

SIBLING VIOLENCE, TRAUMA, AND REALITY: A CLINICAL REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent session a patient began with an account of a distressing interaction with her husband during the previous weekend. In the near future she will make a presentation at an important business conference. Typically, before such events, my patient suffers considerable anxiety, accompanied by intense feelings of inadequacy. She imagines that her work will be attacked mercilessly. Silenced by these imaginary attacks, she will be publicly humiliated in front of her colleagues. Reality consistently contradicts these frequently evoked imaginary scenarios; her work has been for the most part well received by her fellow executives. Furthermore, my impression throughout the analysis is that she is well respected by the company hierarchy.

Faced once again with her tormenting fantasies, she sought reassurance and comfort from her husband. He had been usually sympathetic and supportive of her pre-conference doubts, but on this occasion she experienced him as somewhat impatient and preoccupied. In the session she said, "I felt as though someone had kicked me violently in the chest when he reacted like this." Surprised at the intensity of her reaction at what seemed a mild rebuff from her husband, I commented that her distress and her choice of words seemed to come from somewhere else, perhaps involving memories of the persistent, often violent, physical and verbal abuse that she had suffered at the hands of her brother throughout her childhood.

Without hesitation she agreed and described yet another hitherto untold incident involving her oldest brother. When she was about 12 she

remembered watching TV at the family's chalet. She was lying stretched out on the couch when, without warning, her brother entered the room, loomed suddenly over her, raised his leg, and slammed his foot down hard on her chest. She was left winded, crying, and in great pain. She recalled feeling numb, yet focused, thinking to herself, I have been kicked in the chest; I can't breathe. She remembers nothing of her attacker's action after he kicked her, nor whether her parents were present in the household.

This brief, compelling vignette will serve as an introduction to a longer case report. I hope my report will serve as a clinical addition to our discussions today on trauma, drives, defences, reality, and a possible new synthesis of these central psychoanalytic concepts. In presenting this case, I am most grateful to Drs. Fernando and Bohleber for their contributions to our discipline. It's a signal honour for me to be on the same program with these two colleagues, who have contributed so much to our recent understanding of trauma and its enduring effects on development and psychic structure.

When Joseph wrote welcoming me to the conference, he generously stated that I should feel free to contribute my own understanding of some of the ideas he has expressed in his book, coupled with clinical material pertaining to trauma and defences. Accordingly, I will describe some aspects of the therapeutic work with a woman who, as part of an often painful, lonely childhood, silently endured throughout early life physical and verbal abuse at the hands of her brother. I will then conclude my presentation with a discussion of the case with particular reference to Dr. Fernando's illuminating work on defences.

HISTORY

Paula, a 37-year-old business woman, recently separated, with two children, came for an initial consultation with the following complaints. She had developed persistent feelings of sadness, guilt, and fatigue after the separation from her husband. In addition, she had a longstanding sense of inadequacy at her work, despite noteworthy career achievement and success. This sense of ineffectiveness enhanced her frequent bouts of sadness and fatigue. She was also concerned about a new relationship with a man with whom she had had previous business contacts. These contacts had resulted in an affair during her marriage. This relationship, with its intense emotions and passionate sexuality had precipitated the end of her marriage; it was the breaking point in a troubled relationship.

Following the consultation, I recommended analysis. Paula agreed somewhat reluctantly, commenting that she perhaps she would feel bet-

ter if only she could find a job in the Third World, perhaps Africa, where people faced real problems, unlike herself.

During the consultation she told me the following story. It became a "selected fact" for us over the course of the analytic work. When she was about 6 years old, she had come down to a family breakfast to hear her brother, 5 years older than Paula, holding a learned mathematical discussion about square roots with his mother. She recalled thinking, as she listened to their talk, that she would never in her life possess the expertise with square roots that her brother claimed to possess. This avowal at age 6 has echoed throughout her life. It survived her stellar education at leading universities. Both during and after university her educational and business attainments have clearly surpassed those of her brother. Both her degrees involved a high level of mathematical ability.

