Selected issues in trauma studies

Synopsis:

The ubiquity of trauma in everyday life – whether we are talking about our patients, ourselves, or our society, has become glaringly evident in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have had such wide ranging impact. We are aware of how much need there is for psychoanalysts working with traumatized individuals to be well versed in the multiple manifestations, reverberations and consequences of traumatic events for the psychic life of patient and analyst alike.

The four instructors of this course represent the four tracks within Post Doc. They will present their psychoanalytic perspectives on trauma that arise out of his/her understanding of the subject in its individual as well as socio-cultural meanings. In each of the course blocks there will be overlapping themes, particularly that of the effects on the analyst of working with trauma. The impact of countertransference on the analyst and on the work itself will be considered through the theoretical lens of the individual instructors who represent the four theoretical orientations of the Post Doctoral Program. One of the four instructors will be a consistent presence throughout the 14 weeks to facilitate the course while each of the other three takes primary didactic responsibility for the course sequence in that “block” of material.

Week 1. – Introduction and overview of the scope of the course. All four instructors – Alpert, Prince, Thomas, Tylim.

This session will focus on an introduction to trauma – an event or a reaction to an event? The various forms of trauma will be discussed – chronic illness, poverty, racism, political repression, war, disaster – as well as their psychic and developmental consequences and differences and the differing theoretical perspectives on what constitutes “trauma.”

**Block I – Instructor – Isaac Tylim**

This section will explore the working through processes following traumatic events. I shall delve into Freud’s and Melanie Klein’s conceptualization of normative and pathological mourning, the part played by the repetition compulsion, and the tension between libidinal and destructive forces as manifested in reparation and creativity.

Week 1: Trauma and Mourning. Normal and Pathological Mourning. Memory and the repetition compulsion.

Week 2: Dreams, art, and creativity as facilitators of mourning. Reparation in the therapeutic work with traumatized individuals. Clinical illustrations.


Week 3: Memorialization. Technology, virtuality, and the culture of desire. The building of memorials.


**Block II. Instructor – Judie Alpert** - This section will focus on the impact of trauma (including defensive consequences and issues around memory for traumatic events) as well as dream work related to traumatic events.

Week 5: Impact of Trauma; Defensive Consequences


Week 6 : Delayed Memory Debate


Week 7: Reconstruction, Narration, Truths, and Dreams

Block III. Instructor – Robert Prince - Trauma is quintessentially a private experience. In its most extreme, traumatic experience drives the self into a “prison.” When the individual is also convinced of having been totally abandoned, trauma becomes a black hole that pulls the self into it. Even while trauma is endured privately, it also occurs within a social context. The strain on the tie between the self and the world the individual inhabits illuminates both. These several weeks will be spent looking at the social context of trauma and an exploration of the meaning of the phrase: “after such knowledge.” History will be considered as one of the major influences on a person’s experience of trauma. We will also look at how trauma alters the social context and on how trauma is transmitted.

Week 8. – Understanding trauma in cultural and historical context.

Week 9. - Further consideration of the individual’s embeddedness in culture and its implications for working with traumatized individuals. Trauma and issues of meaning.

Week 10. – Intergenerational transmission of trauma. Trauma as an organizing principle of identity in the second generation.

Block IV – Instructor – Nina Thomas - This section of the course will expressly focus on the phenomenology of traumatic experience and its relational consequences. Traumatized individuals have especial difficulty in modulating their experience whether as a result of the psychic numbing to which they can become subject or the degree to which they may be launched into intense reliving of their original traumatic moments. The intensity of experience coupled with the failure of symbolic function create particular
dilemmas for the therapist in finding ways to navigate the turmoil and to sustain him/herself through the patient’s maelstroms. Psychoanalytic treatment can be a rich resource for accompanying the patient in reshaping experience as an object of memory as opposed to re-enactment.

Week 11. Affect regulation or dysregulation is a familiar concern in work with patients who have experienced traumatic events. This "being in the midst of a storm" has significant implications for patient, analyst and the analytic dyad. This class will focus on the challenges to the analytic task involved in the patient and analyst withstanding such affect storms and working through the enactments that accompany them.


Week 12. The analytic undertaking depends on the symbolic representation of experience. As such, the patient and analyst share the function of being witness to what the patient has lived through. This session will focus on the demands for both participants of "witnessing" in its multiple dimensions.


Week 13. Why do some patients seek revenge and others not? What is it that is sought through recourse to revenge? The seeking of meaning from revenge in the aftermath of trauma and its relationship to distorted mourning will be explored.


**Block V: Integrating the theoretical perspectives** – Instructors Alpert, Prince, Thomas and Tylim.

Week 14. This final session of the course will provide a Coda to the discussion that was begun in the introduction. That is, the four perspectives on what constitutes trauma and the approaches to treatment that emerge from these conceptualizations will be examined in detail.