

TRAUMA THEORY: POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS:
PIERRE JANET, SIGMUND FREUD,
BESSEL VAN DER KOLK

“As these [traumatized] men are unable to process *affective* stimulation through *ordinary* channels, very few psychological options remain open. Since they react to emotional stimulation *as if it threatened a recurrence* of the traumatic stress, they respond to any affectively charged situation only through the *rigid, primitive, and totalistic reactions* appropriate to overwhelming and traumatizing situations -- either with *fight* responses or with *flight*. This *lack of affect tolerance* interferes with the ability to grieve, and with the capacity to work through ordinary everyday conflicts and to accumulate *restitutive, gratifying experiences*. Hence, they are deprived of precisely those psychological mechanisms which allow people to *cope* with the narcissistic injuries of daily life” (van der Kolk & Ducey, 1989, p. 268).

“In people with PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], even *minor stimuli* may serve as *precipitants* of emergency responses. They have no awareness of the *personal meaning* of the stimuli that *reactivate past learning*. The *reliving of the past* occurs automatically and without reflective recognition of its *historical context*: Contextual stimuli directly evoke *stored memories without conscious awareness* of the transition (Squire, 1978). The inability to *appraise new situations* appropriately results in further autonomic arousal, anxiety, and . . . even disorganization of thought processes.”

“Pierre Janet, who first explored *the human response to trauma* in detail, believed that *vehement emotions* interfere with people’s capacity to *cognitively integrate* traumatic events into *the totality of their life experiences*. He thought that if an event is too upsetting for people to be able to *make sense of it*, it cannot be *neutralized* by integration into the memory system. The terrifying nature of the event results in ‘a phobia of memory’ (1919, p. 661) which prevents the *integration* of traumatic events and causes *dissociation* of the traumatic memories from ordinary consciousness (1889, 1898). Janet postulated that an experience becomes *traumatic* when it cannot be assim- (van der Kolk & Ducey, 1989, p. 269) ilated into *existing meaning schemes*, and that this *lack of transformation* of traumatic memories into *a personal story* results in *recurrent intrusive nonverbal memories* (1911). Memory traces of the trauma are *dissociated*, but linger and continue to *intrude* as terrifying perceptions, obsessional preoccupations or as somatic reexperiences. Janet described how traumatized individuals become ‘attached to the trauma,’ and that *new emotional experiences* cannot be integrated as long as a person is *unable to assimilate the traumatic memories*: ‘they are attached to an *unsurmountable obstacle*. The patient is *unable to tell the story* of the events as they occurred and yet, he remains confronted with the situation in which he was *unable to play a satisfactory role*’ (1919, p. 660). It is ‘as if their personality development has *stopped* at a certain point and cannot be expanded any more by the *addition or assimilation* of new elements’ (1911, p. 532). Eventually, Janet suggested, patients just want to *get away from it all*, and *forget* the situation: ‘complete *avoidance* is characterized by complete *absence of allusion* to sensitive objects or the anxiety associated with them. It is *as if* the event, or even the function *never existed*’ (1909, p. 352). The capacity to *adapt to current reality* breaks down, and the patient ends in a state of *chronic helplessness* expressed through both psychological and somatic symptoms (1903)

“He [Freud] proposed that the failure of the ‘stimulus barrier’ to screen out overwhelming excitation in the face of massive psychic trauma accounts for the ‘compulsion to repeat’ the trauma *as a current reality*, rather than process it *as a memory*: ‘He is obliged to repeat the repressed material *as a contemporary experience* instead of . . . remembering it *as something belonging to the past*’ (1920, p. 18).

