed on by parents and internalized by their children. (1998, p. 22)

They describe how children of survivors develop a sense that their parents often experience their activities of separation, differentiation, and individualization as a reactivation of the original trauma. Such responses by their parents support their own identification with their parents' victimization. Their own feelings and needs, it comes to be felt, are murdering their parents (p. 38). Ilany Kogan writes:

> the traumatized parent, in his own frantic search for an object which can be experienced as something which

> joins together desperate parts of his own personality, turns the child into a container. Thus, instead of fulfilling the role of an internal protective skin, the parent fosters a permeable membrane between himself and the child, through which he transmits depressive and aggressive tendencies which cannot be contained in himself. (1995, pp. 251–252)

Two French psychoanalysts, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (1994), have conceptualized this process of insufficient differentiation between generations by distinguishing between two distinct psychic processes: *introjection* and *incorporation.* For them, the critical role of parents in a child's psychic development is to help enable him or her to structure external experience *with* inner need and desire. This process is described as a process of introjection, taking in the external environment as presented to the child and calibrating with the features of her own inner world. As they describe, introjection is about the capacity, facilitated by the previous generation, to transform needs and desires into words, to develop a language of self-discovery and self-fashioning and to speak it to others. They write that introjection by its very nature ensures independence between generations: it is synonymous with the articulation through words of inner desire, as an outer world always different, always changing in time, provides unique vehicles for self-expression. Introjection describes the process by which one generation moves coherently forward in time, facilitated by those from the previous generation who tolerate and encourage that movement.

But trauma, Abraham and Torok argue, interferes with the spontaneous work of introjection. When traumatic moments intervene, the facilitative environment provided by parents is thwarted. The disarray in the parents' own state of desire—introjection frustrated—passes on to the children, now encountering caregivers distracted by their need to protect their secret. The trauma suffered by the one generation and unmetabolized or undigested becomes "entombed" as an *unspeakable*—without words—and unconsummated desire, interfering with a capacity to pass on their whole world capable for introjection to the next. When words cannot be found to stand in for the person missing and unavailable to provide protection and guidance, introjection is replaced by the fantasy of incorporation, the insufficient provider now taken wholesale into the psychic life of those who encounter silence. Trauma distorts desire.

Incorporation becomes an effort, through magical means, to regain a connection with persons who have failed, in fact, to fulfill their function: facilitating the introjection of desire in an ever-changing world. Introjection might be more familiarly understood as *identification* in contrast to incorporation where, as a result of the fantasy, the parent does *not* encourage or allow separation but (unconsciously) demands obsequiousness; the child has no choice but to comply. The subject takes it upon itself to accept the secret as one's own, and thus trauma makes its way from one generation to the next:

> It is therefore the *object's* secret that needs to be kept, *his* shame covered up…The fantasy of incorporation reveals a utopian wish that the memory of the affliction had never existed or, on a deeper level, that the affliction had had nothing to inflict. (Abraham & Torok, 1994, pp. 131, 134).

In this rendering, incorporation cannot be more strongly opposed to the aim of introjection. When an individual enters and speaks among a community of others—articulating personal desire—autonomy and independence is the result. Introjection promotes the creation of a new voice, uttering new words, fulfilling unique desire. Incorporation, in contrast, reinforces the imagined ties to the past as well as dependency on it. "Like a commemorative monument," Abraham and Torok write, "the incorporated object betokens the place, the date, and the circumstances in which desires were banished from introjection: they stand like tombs in the life of the ego" (p. 114).

Importantly, the secret, or the tomb that Abraham and Torok so vividly describe, constitutes a foreign body, an alien object. As bearers of the secret, children protect their connection to their traumatized parents and preserve their dependence upon them. To be sure, the secret is a toxic force yet it remains outside “the kernel of the self.” It need not distort character; with appropriate conditions, when the secret comes to be revealed, it can be exorcised or eliminated from the inner world, allowing introjection or identification to resume its natural course.

