

Book review

Trauma, Drug Misuse and Transforming Identities: A life story approach

Kim Etherington

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If this book were made a compulsory read the helping professions might encourage more inclusive practice. I will certainly add it to the various reading lists under my influence as an educator. The core of the book, and its impact, comes from the experts by experience, who chart our journey through the underworld of human suffering. If that sounds extreme, I dare you to read it. As ever, when you really stop and listen you hear the patterns of abuse that underpin the seemingly random behaviour of the more obviously distressed. And for those of you who find comfort and refuge in diagnostic labels, be prepared to feel uneasy. This is the world of relating where little comes between you and the horror of the other person's life experience. You might want to cry, or switch off for a while, but hopefully you will continue to see the person in the story. Those of you with wilderness years of your own will find part 1 and part 3 of the book a useful contribution to your sense-making process.

Too few books allow people to bear witness to their own experience in this way. In my field, the world of psychodynamic theory, people's voices are often trapped inside 'clinical' vignettes, wrapped up in powerful analytic statements. The eloquence of theory takes over the fundamental experience of speaking, listening and feeling in the presence of another. Etherington gets away from this convention by dividing the book into three parts, so that theorising occurs in parts 1 and 3. The prologue, 'Hannah's story', launches the reader into the harsh reality of a childhood that has to be

endured. Hannah's traumas unfold along with her survival strategies, drinking and drug use being the key among these. Hannah has the chance to contextualise her behaviour here, so that we attend to the abuse that has to be managed rather than to some amorphous 'disorder' that has to be treated. How often does this occur in practice? Having worked for a number of years in the domestic violence field I am used to hearing that women were not asked about the context of their depression, self-injury, problem substance use, and a host of intelligent though dangerous responses to trauma. Hannah's is the first of eight transcribed interviews. Part 2 contains interviews with a further seven people courageous enough to agree to such scrutiny. These transcripts are interwoven with Etherington's responses and feelings. Again this candour on the part of the practitioner is refreshing. We are not unmoved. We are not professionally distant and sometimes we are closely identified with the person before us.

The chapter on trauma, drug misuse and transforming identity provides an excellent overview of ideas about the impact of abuse. All the key theorists get a place here in clear well-structured sections. Etherington handles the complex insights of the neurosciences without losing the connection with the less scientific reader. We hear about the impact that traumatic events have on the limbic system and discover that this system 'goes wrong in PTSD'. The discoveries from neuroscience are critical in the trauma and abuse field and have many implications for our understanding of attachment behaviour. It was disappointing not to see references to Schore's (2002) work here, but maybe that was the psychoanalytic part of me screaming to get out. The overall sentiment of this book reminded me of the excellent work by

Herman (1992) *Trauma and Recovery*, and it was important to see that her ideas were discussed here. Etherington makes useful points about the limitations of fixed views of how to transform trauma, reminding us that,

'Transforming trauma involves recognising that identity is not fixed but constantly reconstructed as a person gathers together aspects of past and present that will help them meet the future head-on.'

Having worked with men who are violent to their partners, this idea is vital to highlight. If you believe that your identity as an abuser is fixed, then you have nothing to lose by continuing to abuse. However, as the men in this book demonstrate it is possible to review frightening behaviours by recognising that they resonate with experiences of having been frightened. Like problem substance use, abusive tactics may be appealing, and sometimes effective, but they also ensure a life of insecurity in relationships. John reveals his responses to fears of relating:

'As soon as I feel insecure in relationships I bolt, or... smash the house up, things like that. In a relationship with a woman, it's like... I feel like they're taking the piss and I start feeling insecure and start to lose the plot, you know?'

Lest I be accused of a lack of criticality I should confess that I yearned for a nod towards a psychodynamic take on the life story research method. Our stories are resonant with symbolic meanings and unconscious actions that await attention. Why we are drawn to problem substance use rather than other ways of coping could be worth

considering somewhere in the theoretical substance of this book. Many of the stories resonate with ideas about belonging and the notion of the 'family' offered by other problem substance users. We have a description of an almost magical connection in Omar's story about Mac from the treatment centre. The powerful pull back towards symbiotic relating that hits us all when drunk or 'out of it' needs to be named. In my experience of my own wilderness years and the descriptions of others, it is this symbiotic promise that has to be tamed. The seamless merger between self and other that delights and at the same time threatens the integrity of self emerges in glimpses here. Yet we focus on narrative and co-construction of identity as potentially therapeutic. In research terms, recognition of the way we as researchers pick up and parallel the feelings and narratives of our interviewees is rich territory. But then it's to be expected that as someone with a psychodynamically wired head I would need time to think over the prominence given to identity here.

Despite my personal frailties about theoretical orientations and the fact that we get glimpses of the dark side of human behaviour, this book left me full of hope. Is there anything more awesome than bearing witness to the human spirit restoring itself from having been broken?

Reviewed by Suzanne Martin
Lecturer in Mental Health Studies
University of Kent

Reference

Schore A (2002) Dysregulation of the right brain: a fundamental mechanism of traumatic attachment and the psychopathogenesis of post-traumatic stress disorder. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* **36** 9–30.