



A review of Traumatic Narcissism: Relational Systems of Subjugation

Daniel E. Greenberg Ph.D.

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BOOK REVIEWS

A review of *Traumatic Narcissism: Relational Systems of Subjugation* by
Daniel Shaw. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014. 192 pp.

DANIEL E. GREENBERG, Ph.D.

Daniel Shaw's *Traumatic Narcissism: Relational Systems of Subjugation* is an important moment in an ongoing process through which the American psychoanalytic movement is coming to grips with an ambiguous and often regressive political legacy. Shaw wants psychoanalysis to reclaim for itself a voice in the important social and political issues of our day and to once again add its voice to the struggle for social justice. Starting with a compelling account of how relational psychoanalysis can help give voice to those who have been victimized by relational trauma in childhood, Shaw quickly extends his reach to those who are victimized by systems of exploitation that operate in groups (including psychoanalytic institutes) and in the broader social, political, and economic surround.

Shaw leverages relational theory in a sophisticated and compelling argument aimed to uncover the psychological effects of the exploitation and abuse of subjectivity itself. Jessica Benjamin's fundamental work on mutual recognition versus complementarity plays a crucial role in these efforts. According to Shaw, the fundamental narcissistic dynamic we should attend to is not captured in a theoretical contrast between healthy and pathological narcissism. Rather, Shaw proposes a fundamental distinction between *traumatizing* and *traumatized* narcissists. Traumatizing narcissists are sadistic and/or sociopathic and their interpersonal dynamics are characterized by a striking incapacity to tolerate a subjectively authentic voice in those around them. As parents, traumatizing narcissists cannot allow a process of true (mutual) recognition to unfold

between themselves and their children because they cannot tolerate the uncontrolled element of difference or otherness to appear in the child's growing subjectivity. Driven by fantasies of omnipotence, they attempt to disavow their own intolerable vulnerability by retaliating against the child's dependency, inducing feelings of shame and worthlessness in the child. The traumatizing

narcissist seeks hegemony for his subjectivity by weakening and suppressing the subjectivity of the other for the purpose of control and exploitation. The other is then left in grave doubt about the validity and even the reality of their own subjectivity. This sadistic, abusive aspect of narcissism stems from the belief, often held unconsciously, that the separate subjectivity of the other is a threat to the survival, literally and/or figuratively, of one's own subjectivity—and the other must therefore be captured and kept under control. (p. 12)

The traumatizing narcissist's disavowal of feelings of vulnerability and dependence takes place in a relational system in which the victim is often induced into a role of worshipful admirer:

The heightened sadistic tendencies of the traumatizing narcissist may be masked in some cases by charisma and seductive charm. She has successfully dissociated the need to depend on idealized others by achieving a complete super-idealization of herself. She is overt in her need for superiority and domination, successful in seducing others into dependence on her, and cruel and exploitative as she arranges to keep the other in a subjugated position. (p. 13)

The child in this relational system faces a severe threat to his or her sense of subjective integrity. She is induced into intense feelings of shame and self-loathing that place her psychological and even physical survival at stake. Confronted with this psychological devastation, the child faces one of two possible developmental paths for dealing with her dependency on the traumatizing narcissist: *internalizing* or *externalizing*.

The developing child of the traumatizing narcissist takes one of two possible paths for survival in the face of being raised by the traumatizing narcissist: 1) *externalization* of shameful dependency (the badness) through the subjugation of others; and 2) *internalization* of the badness the traumatizing narcissist parent has projected. Number 1 becomes much

like his traumatizer—the traumatizing narcissist. Number 2 becomes the post-traumatic, objectified, and self-objectifying person who repetitively finds himself in relationships in which he is subjugated by the other. (pp. 35–36)

The sharp way in which Shaw sketches out the mutually exclusive nature of these two positions is a striking and important part of his argument. Traumatizing and traumatized are *not* developmental possibilities laid out on a continuum that we all may traverse in both directions through a potentially infinite number of relational permutations. Nor is Shaw trying to claim that these dynamics play out for those children who are raised with “good enough” parents; not everyone experiences these sadistic relational dynamics in childhood. Rather, the rhetorical power of Shaw’s argument lies precisely in heightening and illuminating the devastating effects of a certain kind of sadistic parenting on innocent children. The substantive and rhetorical implications of this approach influence Shaw’s political analysis in important ways, as we shall see.

