BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by
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Tears in our Eyes, Trembling in Our Hearts, and Confusion in Our Minds: On Traumatic Losses, Failed Assumptions, and Evolving Meanings


Simon Shimshon Rubin is active in the field of loss, trauma, and bereavement as a clinician, researcher, and theoretician. He has written about the life-long implications of loss and bereavement, the significance of the relationship to the deceased, and the impact of child loss upon parents and families. Dr. Rubin’s Two-Track Model of Bereavement (1999) has served as the basis for ongoing research and intervention strategies across a range of bereaved persons. A full professor at the University of Haifa in Israel, Rubin was formerly chairman of the Clinical Psychology Program and past director of the Postgraduate Psychotherapy Program at the university. He co-edited Traumatic and Nontraumatic Loss and Bereavement: Clinical Theory and Practice with Ruth Malkinson and Eliezer Witztum, published in 2000 by Psychosocial Press.

Loss of the Assumptive World is an excellent collection of current, thoughtful, and useful chapters addressing issues of meaning construction, the nature of attributions and assumptions that provide internal structure
to the individual, across a range of perspectives that may be employed in the context of bereavement and other losses. This is a book that does not deliver quite what its title promises, a fact that carries a certain logic and appropriateness. In this book that addresses how challenges, violations, disappointments and shocks to basic assumptions impact the individual, it is perhaps a form of poetic justice that this reader's assumption about the book (based on the title alone) were challenged by the reading of it.

Make no mistake. Jeffery Kauffman and the various contributors have given us a valuable, important, and interesting book. However, I would not call this a "theory of traumatic loss." The contributions range too widely and relate to a number of theories and perspectives about how trauma and loss interact with the meaning structure of the individual at times of loss and crisis. Taken together, they provide us with the road map of an important area for study and for intervention, and one that we dare not neglect at the risk of detriment to our clients, our students, and ourselves.

The foreword by Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, and the postscript by Colin M. Parkes are tributes to their respective seminal contributions to the development of the study of assumptions following losses. The opportunity to get their perspective directly on the issues raised in the book is valuable. Kauffman's own introduction is thoughtful and introduces the reader to the issues, authors, and material covered in the book.

The first section is titled "Constructing Meaning in a World Broken by the Traumatic Loss of the Assumptive World." The opening chapter by Irene Smith Landsman is a fine introduction to the field and focuses on issues of meaning, cognitive mastery, and existential crises that are bound up with the crises and opportunities of trauma and loss. Individuals' responses to trauma can be transformative across a continuum marked by the poles of despair and transcendence. Landsman focuses the issues in a combination of process and outcome, and leaves open the question of to some extent, the mystery, of how these transformations occur. The theme of construction and reconstruction of meaning following traumatic loss is further developed by Robert Neimeyer and colleagues. They seek to combine discussion of theory with a closer look at the phenomena encountered. The chapter's co-authors include Luis Alberto Werner-Wildner, himself a bereaved father. Werner-Wilder's journaling, poetry, and writing convey some of the magnitude of the challenge following traumatic loss. The power of the individual narrative to touch and teach us allows the chapter to work as a combined intellectual and emotional experience. The directness and immediacy radiate through quotes such as this.

Today I recall your face and my soul aches and cries.
There is no warmth in my heart or hope in my life.
That consoles me for your absence,
And that takes away the anguish of living without your life." (p. 40)
And later,
"Today we weep for your absence, we yearn for your hours.
But the same memory comforts us for our departure." (p. 42)

In his chapter titled "How Could God?", Kenneth Doka writes about loss and its impact upon spiritual and religious worldviews. The individual coping with the death of a loved one may experience the loss as posing a powerful challenge to spiritual assumptions. The material on the topic is vast and is worthy of (and has received) complex and nuanced treatment in every faith tradition (cf. Berkovitz, 1973; Solomon, 2003, for modern perspectives from the Jewish tradition). Doka wisely limits his treatment of the topic to an introduction to issues in working with clients. His selections from The Book of Job, C.S. Lewis, and Rabbi Horold Kushner are well chosen and can be useful to both the secular and religious individuals confronting loss. The final chapter of this section, by Tom Attig, expands the discussion of our assumption about assumptions. Attig explains how the assumptive world encompasses "all that we have come to take for granted as we have learned how to be and to act in the world" (p. 55). This means that cognitive aspects are only a fraction of what must be relearned following certain losses, and Attig's exposition brings a freshness to ideas both known and new.