There is an intriguing and suggestive body of research about the children of Holocaust survivors in Israel that bears on these hopeful possibilities. It appears that the descendants of Holocaust survivors in Israel have been more successful in establishing independent lives as compared with similar populations among Jews either in European countries, in the United States, or in Latin America (Solomon, 1998, p. 79). Israel, of course, is a nation whose existence in large measure had been defined as a response to the Holocaust, and innumerable public rites, sites, and rituals document the inextricable connection between the nation and the trauma. It might be said that the nation has taken the traumatic secret and assertively sought to expose it. In this sense, it might be speculated, there is far less need for any individual to hold the secret privately, to internalize it, and to fear unconsciously the autonomy and independence that comes from no longer being the secret’s bearer.

We are living through an age, throughout the world, of collective remembering in which political agents and various organized publics are gingerly attempting to find a way of undoing the secrets, passed from one generation to the next, without irreparably opening old wounds. This is no easy process and, it is also true to say, considerable effort is also being expended to forget and to protect a traumatic past from full-scale exposure. From Chile and Argentina to the Republic of South Africa and Rwanda, from Yugoslavia to Indonesia, these debates about remembering are now central to national politics. The debate in many of these nations has focused on the delicate political balance between remembering—thereby creating a healthy distance between the present and the past—and forgetting, thereby not bringing to center stage the bitter divisions and experiences that divide the nation. Much of this debate has centered on the political costs incurred when the secret is uncovered, when people “reopen the coffin.” But there is also much to be said when, through public rites of remembering, mourning, and accountability, traumatic secrets are allowed to see the light of day: conditions are established, it might be said, to recover childhoods for the children and to enable subsequent generations to claim the world as their own.

3. Traumatic symptoms surface as a result of an in-the-present interpersonal or societal failure. I have been suggesting that the repetition of cycles of destructiveness depends on the *intrusion* of memories of a traumatic past that powerfully blur the present day from the past—either as mediated in subsequent generations through an over-identification (incorporation) with the generation that preceded them or, for the first generation, by a remembering of events or experiences that happened earlier in one's life. As important as the past figures in all of this, trauma, as Freud would remind us, can only be overcome in the present. Discussing the importance of the transference relationship between patient and therapist for cure to occur, Freud writes: "we must treat [the patient's] illness, not as an event in the past, but as a present-day force…one cannot overcome an enemy who is absent or not within range" (1914, pp. 151–152) and, finally, "when all is said and done, it is impossible to destroy anyone *in absentia* or *in effigie*" (1912, p. 108).

Intrusive memory, in short, signifies not so much the events of the past that predispose survivors repetitively to pass on their experiences, but rather the failures occurring in the present. Intrusive memories indicate an instantaneous loss of contact with the present, an experience in which a sense of one's own isolation in the world, of the absence of a caring and protective environment, and consequently the fear of annihilation have been revived and insufficiently contained. The defensive purposes intrusive memory serves—never to re-experience the life-threatening event or events again—are undermined and traumatic repetition seems close at hand. The psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut describes intrusive memory as a reminder of the traumatic experience itself, one characterized by the absence of empathic contact between self and other. It becomes the principal task of the analyst (as a stand-in for the present-day larger environment) to provide for the patient, to demonstrate cognitively and affectively the capacity in-the-present to hold, contain, and protect the patient's experiences, including those that are felt to be life-threatening, annihilative, infuriating. And as D.W. Winnicott emphasizes, the analyst must be able to sustain the destructive rage that becomes mobilized in the unfolding relationship—rage that the patient holds as a contemporary tribute to the profound loss of self-centeredness that was traumatically stolen, a loss he or she continues to mourn and yearns to be restored.

