

Nevertheless, the book is a hell of a great read. We encounter cultural and medical history, inspiring tales of ordinary individuals transformed by adversity, and an opportunity to challenge our own myriad assumptions about the sexualities.

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EXPLAINING THE INEXPLICABLE

A review of *Prologue to Violence: Child Abuse, Dissociation and Crime*, by Abby Stein, 2007, Analytic Press, 147 pp.

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In *PROLOGUE TO VIOLENCE*, Abby Stein tells of a 15-year-old boy who killed a 63-year-old woman. The young murderer described his actions in the following way: "I just started stabbing her. I really did not think about it. I really did not want to stab anybody. It was just bad luck" (reported by Revitch and Schlesinger, 1989, p. 1). Most forensic professionals

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would likely focus their evaluation of this case on the teen's conscious intentions, fantasies, and defective sense of right and wrong. Stein, on the other hand, traces the genesis of this and other acts of violence to dissociation, trauma, and reenactment. In making her argument she is thorough in her documentation of violent criminals' histories and accounts of their crimes. Stein provides abundant data, derived from open-ended interviews she conducted with incarcerated inmates, archival data in police files, and quantitative research. As a work of applied psychoanalysis, Stein's book is exemplary.

Stein is equally rigorous in her application of multiple theoretical perspectives to the phenomenology of violence. While she uses a broad array of psychoanalytic, attachment, forensic, and cognitive neuroscience theory to help us understand the many factors that conspire to create humans capable of terrible deeds, she mostly focuses on the power of trauma and dissociation. As she puts it, "[I]t is the pathological disengagement precipitated by early, intense, and repetitive trauma that most strongly facilitates the streaming of an unprocessed violent past into the present" (p. 4). By closely examining the words and histories of these people, Stein shows how violent individuals reenact their childhood traumas in remarkably symbolic, psychologically meaningful ways. Thus psychoanalytically hospitable clinicians will find Stein's basic conclusion highly compelling, if not altogether convincing. Even the most skeptical and cynical reader will likely find it difficult to finish the book without at least finding her thesis plausible.

Employing a well-substantiated and well-reasoned approach, Stein makes the links between childhood trauma, dissociation, and violence crystal clear. We learn that when they were children many violent criminals suffered horrific acts of brutality at the hands of caretakers. Stein makes it equally apparent that offenders' early traumas prompt the severe dissociative symptoms she finds common among them. Finally, she provides dozens of vignettes strongly suggesting that many violent criminals are in a dissociated state when they commit acts of violence and that their acts—or reenactments—are psychologically intelligible and meaningful.

In his lucid Foreword, Donnel Stern writes of these individuals, "Theirs is a complex kind of evil, an evil that seems desperate not to know itself" (p. x). To illustrate such desperation, Stein cites another case in which a man, when questioned about the disappearance of a woman with whom he left a bar, said, "I don't know if something happened. I hope it didn't" (p. 1). He then led the police to the pit where her body was buried and

later pled guilty to killing her. In these and numerous other instances, the men cited do not dissemble or try to hide the fact that they killed their victims. On the contrary, these killers admit guilt even when they are “unaware of what they had done” (p. 2), making it clear that what is at work here is not mere denial or minimization of responsibility for something they know they did. It is more psychologically complicated than that, and Stein is adept at grappling with such complications. The concept of dissociation—with its implication of being present and absent, there and not there—thus emerges as the best explanation currently available to explain these grisly tales.

Stein makes a number of other cogent, at times counterintuitive, observations about violent criminals. For instance, she shows why the concept of antisocial personality—applied to those cold-hearted criminals apparently devoid of conscience—is not particularly useful, illuminating, or even accurate. Many criminals, Stein demonstrates, actually have severe, guilt-ridden consciences and are highly shame prone. As Stern puts it, “Their consciences may be so severe that the people who commit these acts may be less willing than the rest of us to know what they have done” (p. x). The implicit link between dissociation and unbearable guilt suggests a radically different way of thinking about criminals’ manifest lack of guilt. As Stein writes:

Violence itself robustly testifies to the existence of an agentic, murderous superego, inculcated by early punishment too heinous to signify semantically, so that instead the violence is dissociated and performed. In a dynamic replay of past abuses, the traumatized person moves between states of rage and victimacy, shame and guilt, injury and attempted reparation. Those who break the law often seek containment, censure, and approbation from “outside authorities,” to whom they delegate moral agency when they can no longer handle the superego’s volatile demands [p. 40].

In addition to illustrating offenders’ profound inability to manage such affects, Stein presents dozens of vignettes depicting offenders’ severe psychological deficits in a number of other domains. Interspersing criminal narratives and theory, she demonstrates how traumatic early experience warps the normal development of fantasy, imagination, self-reflexivity, interiority, language, symbolization, memory, agency, and attachment in the lives of violent offenders. When deficits are so widespread and extreme—and when nontraumatizing caretakers are nonexistent or unavail-

able—trauma and radical dissociation make primitive violent enactments viable, compelling, and compelled.