She was born into comfortable circumstances, the second child and only girl, of an intact marriage. Her father, who had died some years before her analysis, was a writer with a considerable reputation and some financial success. He had inherited money, which, along with his earnings, afforded a comfortable living to the family. Her mother did not work outside of the home. Although instrumentally sound, the family atmosphere was not without conflict and emotional strain. For a number of years her maternal grandmother lived with the family and created tension between husband and wife with her domineering and self-righteous ways. Later in his life, her father developed what seems to have been a mixed anxiety and depressive disorder. She recalled that in adolescence she would spend time with her father as a comforting and reassuring presence.

Her relationship with her mother was more troubled, although this took time to emerge in the analysis. During the early phases of her analysis, she had told me that her mother had been laid up with a severe accidental injury to her upper arm and shoulder for at least the first 9 months of Paula's life. This problem interfered with her mother's ability to hold her daughter; it also suggests that there was an early interruption of the bond between mother and daughter. As a quiet, observant, and sensitive child, overshadowed by a dominating older brother, she felt distant from her mother who, for a period of time, referred jokingly to her daughter as the "silent presence." Although Paula was initially very hesitant to criticize her mother, it slowly emerged that she had experienced her mother as remote, even disinterested, for much of her childhood and adolescence. In addition, Paula was convinced that her mother favoured her brother.

Prominent in her analysis was the relationship that developed with her brother, Dave, throughout her childhood and beyond. As Paula grew out

of infancy, this brother became a threatening and bullying presence in her young life. Over the course of our work together, the details of the abuse slowly emerged. In the course of this presentation I will describe some of these incidents in more detail.

Dave seemed to have been problematic for her parents as well as her. She recalled her mother serving him at breakfast, catering to his excessive demands, while she looked on fearfully. At no time could she remember either of her parents defending her against Dave, or of being aware of his abuse. Nor did Paula ever complain. Instead she seemed to have developed stoicism in the face of these assaults and a determination to endure whatever happened. These attitudes became entrenched adaptations that helped her in the immediate situation but exacted a price in her later life.

THE ANALYSIS

My analysis of Paula has taken place in two stages. The first involved a three-times-weekly analysis, with the use of the couch, which lasted 5 years. It was terminated by mutual agreement. The second stage began when Paula called me and asked for a consultation two years after her analysis ended. Following the consultation, we agreed to meet again, this time at a frequency of twice weekly, face to face. I will focus in this presentation on the second stage, where much of the work on Paula's most prominent resistances has been done.

A number of themes emerged in the analytic material that pointed to the importance of siblings, and sibling substitutes, in Paula's internal world and their important effects on her past and current life. This horizontal dimension of psychic life was ever-present in the clinical material (Coles, 2003, 2006; Kaës, 2008; Mitchell, 2003, 2012; Vivona, 2007). In the early years of her analysis, much time was spent in dealing with her feelings about the separation from her husband. Over time, it became clear that a major element in this unhappy object choice was linked to Paula's unresolved issues with her brother. The middle years were marked by the emotional fluctuations of her developing relationship with her former lover, whom I shall call Jim. He also represented a brother figure, although dissimilar from her husband and markedly different from her eldest brother. In the later sections of her analysis we worked through repetitions of her internalized sibling object relations, as they manifested themselves in her relationship with Jim, and as they appeared in the transference-counter-transference of the analysis.

By the termination of her analysis much had changed in Paula's life. Her divorce had been finalized and her relationship to her former lover,

Jim, had consolidated. They now lived together and had become engaged during the final phase of her analysis. Paula's guilt about the effects of their relationship on her children and her former husband had lessened. She continued to worry about the effects of her divorce on her children but was reassured by their reluctant acceptance of the changes she had wrought in their lives. She was also much less depressed.

Some apprehension persisted. Her workplace inadequacy lingered, particularly with respect to her feelings that Jim's career was, and would be, much more successful than her own. However, at this time I felt that the analysis had succeeded in that it had allowed Paula to rekindle and consolidate her relationship with Jim. Without analysis I felt it likely that her guilt and shame at its illicit beginning, and its passionate nature, would have interfered with the transformation of the affair into a solid, maturing, love relationship. I had concerns that her constrained behaviour in analytic sessions might be a manifestation of continuing problems involving her personal and professional life outside the analysis. In the final phases, some of these issues surfaced and were further analyzed. Nevertheless, given the gains that Paula had made, I agreed to a termination date.

In retrospect, and after rereading my notes of this final phase, I believe that it presaged continuing difficulties in Paula's relationship with Jim and with her sense of ineptitude in the corporate world. Their lives were now entwined daily, personally, and with occasional contacts in the business world. Jim, her re-found sibling object, was now more intimately present in her life than the threatening, overbearing brother of her childhood and adolescence.

