

Book Review:

Prologue to Violence. Child Abuse, Dissociation, and Crime.

By Abby Stein, Ph.D.

Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 2007; 147pp, \$29.95¹

Ronald C. Naso, Ph.D.

What transpires in the minds of violent criminals? Do their actions follow from uncontrollable impulses or simply reflect an absence of moral feeling? Abby Stein's (2007) response is that violence is "...the inevitable outcome of severely damaging early interpersonal relationships" (p. 38). Her work as a forensic psychologist and Adjunct Associate Professor at the John Jay Criminal Justice program at City University of New York leads her to conclude that violence is shaped by massive trauma and dissociation. She seamlessly integrates psychoanalytic theory and her clinical work into a unique understanding of violent offenders. However, by according dissociation a central etiological role, Stein also makes a significant contribution to the current debate about this mechanism within contemporary psychoanalysis. Her sensitivity to the indicants of dissociated moral feeling in individuals widely regarded as conscienceless has important clinical and philosophical implications.

Stein's central argument may be parsed into two interlocking premises: (a) As a result of severe childhood trauma, violent offenders are more vulnerable to pathological dissociation; (b) Pathological dissociation produces a distinctive mental state described by the term "psychosomnia", a chronic, dream-like mode of experience resulting from an incapacity for linguistic representation. Psychosomnia undermines critical reflection and integrated moral appraisal, thus increasing the likelihood of enactment.

Whereas many criminologists understand violent action as expressing impulses no longer satisfied within the offender's elaborate fantasy life, Stein views their imaginative capacities as impoverished and inarticulate. Without any facility for reflective self-awareness, they experience affects as intolerable tension states pressing for discharge. Violent enactment thus voices dissociated victimization, communicating unthinkable trauma through disclaimed action. The real legacy of abuse is a lust for attachment rather than for sexual gratification. The perversity of this pursuit destroys the possibility of secure and satisfying attachment.

There is wide agreement among trauma specialists with regard to Stein's first point: severe abuse produces dissociation. The prevalence of the former in violent offenders correlates with the alarmingly high incidence of the latter. But Stein does not rest her

¹ (2007). Book Review: *Prologue to Violence* by Abby Stein. *Psychologist-Psychoanalyst*, 27: 52-59.

conclusions exclusively on statistical induction. She uncovers powerful evidence of dissociation in their narratives. One sadistic killer recounted his crimes in the following way: “I knew what happened when I woke up but I did not know if it happened for real or was imagined” (p.97). For Stein, dissociation increases the likelihood of violent enactment by preventing the offender’s “victimacy...[from being]...seamlessly woven into expressive discourse” (p.25). Unassimilated, but highly charged experiences are destined for “the comforting pulse of gesture” (p. 25). Although one must remain vigilant to their wish to evade punishment, Stein notes the frequency with which they forgo opportunities for denial in speaking about their deeds. She interprets this surprising phenomenon to mean that punishment is an integral element of criminal narratives, providing comfort, containment, and moral authority that cannot be generated internally.

Although relational theorists largely regard dissociation normatively and as a dimensional variable, Stein very clearly speaks of dissociative experiences falling at the pathological end of this spectrum. Indeed, some of her patients might well meet the diagnostic criteria for Dissociative Identity Disorder, thus indirectly supporting the claim that pathological dissociation is categorically distinct from other forms of so-called dissociative experience. There is substantial evidence supporting the view that pathological dissociation occurs rarely outside of severe psychopathology and bears little relationship to normal experiences of compartmentalization, detachment, selective inattention, and/or imaginative absorption (Waller et al., 1996 & 1997). Thus, many forms of expectable dissociation do not preclude linguistic representation. That I do not formulate or permit certain experiences into awareness does not mean they cannot be formulated or symbolized. If the absence of formulation is the *sine qua non* of dissociation (Stern, 1997), then much of everyday experience is dissociated. However, it is more likely that pathological dissociation reflects the inability to bridge disparate states of mind. Stein suggests that violent offenders learn to dissociate facilely to diminish the subjective experience of agency and to by-pass moral culpability. The multiplicity of which Stein speaks is real multiplicity; pathological dissociation renders the subjective experience of who did what to whom uncertain.

In framing these questions, Stein follows the thinking of Grossman (1993) who explicitly links disavowal to an inconsistent commitment to truth. He uses the term “perverse attitude to reality” (p. 422) to denote a mode of experience in which one sees and knows, but facilely “turn[s] down the volume on reality” (p. 422) when it is advantageous to do so. Similar to psychosomnia, the perverse attitude allows one to gratify forbidden wishes without experiencing conflict. However, in this perspective, agency is maintained. Although one may not experience it as such, one makes choices and decisions about one’s actions. Stein does not jettison the concept completely, but sees the concept of agency as more ambiguous. She describes it as “ping-ponged” (p. 121) between dissociated aspects of the self. She avers that what is enacted is “at least partially conscious” (p. 116), but implies that agency is diminished by dissociation.