Similarly, Stein challenges the idea that sexual offenders use conscious, sexually aggressive fantasies as a rehearsal for sexual crimes. As is the case with many violent offenders, these men do not have the imaginative or symbolic capacity to use fantasies as sources of satisfaction. For offenders who were traumatized as children, fantasies are more like delusions or obsessive ruminations than acts of imagination. Thus fantasies more closely resemble “highly ritualized reenactments of early abuse scenarios” (p. 65). In this sense, Stein adds, they are actually “perpetual enslavement[s] to reality” rather than “liberating flights of fancy” (p. 66). These so-called fantasies often serve a self-soothing function designed to magically remedy “disrupted attachments,” and offenders’ sexual crimes may represent a “perverse merger with their victims” (p. 63) rather than an attempt to satisfy erotic wishes. In exploring the roots of sexual aggression, Stein notes that, for an abused, frightened child who is trapped or enslaved by traumatic reality and whose capacity for symbolization is profoundly truncated, “the need for power and control comes to be forcefully dissociated and enacted rather than creatively imagined, as it is for less traumatized persons. . . . It is only through imaginative construction that destructiveness can be creatively integrated” (p. 67).

Likewise, and in contrast to the popular view among forensic professionals suggesting that criminals overindulge in sadistic fantasy, Stein argues that “the tendency to experience affects as alarmingly diffuse and indecipherable suggests an *inability* to engage in imaginative reverie, and a collapse into physical expressions of anxiety and rage” (p. 26).

Stein instead explores the question of what happens when universal, developmentally normal fears that occur during childhood (of annihilation, for example) are realized by the actions of caretakers. One man said the following:

My father beat my mother and me. He hit her with an iron cord, sometimes a pan. He hit me with everything: a belt buckle, his hand, an extension cord. During beatings I was so scared—I just wanted it to be over. . . . He used to tie me up and leave me in the closet for the KKK. He said that I was too black. . . . Once he slit the dog’s throat and left me in the closet with him for three hours. He told me, “I’ll do the same to you” [pp. 91–92].

In cases like this, Stein says, “the entire relationship in which the trauma eventually becomes embedded is itself so lacking in nourishment as to

constitute a massive threat to survival” (p. 92). She later adds, “If indeed abuse is perpetrated with the tacit approval or even the participation of several family members, there may be no other benign adults around to act as transitional other-than-abuser objects. This last was true for almost all the abused inmates with whom I spoke” (p. 101).

Stein likens another class of criminals, the manipulative, “smooth-talking, cold-blooded predator,” personified by the serial murderer Ted Bundy, to alexithymic patients. Their language reflects “a sterile imaginative landscape, a kind of ‘semantic aphasia’ that condemns speech to meaningless tautology” (p. 26). Stein refers to their “matrix of undifferentiated affect, more easily somatized or projected than verbalized. Feelings, for alexithymic offenders, do not exist in a manner usable for reflection; they are experienced simply in the form of mounting tension, mitigated only through physical action. Assault, rape, and murder relieve the pressure” (p. 26).

Of course, it can be risky to explain a criminal’s behavior as stemming from bad things that happened to *the perpetrator*—doing so tends to elicit the charge that one is excusing the crime. While explaining behavior is not tantamount to excusing or justifying it, many professionals and laypeople confuse the difference and are resistant to psychological or social explanations of violence. In fact, viewing violent criminals as having been seriously maltreated and injured humanizes them and forces us to see perpetrators as more like us than otherwise. As Stein says, many forensic professionals “seem to reject the very idea that violent people deserve compassion” (p. 37). For most people, it is preferable to see such criminals as monsters—psychopathic deviants who are somehow not human, what Stein refers to as the “bad seed theory” (p. 38). By demonizing violent offenders as intrinsically bad or evil, we continue to live in protective cocoons and feel better about ourselves, although we are not necessarily any safer or closer to crime prevention.

On the other hand, “There but for the grace of God go I” (Greif, 2004, p. 524) is an irresistible and, I think, irrefutable conclusion when one listens empathically and hears the awful details of the early lives of many violent criminals. If we identify with their early innocence and vulnerability, we can be deeply shaken and wonder how our lives would have turned out if we had been subjected to the same abuse. Empathic identification also forces us to grapple with one of the most difficult of all human tasks, eloquently described by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1936): “[T]he test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same

time, and still retain the ability to function” (p. 139). It is not easy to feel horrified and angry toward a person for what he has done to another person and also feel sympathetic and sad for what he endured as a child. Stein’s work implies that this capacity—requiring both thoughtfulness and a fuller emotional life—can be essential to the most difficult and complex problems of crime prevention and retribution.