THE RETURN

At Paula's return consultation she gave a mixed account of the past 2 years. Although she and Jim had married and for the most part were happy, she remained plagued by difficulties. Her problems with her professional life had continued if not worsened since termination. She frequently found herself in despair about her inability to work consistently, as she put it. She often found herself staring, agonized, in front of her computer screen, feeling totally inadequate. The familiar mental litany of personal inadequacy, hopelessness, and despair, coupled with ruthless self-criticism, was a frequent event, both at work and at home with Jim. She was also plagued by jealousy of Jim's capacity to work without apparent conflict or despair. Paula added to her woes by her certainty that her feelings and her failings would affect her relationship with Jim and lead to the breakup of their marriage. Paula's moods did affect him to the point where, baffled by what

he perceived as her gloom-filled distortions about her professional abilities, he would become impatient with her, thereby worsening her despair.

In the interim, since the ending of Paula's analysis I had done two things that helped me and my patient with the next phase of her therapy. First, I had critically reviewed the analytic literature on siblings as a result of having had two other analysands whose siblings had played large roles in the analytic work. Second, I read both Dr. Fernando's and Dr. Bohleber's books and papers. In reading their work I became much more aware of the central importance of the traumatic nature of Paula's childhood and its lasting effects in both the personal and professional spheres of her life.

The face-to-face nature of the second phase of the analysis was one factor that allowed for a more active approach to the episodes of abuse that Paula suffered. I began to actively seek details of the abuse she had endured at the hands of Dave, an approach that both Fernando and Bohleber advocate in the analysis of individuals who have suffered significant abuse. Besides the attack I have already described, there were many others throughout her childhood. She was constantly on guard against Dave's aggression, ready to raise her arms against his attacks. As Paula said, "I was always on guard, hyper-vigilant in Dave's vicinity." Accordingly, she learnt to adopt a low profile in the home when he was around. She became the "silent presence" of her mother's comment. She dreaded being on "show" in any way, as she put it, or drawing attention to herself. Any such action on her part in Dave's presence could be greeted by a blow, by sarcastic insults, or both. Frequently, he would grab her painfully by her throat, saying threateningly, "Want to make something of it?" She particularly recalled the unexpected shocks she endured as a result of his attacks. For example, there were many times that she was struck very hard by various objects he hurled at her with full force and without warning.

There was one incident that she found especially terrifying, as she believed her life was in danger. This occurred during a family lakeside vacation when Dave, in an unusually friendly gesture toward his young sister, invited her for a sail in the family yacht. At the time she had suffered a broken arm some weeks previously and was wearing a heavy cast on the arm. All went well until they reached the middle of the lake. Abruptly, Dave's mood changed. Curtly, he told her it was time for a swim and swiftly removed the drain plug from the hull of the boat. As the boat began to fill with water, he laughed mockingly at Paula's mounting fear. He did not replace the plug until the yacht was awash in water and she was terrified, fearing that she would drown.

Having reviewed the previous work, I also became aware of certain aspects of the transference-counter-transference dynamic that had escaped my notice. I have spoken of her unexpected constraint in the analysis manifest in her habitually ironic stance to herself and others in her current and past life. It became clear that I was experienced transferentially as an elder brother figure. For instance, in a dream that involved a colleague whom Paula identified as a brother figure, the brother/colleague sat at his desk looking at her, "as if he had more important things to do." I then interpreted my own position as such a figure. Paula responded sharply, saying, "Well look at this office here. There's no fretting here. No things not handled. It's like mission control, papers arranged, always ink in the pens, the Palm Pilot never crashes and no lost agendas."

Beyond this clear transference, my tendency to have left her constraint unchallenged was linked to some aspects of my own sibling counter-transference. Initially, I had been somewhat in awe of Paula's achievements and her stellar, broad-based intellect. My own sibship enters here. I was the youngest of three boys by 12 years. My early years with respect to siblings had none of Paula's pain. I idealized my elder brothers in childhood. They carried with them into my psyche the rambunctious joys of life that adolescent boys can experience and evoke. I basked in their presence and would never have thought of challenging them until much later. I suspect that this aspect tended to unconsciously limit my usual, more confrontational approach to analytic work with Paula. With this knowledge, I intervened more persistently with Paula in the second phase of our work together. It is noteworthy that there are only sparse references to sibling transference-counter-transference dynamics in the psychoanalytic literature (Graham, 1988; Lesser, 1978).