What is not discussed by Stein, but is of vital importance to psychoanalysis, is how one reconciles a fundamentally dissociative model with one that is agentic. Because relational theorists regard consciousness as the product of effortful construction, the idea

that some mental contents remain outside awareness is not problematic. Experience, like personal identity, exists only by virtue of verbal formulation. What is not formulated creatively in language never reaches awareness. But, by understanding the form and content of experience to be determined exclusively by the interpersonal field rather than by the individual, this view necessarily diminishes agency. As Mills (2005) contends, this leaves relational theorists in the unenviable position of choosing between a nontranscendental self, understood as a reflection of these influences, or a materialistic one. Neither alternative is appealing. To speak of splitting or dissociation employed for the purposes of defense implicates agency. It implicates a self that is distinct from the influences of language, culture, and/or the interpersonal field—a self, in other words, that decides and chooses. Stein says as much when she notes that “offenders work hard to exploit their natural tendency for dissociative reverie” (p. 24). In embracing what comes naturally or results from trauma, offenders powerfully express agency.

Upon reflection, enactment instantiates processes of two different kinds: those that cannot be (or have not yet been) thought and those that are defensively excluded. Although both are separated from conscious experience and identity, the former bespeaks an agent that guides, directs, appraises, and defends, whether consciously or unconsciously. Dissociation deletes these experiences. But there’s a catch: It does not obliterate agency as such, but rather the subjective experience of it. One no longer perceives oneself to be the author of one’s actions; intention and will are felt to be distributed among multiple selves and self-states, or, in the extreme, are experienced as someone’s else’s. One need look no further than phenomena like highway hypnosis and the modularity of cognition more generally to appreciate the relatively minor role played by consciousness in the drama of agency (Naso, 2007). This is the deeper sense of Mills argument, as well as of relational theorists like Greenberg (2005). Although dissociated, the powerful and sustained impact of agency nevertheless may be discerned.

The liabilities of a dimensional view are most apparent when one confronts the problem of deception, an essential element of immoral action. Deception is a prominent feature of criminal narratives and coextensive with intention. If Stein is correct in understanding criminal acts as the perverse effort to mollify a murderous superego, it is only because they express multiple intentions, including, but not limited to, the desire to conceal uncomfortable truths from the self and others. This intention is not reducible to expectable, nonpathological dissociation. To disentangle victimization from victimizing, dissociation as a subjective experience from the self-serving disavowal of deception, one must pay greater attention to moral agency.

At a deeper level, Stein’s analysis suggests that, by undermining the capacity for verbal representation, dissociation creates a kind of premoral internal world that obscures the connections between action and intention. What cannot be said cannot be avowed or connected to who one is. By precluding speech, dissociation also undermines the possibility of moral integration by perpetuating the illusion that one is a victim of forces beyond one’s control. It thus reinforces the perception that one is not implicated morally in what one does, leaving one with only a vague and indistinct connection to one’s immoral actions.

Stein gives us a highly intelligent, depth psychological perspective of the frighteningly opaque inner worlds of violent offenders. Part of the pleasure in reading her work is the window it provides into their experiences, helping us make sense of what lurks beneath their acts of cruelty and seeming inhumanity. That Stein also engages important issues debated within contemporary psychoanalysis only adds to its appeal. Needless to say, this book is strongly recommended for psychoanalysts and mental health practitioners alike, as well as those who have a more specific interest in the dynamics of violence.

References

- Greenberg, J. (2005). Conflict in the middle voice. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 74, 105-120.
- Grossman, L. (1993). The Perverse Attitude Toward Reality. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 62, 422-436.
- Mills, J. (2005). A critique of relational psychoanalysis. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 22, 155-188.
- Naso, R. C. (2007). In the "I's" of the beholder: Dissociation and multiplicity in contemporary psychoanalytic thought. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 24, 97-112.
- Stein, A. (2007). *Prologue to Violence. Child Abuse, Dissociation, and Crime*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Stern, D. (1997). *Unformulated Experience: From Dissociation to Imagination in Psychoanalysis*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Waller, N., Putnam, F.W., & Carlson, E.B. (1996). Types of dissociation and dissociative types: A taxometric analysis of dissociative experiences. *Psychological Methods*, 1, 300-321.
- _____. & Ross, C.A. (1997). The prevalence and biometric structure of pathological dissociation in the general population: Taxometric and behavior genetic findings. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 106, 499-510.