“Freud and Janet attached crucial importance to the capacity to be able to *reproduce memories into words*. Freud called the *inability* to put experiences into words *repression*, and when that happens, the person, instead of remembering, *acts it out*: ‘He *reproduces* it not as a memory but as *an action*; he *repeats* it, without, of course, *knowing* that he is repeating . . . he cannot escape from this *compulsion to repeat*; and in the end we understand that this is *his way of remembering*’ (1914, p. 150). . . . He saw the individual’s experience of the *intruding affect* associated with trauma, the ‘compulsion to repeat,’ as an attempt to *symbolize* the mute, concrete, unsymbolized experience, and *to master actively* what he was initially *overwhelmed by passively*. Thus, while Janet emphasized the *passive inability* to integrate overwhelming experiences that led to the *dissociation* of experience, Freud asserted that *active motivation to forget* unacceptable memories led to *repression*. They both claimed that the crucial factor that determines *the repetition of the trauma* is the presence of mute, unsymbolized and unintegrated experiences: *A sudden and passively endured trauma is relived repetitively*, until the person learns to *remember simultaneously* the *affect* and the *cognition* associated with trauma through access to *language*.”

“The key elements of the psychotherapy of people with PTSD -- as perhaps for all psychotherapy -- is *the integration of the alien*, or, in Freud’s famous (though frequently mistranslated) dictum on the aim of psychoanalysis, ‘where *it was*, there shall *I* come to be’ (1933, p. 80). Life events initially experienced as alien, *as if imposed* from outside upon passive victims, must come to be ‘personalized’ affectively as *integrated* aspects of one’s history and life experience (Ducey, 1987, 1989). Even after having been dealt seemingly unmanageable blows by fate, people must somehow integrate those blows *as aspects of their own lives*, in order to maintain continuity of a sense of self.”

“The patient’s ‘repeating’ the trauma in *action* is the forerunner to his ‘remembering’ and symbolizing it in *words*, which in turn is the precursor accompaniment to his ‘working through’ in emotional experience” (van der Kolk & Ducey, 1989, p. 272).

PRIMARY REFERENCE

van der Kolk, B.A. & Ducey, C. P. (1989). The Psychological Processing of Traumatic Experience: Rorschach Patterns in PTSD. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 2 (3), 259-274.

SECONDARY REFERENCES

Ducey, C. P. *Oedipus am Scheideweg der Zivilisation [Oedipus at the Crossroads of Civilization]*. In Deurr, H. P. Die Wilde Seele. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 124-139.

- Ducey, C. P. (1989). Academic Underachievement. In Grayson, P., and Cauley, L. (eds.), *College Psychotherapy*. Gilford, New York.
- Freud, Sigmund. (1958). *Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through* (1914). *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Vol. 12, Hogarth Press, London, pp. 147-156.
- Freud, Sigmund. (1959). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Vol. 18, Hogarth Press, London, pp. 7-64.
- Freud, Sigmund. (1964). *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933). *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Vol. 22, Hogarth Press, London, pp. 7-182.
- Janet, Pierre. (1973). *L'Automatisme Psychologique: Essay de Psychologie Experimentale sur less Formes Inferieures de l'Activite Humaine*, Paris, Felix Alcan, 1889. Reprint: Societe Pierre Janet/Payor, Paris, 1973.
- Janet, Pierre. (1893, 1894). *Etat mental des hysteriques*. Bibliotheque medicale Charcot-Debove, Paris, Rueff et Cie, Vol. 2. I. Les stigmates mentaux (Preface de Charcot), 1893; 11. Les accidents mentaux, 1894.
- Janet, Pierre. *Nevroses et Idees Fixes* Vol. 2, Alcan, Paris.
- Janet, Pierre. *Les Obsessions et la Psychasthenie* Vol. 2, Alcan, Paris.
- Janet, Pierre. (1904). L'Amnesie et la dissociation des souvenirs par l'emotion. *J. Psychol.* 4:417-453.
- Janet, Pierre. *Les Nevroses*, Flammarion, Paris.
- Janet, Pierre. *L'Etat Mental des Hysteriques* (Second Edition), Alcan, Paris. Reprint: Lafitte Reprints, Marseille, 1983.
- Janet, Pierre (1919). *Les Medications Psychologiques* (3 volumes) Alcan, Paris.