I became gradually more aware that Paula made great use of a variety of what Dr. Fernando has labelled as attentional defences. She spent a great deal of time in her sessions in complaining about how difficult it was to live with Jim. He was depicted as having no inner struggles with his own work, in clear contrast to her work-related despair. Her portrait of his carefree life did not fit with her accounts of his anxiety when stressed at home and at work. I would hear a great deal about his bafflement and growing impatience with chronic self-denigration with reference to the various aspects of her work. When their paths would cross at industry gatherings, Paula complained that he surrounded himself at such meetings with "admiring females" while at the same time ignoring her presence. I was then able to point out that these various descriptions of Jim's behaviour in their personal and professional life were almost entirely negative. Furthermore,

these accounts were at variance with what she had previously told me over the years about the loving, passionate side of their relationship. Initially, Paula was taken aback. In the next session she admitted with some hesitation that she continues to find Jim “excruciatingly attractive” and that the “physical side of things between us is as powerful as ever.”

This focus on the negative was coupled with the defensive use of guilt. Paula was rarely without guilt. Guilt about her relationship with Jim, guilt about her mothering, guilt about her business achievements, guilt about her slow progress in analysis, guilt about competitiveness: the list covered most of Paula’s activities present and past. In the second phase of her analysis, I became much more aware of how abundantly she used defensive guilt. As Fernando has noted, any patient suffering from trauma is prone to make ample use of this defence. He has also observed that this guilt allows an individual in a traumatic situation to retain hope. If only she could change, she could make things better for everyone concerned.

Paula’s complaints about Jim also represented in part a contrast defence. As Fernando has described, contrast defences begin with either a trauma or another painful reality. In Paula’s case, there were two such factors: the traumatic abuse that she suffered at Dave’s hands and the distant relationship with a mother she experienced as disapproving and judgemental. In contrast, her relationship with Jim represented the most loving and caring of Paula’s life. Faced with this fact, she had strong defensive needs to keep the contrast between these relationships separate in her mind. She needed to insist to herself, to Jim, and to me that her relationship with Jim had turned out to be a slightly less painful repetition of the ones she had endured in the past. This enabled her to keep out of full awareness the sadness, fear, and loneliness that had plagued her childhood.

Paula began a recent session with a statement that she was “at the bottom of the pile.” She had had a very busy day at work, during which she had made a number of presentations. Characteristically, she had begun to feel that her colleagues were disapproving of her, finding her work inadequate, and thinking that she was disorganized. Paula arrived home overwhelmed, tremulous, and exhausted. She told Jim, who had attended one of her presentations, that she was a failure in the eyes of her colleagues. Exasperated, Jim replied that she was “crazy,” as he had thought of her as beautiful, brilliant, and organized. He also told her that she appeared to love her negative feelings more than him, which upset her greatly. Her attentional focus was shifted away from his depiction of her as beautiful, brilliant, and organized to his exasperation and his accompanying comments.

Unfortunately, my allotted time does not allow me to describe more features of Paula's ongoing analysis. I could continue if time permitted and describe some of the compound defences that Paula employs that signal the complex intertwining of her attentional and counterforce defences. These she mobilizes against past memories, painful affects, and her Oedipal conflicts. Paula also gives some evidence of what Dr. Fernando has called zero process defences in that she has always acknowledged her brother's abusive behaviour but has consistently minimized it. The lasting emotional effects of this abuse on her were essentially dissociated until recently.

In his review of *The Processes of Defense*, Charles Levin (2012) writes that the book is an exceptional contribution. It builds on established analytic traditions while challenging them with new and refreshing approaches to classical concepts such as defences, drives, trauma, and reality. I agree with his comments but would also add that Fernando has written the best technical psychoanalytic contribution in recent times. His book is useful to the working analytic clinician, in that it allows for new solutions to taxing clinical problems. There have been few writers in our field who have given us such a comprehensive theoretical reformulation of defences. In addition, in his book Dr. Fernando gives us a master class on the technique of analyzing defences. We should all be grateful for his contribution to our field.

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