The second section of the book shifts to consider issues concerned with the relationship of self and other. Anne DePrince and Jennifer Freyd examine the place of emotions such as fear in the development of trauma literature, before turning to focus on the significance of betrayal in the conceptualization of what is shaken in trauma. Attention to the social contexts of trauma are more likely to receive attention in the betrayal formulation and assist in the approach to trauma that emphasizes relationships and expectations rather than basic neurochemical changes occurring following exposure to life-threatening situations. Daniel Leichty, drawing on the work of E. Bercker, addresses
how the balance between safety and danger pervades our lives. The individual places emphasis upon the former and actively de-emphasizes the latter. "Once the basic point is made that we skate...on a thin sheet of certainty above a lake of faith, it becomes clear just how integral acts of faith are to normal human existence" (p. 83). The individual's attempt to defend against human frailty and eventual death is shaken when he or she loses a close relationship to death. At that point, the need to repair and restore protective barriers, albeit with change, becomes most pressing.

Richard Ulman and Maria Milora use the perspective of self-psychology to describe how the threat to one's own life or the loss of a close relative shatters assumptions and fantasies. In their presentation of three cases they focus on the ways in which loss serves as a threat to the individual. The meanings attributed to the person who died and to the relationship with him or her are the key to understanding what makes the loss threatening. The distinction between the loss of another (the loss-of-someone-else-important-but-not-me) and the loss of the so-called self-object fantasy (the loss-of-someone-who-functions-for-me) is examined in the clinical material. The loss and trauma literatures do not sufficiently stress how often "loss" is actually the loss of something or someone that has significance in the modulation of the emotional life of the bereaved. Were this not the case, the bereaved would not have "lost" anything when someone else dies.

This third section of the book groups together a number of psychological processes and approaches that are relevant to the trauma of loss. Roger Solomon's chapter on the use of eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) in work with violated assumptions broadens the discussion of this technique in therapeutic work with people who are dealing with violations of assumptive worlds. Rather than focusing on a specific technique, Charles Corr addresses how to assist in coping with challenges to assumptive worlds following trauma and loss. Coping and adaptation to change are fundamental to human functioning under general condition of stress and/or loss, and they are considered independently and together. His concluding remarks on evaluation and intervention provide direct advice to helping professionals.

The following chapter by Sandra Bloom moves beyond the discussion of loss due to death to consider potential implications of the loss and assumption paradigms for dealing with childhood maltreatment. The feedback loops for the child growing up is one in which basic attitudes and views about self and other are vulnerable to the effects of trauma. Under conditions of maltreatment, there are often extremely potent impacts on relationships to self and other. Bloom sketches a broad and inclusive accounting of the impact upon children who grow up to become adults. The loss of what wasn't there but should have been (protection and the experience of "being properly held") is conveyed by quotations from those who have undergone those experiences. How too little of a bad thing, too much of one, and too many bad things, may affect us, is taken up in a different fashion by Theresa Rando. Her chapter on the "curse" of too good a childhood turns the spotlight on people who having had life relatively devoid of adversity, are without the skills and flexibility to deal with serious misfortune, trauma, and loss. Rando builds her case expertly, tackling between clinical material and theoretical literatures, and concludes with suggestions for the clinician working with such persons. Linda Goldman's chapter on the assumptive worlds of children describes what kinds of adversity many of today's children face and the toxic assumptions that they may develop in response to life situations. Reading Rando and Goldman together puts a recurrent theme in the volume back at center stage: What are the kinds of life assumptions that will serve people best? In a world where danger and vulnerability are always present to some degree, and where particularly bad things can and do happen, what is most adaptive? If previous belief systems and personal constructs are shattered by difficult life events, the question of what assumptive worldviews may emerge and which best serve the individual negotiate the new view and new circumstances of life.