The defensive quality of traumatic memories leads us to a rethinking of the personal narrative account itself, the retelling of the story of what happened. Telling the story constitutes a cognitive acknowledgement of historical wrongs and an effort to demarcate present from past, while understanding oneself in relation to that past. Yet, one must also be alert to its likely use, person to person, as a form of defensive distancing from the affective or emotional experience and inner personal conflicts from the traumatization itself. Narratives of past wrongs tend to externalize conflict to the outside world and, paradoxically, protect defensive denial; they preserve others as villains and promote oneself as a victim. Moreover, they are easily passed on from one generation to the next, oftentimes, as I have described, generating unintended consequences for subsequent generations. As the case of Israel suggests, when the nation, the public, the state continue to tell the story of past traumas; when the nation acknowledges the past; and through ritual, rites, and sites articulates for all the citizenry the difference between the present and the past, individuals become less encumbered by earlier traumas. They can remember the experiences of their ancestors, but be less haunted by the ghosts from the past.

Practicing Trust

The future calls for an alternative model to disarm memory's on-going impact. Such a model or strategy would develop in every social institution patterns of social interaction that do not recreate past patterns of inclusion and exclusion, of domination and subordination. The challenge for new beginnings, as I have described, is to have a public sphere as container and holder of memories of past wrongs, while each and every institution in civil society resists the temptation to reinforce social distinctions from the past in their own efforts to "remember." When the temptation is not resisted, and when the past injustices and inequities too powerfully effect the thinking of these institutions, the necessary oxygen is provided for those distinctions—either in action or thought—to reproduce themselves from generation to generation.[2] What is required is the birth naturally of social circles, in each institution, responding to the on-going, present-day challenges of the institution today. The challenge for new communities like post-apartheid South Africa, which are built upon traumatic experiences of the past, is to appreciate that the overriding concern in nation building is mistrust, not "race" difference. The answer is new and stronger friendship circles establishing new affinity groups engendering trust.

In an important book by the American moral philosopher and political theorist Danielle Allen, titled *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (2004), the author notes that, at least in most modern societies, one of the first lessons taught to children is "don't talk to strangers." Do not trust the world, in other words, because it is a dangerous place. The world outside of you has built-in dangers (Žižek's metaphorical chickens) outside your control. In a word, it is an instruction embodying traumatic danger, passing on from generation to generation the conviction of the unsafety of the world. Allen describes this as a world with insufficient "citizenly practices." She insists that good citizenship requires the on-going work of *political friendship*: a sense of obligation and responsibility to fellow citizens, not unlike those we feel toward our personal friends. This includes an understanding of why *we* might not be trusted by others, just as we might try to imagine why a friend might be mad at us at any given time. To feel oneself safe to talk to strangers, at least metaphorically, implies a community of trust, of deep and abiding citizenly trust, and should such efforts everywhere be the preoccupation of each and every social institution—"citizenly practices"—there might be some hope of disrupting the repetitive cycle of trauma from one generation to the next.

Notes

1. The theory of a universally shared quality of racism, held by whites and blacks, persecutors and persecuted, is developed in my article "'Mourning Becomes Eclectic': Racial Melancholia in an Age of Reconciliation," in *The Unhappy Divorce of Sociology and Psychoanalysis: Diverse Perspectives on the Psychosocial*, edited by Lynn Chancer and John Andrews (2014).
2. Here again, I think South Africa is in a unique place to lead the way. As a new republic, born from the recent horror of apartheid, it is possible to build into the civic structure ways of acknowledging and remembering the traumatic past. When it is done, the burden is removed from all the institutions to remember for themselves.

References

Abraham, N., & Torok, M. (1994). *The shell and the kernel: Renewals of psychoanalysis, volume 1.* N.T. Rand (Ed. & Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Allen, D. (2004). *Talking to strangers: Anxieties of citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Auerhahn, N.C., & Laub, D. (1998). Intergenerational memory of the Holocaust. In Y. Danieli (Ed.), *International handbook of multigenerational legacies of trauma* (pp. 21–42). New York: Plenum Press.