Instead, viewing criminals as only bad or evil, Stein points out, is supported by our none-too-successful criminal justice system. “It is a position”, she explains, “only too eager to draw the moral boundary between ‘them’ and ‘us’ and to disavow its own capacity for aggression and moral detachment” (p. 40). This attitude is also part and parcel of a ‘get-tough’ approach to crime, rampant in our society (except, of course, when it comes to white collar crime). Still, the U.S. continues to have the highest incarceration rate, yet one of the highest homicide and sexual violence rates in the world. Based on these statistics alone, when new ideas about the etiology of violence are presented, people should listen.

If we take seriously Stein’s notion that “dissociation is both the *barbin-ger* of violence and its consequence” (p. xvii, italics added), then we can help those people most involved with children and adolescents—parents, teachers, doctors, nurses, and law enforcement professionals—to recognize and identify signs of dissociation and trauma, as well as other psychological and behavioral precursors to violence. If effective familial and individual interventions occur when these signs are first evident, we will very likely save some children from perpetrating violence.

Stein’s book is important reading for anyone concerned with reducing violence, and it is equally valuable for clinicians who treat nonviolent patients with trauma histories—who inevitably struggle with their own and others’ aggression. It is also valuable for clinicians who treat untraumatized (or less traumatized) patients who struggle with feelings of hostility and rage. In other words, Stein’s book is relevant to virtually all clinicians. There is a caveat, however. While Stein captures essential psychological antecedents to certain forms of violence, there is a danger in applying her ideas (and this is true for all new ideas) in an overly inclusive way. We cannot forget that there are many factors besides individual trauma that account for acts of violence. It strains credulity to think that the degree and nature of trauma and dissociation alone determine violence, although they may very well explain—statistically speaking—a significant amount of the variance. To understand what other psychological and social factors lead to violence, we must know what differentiates those people who

have suffered severe, violent trauma as children, and do not commit violent acts, from those who do.

Furthermore, while most of Stein's formulations have the ring of truth, and many are backed by research, they would gain further support if corroborating clinical data, particularly from psychoanalytic treatment, were available. Such data, involving dialogue and self-expression, could also help these men come across as more human. At times, I found Stein's descriptions and interpretations of her subjects' histories and violent behavior detached and intellectualized. This reaction undoubtedly parallels her subjects' own lack of attunement toward—or failure to develop—their inner lives and probably also reflects my need to create distance from such disturbing material. Nonetheless, I think more analytic data would make it possible to place oneself imaginatively in the hearts and minds of these very disturbed people and get more of a felt sense of their inchoate inner lives. Of course, it is *also* through greater analytic engagement that these men would have the best chance to transform what is inchoate into more elaborated, coherent and articulate language; in other words, to develop richer, more nuanced inner lives.

In her final chapter Stein discusses limitations of cognitive and behavioral treatments for violent offenders and the thorny transferences and counter-transferences that occur in any treatment of these individuals. She agrees with Winer's (2001) emphasis on the need for therapists to "examine their own destructiveness" (p. 122) in order to empathize with these men. She states, "It is in treatment, during transference, that the offender has an opportunity to experience his or her hatred as an affect instead of as a dislocated sensorium, and perhaps even own the more gratifying aspects of it. This agency will make dissociated rage less fearsome, less fragmenting, and less likely to be enacted. But the process requires the clinician to examine her or her own aggression in particularly challenging ways" (p. 122).

Stein makes a compelling point when she states that dissociation of powerful affects, and avoidance of discussion of unconscious dynamics between inmates and treatment providers, can "cause clinicians in forensic settings to over-identify with police, the prosecution, and correctional personnel" (p. 120). Since "the integration of dissociated memories and affects must be a primary goal of therapy" (p. 125), the tendency to over-identify with penal professionals (which any clinician working with this population must confront, in my opinion) makes it especially challenging

to treat these patients. It also makes a strong case for why psychoanalytically trained clinicians may be the best equipped to do this work.

Finally, a piece of advice for the reader: because of the book's disturbing content, its organization into short sections, and the complexity of the theory, it might be more easily read in "bite-size pieces," which was the approach that I found I had to take. Yet whatever method you use to read this book, it will be worth the effort.

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BREAKING BARRIERS

A review of *Desire, Self, Mind and The Psychotherapies: Unifying Psychological Science and Psychoanalysis*, by R. Coleman Curtis, 2009, Jason Aronson, 265 pp.

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IN HER LATEST BOOK R. Coleman Curtis ambitiously applies concepts from social psychology, cognitive science, affective science, and behaviorism, to derive a theoretical rationale for an integrated psychoanalytic treatment model, one that incorporates behavioral, cognitive behavioral, and gestalt therapies. As if this were not enough of a task, this amalgam is