The final section of the book returns to traumatic loss per se. Jeffrey Kauffman's own chapter focuses the trauma in traumatic loss on the psychological impact of the experience. This includes the threat to the cohesion of self, the blows to the protective and cohesive functions of assumptions, and the search for the sanctity of "safety." Returning to focus upon the experience of self, Kauffman concludes with the significance of shame following trauma and its importance in self-regulation. If Kauffman highlights shame and the experience of self in trauma from a theoretical vantage, Henry Krystal's chapter on "What Cannot Be Remembered or Forgotten" is rooted in catastrophic human experience. For its victims, the Holocaust shattered previous assumptions, while remaining beyond the ability of most victims to integrate the experience into their reconstructed assumptive worlds. Krystal focuses on the
interplay between the individual who needs to find proper conditions to tell parts of his or her story as part of the integration-testimony-healing process, and the numerous obstacles to that process. The wish to not hear, listen to, or be overwhelmed by horror is shared by the victim as well as by members of society. Although victim and non-victim alike are in the grip of strong psychological forces operant to shut down the avenues for exploration and integration of these overwhelming life stories, it is the victim's reticence that can be more easily forgiven. Cathy Caruth's chapter on trauma, silence, and survival integrates insights from Freud's post-WW1 Vienna with those from current centers of America's urban violence regarding what needs to be confronted and mastered. She highlights the need to rework and to integrate the experiences of loss of loved ones, loss of safety, and loss of coherence. If successful, the integration will evolve into a life story where loved ones live on within oneself, where enough of what we need from others is preserved, and where a new way of making sense of the world will have been achieved.

This book went to press before the events of September 11th occurred and made their impact on the American psyche. The terrorist attacks upon civilians and civil airlines, the televised collapse of the World Trade Center towers, and the piercing of the sense of relative invulnerability on home soil that Americans previously took for granted are the epitome of the loss of an assumptive world. Since September 2001, literature addressing the impact of terror and traumatic loss have achieved primacy they had never received before (Malkinson, Rubin, & Witzeum, 2000). The convergence of research studies examining the impact of trauma on individuals has begun to document clearly that those in the proximity of trauma suffer measurable and negative effects. Proximity to trauma is not a simple matter, however, as it includes physical exposure, being directly affected by the events, as well as having friendship and kinship relationships to someone who was exposed, harmed, or lost in the trauma (Galea et al., 2002). These data require us to explain how exposure to the threat to others functions similarly to exposure to a threat to ourselves. Just as the death of another is experienced as a loss to the person of the bereaved, the threat to another can be experienced as a threat to one who is involved with the person directly affected. To my mind, issues of identification with others, along with the meaning and relational matrixes we construct consciously and unconsciously, are undoubtedly part of the conceptual approach we need in order to understand what is going on.

The construction of meaning, and the interpretation of one's life and of one's losses, are closely bound up with one's overarching view of the world. They are, however, no less bound to one's very personalized response to the significance of the relationship to the loved person who died. As with almost any focus of study in the field of loss, we have much to gain when we direct our powers of observation and attention to a particular dimension or feature of the response to loss. It may be self-evident much of the time, but the multi-dimensional complexity of the response to loss challenges us to focus on various aspects of the experience. Conceptualizing such important topics as life assumptions and meaning-making benefits from focusing upon them specifically. They are akin to "break out topics" within a broader view of the loss experience.

My own overarching matrix for viewing loss is reflected in the multi-dimensional Two-Track Model of Bereavement (Rubin, 1999). From time to time, I have been asked whether life assumption and meaning construction are better subsumed under the grouping of overall functioning (Track I) or as placed within the rubric of relationship to the deceased (Track II). My response has been to describe them as relevant to both tracks of the bereavement response. Ultimately, significant trauma as well as significant interpersonal loss have the power to change one's ways of viewing the world. At one level, and in common with other traumas, there are changes that accompany the bereaved's adjustment to his or her new life that affect how the world is viewed. Life assumptions and meaning in the broadest sense can be challenged and reworked here. Nonetheless, when it come to issues regarding the impact of loss at it relates to meaning making and assumptions bearing on the conscious and unconscious aspects of the relationship to a particular deceased, then it is the relational aspects of the response to loss that are most affected. The issues most relevant are those concerning how the bereaved manages the ongoing thoughts, memories, and feelings to the person who has died and their meaning for him or her. Although there is interdependence between the two levels of meaning affected in loss, I believe it important not to separate changes in one's view of the world and changes in the reworked and internalized relationship to a particular loved one who has died. When to focus on the broad sweep of the assumptive world view shaken following traumatic loss, and when to focus more specifically on the particulars of what was "intra-personally lost" in the death of a loved one, are questions that deserve attention in the case of all traumatic bereavements. This book has material relevant to both these questions, as well as to other similar questions. I found it a
thoughtful read and one that expanded my thinking. It is a valuable, as well as topical, addition to the literature, and I recommend it highly.

References