Bar-On, D. (1989). *Legacy of silence: Encounters with children of the Third Reich.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bergmann, M.S., & Jucovy, M.E. (Eds.). (1982). *Generations of the Holocaust.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Caruth, C. (1991). Introduction. *American Imago, 48*(1), 1–12.

Coetzee, J.M. (1991). The mind of apartheid (Geoffrey Cronjé, 1907–). *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies, 17*(1), 1–35.

Felsen, I. (1998). Transgenerational transmission of effects of the Holocaust: The North American research perspective. In Y. Danieli (Ed.), *International handbook of multigenerational legacies of trauma* (pp. 43–68). New York: Plenum Press.

Freud, S. (1912). The dynamics of transference. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 12, pp. 97–108). London: Hogarth Press.

Freud, S. (1914). Remembering, repeating and working-through (further recommendations on the technique of psychoanalysis II). *Standard Edition* (Vol. 12, pp. 145–156). London: Hogarth Press.

Herzog, J.M. (1982). World beyond metaphor: Thoughts on the transmission of trauma. In M.S. Bergmann & M.E. Jucovy, *Generations of the Holocaust* (pp. 103–119). New York: Columbia University Press.

Hook, D. (2004). Racism as abjection: A psychoanalytic conceptualisation for a post-apartheid South Africa. *South African Journal of Pyschology, 34*(4), 672–703.

Jansen, J.D. (2009). *Knowledge in the blood: Confronting race and the apartheid past.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Kogan, I. (1995). *The cry of mute children: A psychoanalytic perspective of the second generation of the Holocaust.* New York: Free Association Books.

Layne, C.M., Pynoos, R.S., Saltzman, W.R., Arslanagić, B., Black, M., Savjak, N., Popović, T., Duraković, E., Mušić, M., Ćampara, N., Djapo, N., & Houston, R. (2001). Trauma/grief-focused group psychotherapy: School-based postwar intervention with traumatized Bosnian adolescents. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice, 5*(4), 277–290.

Loewald, H.W. (1960/1980). The therapeutic action of psychoanalysis. In H.W. Loewald, *Papers on psychoanalysis* (pp. 221–256). New Haven: Yale University Press.

Prager, J. (1998). *Presenting the past: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of misremembering.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Prager, J. (2006). Jump-starting timeliness: Trauma, temporality and the redressive community. In J.A. Parker, M. Crawford, & P. Harris (Eds.), *Time and memory* (pp. 229–245). Amsterdam: Brill.

Prager, J. (2011). Danger and deformation: A social theory of trauma. Part I: Contemporary psychoanalysis, contemporary social theory, and healthy selves. *American Imago, 68*(3), 425–448.

Prager, J. (2014). Melancholia and the racial order: A psychosocial analysis of America's enduring racism. In L. Chancer & J. Andrews (Eds.), *The unhappy divorce of sociology and psychoanalysis: Diverse perspectives on the psychosocial* (pp. 284-316). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Prager, J. (forthcoming). Disrupting intergenerational transmission of trauma. In P. Gobodo-Madikizela (Ed.), *Breaking Cycles of Repetition: A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory.* Leverkusen: Budrich Academic.

Prager, J. & Rustin, M. (Eds.). (1993). *Psychoanalytic sociology, volumes 1 & 2.* London: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Solomon, Z. (1998). Transgenerational effects of the Holocaust: The Israeli research perspective. In Y. Danieli (Ed.), *International handbook of multigenerational legacies of trauma* (pp. 69–83). New York: Plenum Press.

Stolorow, R.D. (2007). *Trauma and human existence: Autobiographical, psychoanalytic, and philosophical reflections.* New York: The Analytic Press.

Žižek, S. (2005/2010). The ignorance of the chicken: A talk at Princeton. Retrieved from *https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLwumIflgXsEASg1Zhfe92MzoKffAzEccs.*