The rhetoric of victims and victimizers is especially compelling in Shaw’s persuasive presentation of case material. Shaw makes a convincing argument that those who come to us with “narcissistic personality disorders” are the traumatized victims of traumatizing narcissists. The damage done to the child’s subjectivity in a relational dynamic of sadism and subjugation accounts for many of the notorious challenges involved in treating these patients. Shaw’s case material is moving and beautifully crafted and represents a kind of showcase for the advances relational theory has made over classical approaches in dealing with these kinds of difficulties. Shaw’s technical recommendations for dealing with the countertransference challenges of this work are sound and persuasive. Clinicians who work with these kinds of patients will find much that is helpful and deeply illuminating in Shaw’s work. I had to remind myself that the cases Shaw is discussing are the kinds that analysts in the past dismissed—often with a shrug—as “unanalyzable.”

Shaw demonstrates with great sensitivity and insight the ways a relational focus on one’s own painful reactions to accusations and hostility become the foundation for therapeutic change. This passage, influenced by both Philip Bromberg and Donnel Stern, is worth quoting at length:

The central aspect for me of the working through of [impasses]. . . has involved finding a way out of the dissociative state one enters when one’s

subjectivity is perceived to be under assault. Initially when I feel under attack, I cannot see my own badness, I want to deny it completely. The dissociation dissolves for me when I became able to see in myself what I do not want to see. Most often with Alice, what I can't see is that sometimes when I think I am helping her, I'm actually hurting her, and instead of being willing to recognize it and acknowledge it, I get mad at her for being hurt when I think that what she should feel is helped.. .. If I can recognize the shame and pain I evoke in her by doing what I do, that is, by being her analyst, and let myself feel my own shame and the pain I inflict, we can get somewhere. (p. 37)

A relationship in which one member is expected to change and grow, and the other considers himself exempt from those processes, is a relationship in which the one expected to change is being subjugated. .. analysts who imagine that only their patients need to change and grow over the course of an analytic therapy are unwittingly and in some case knowingly, keeping their patients dependent—by implicitly or explicitly asserting that there is a state of being “fully analyzed” that the analyst has reached and the patient has not. When the analysand is forbidden to know that the analyst is also struggling to change and grow, or when the analyst believes he has no need to change and grow, the analysand may easily, and justifiably, feel subjugated, envious and resentful—but at the same time, frightened to challenge the analyst and thereby lose their tie. For the adult child of the traumatizing narcissist, being in such a position is bound to be retraumatizing. (p. 38)

Shaw's discussion of relational analytic work with adult children of traumatizing narcissists is, in itself, an extremely valuable and successful aspect of this book, but it actually forms only part of a much more ambitious project. Shaw intends to carry his analysis through to the group psychological level and then to broader social and political questions ultimately concerned with the origins of exploitation and subjugation. The pivot comes in a surprising chapter devoted to traumatic narcissism in cults. Shaw draws on his own past painful experience as a member of an abusive religious cult to describe the ways in which the cult's traumatic narcissistic leader imposed his will on the cult's members. The abuses Shaw recounts are horrific and include sexual assault and rape, financial and emotional exploitation, scapegoating, social isolation, shaming, banishment and threats, intimidation, and virtual enslavement. Drawing on secondary accounts Shaw also describes similar processes taking place

within a New York psychotherapy cult—the Sullivan Institute—that operated in the 1960s. Shaw's discussion of the horrors and abuses in these cults centers around three related claims: 1) Those drawn into these cults tend to have histories of traumatized subjectivity; 2) the interaction between cult leader and followers recreates the undermining of subjectivity that is the core of the relational system of the traumatizing narcissist; and 3) the cult leader is always a traumatizing narcissist.

Cult leaders are invariably traumatizing narcissists. . . grandiose, overinflated narcissists who seek hegemony for their subjectivity by weakening and suppressing the subjectivity of others. They control and exploit followers by seductively dangling carrots. . . such as success, fulfillment, wealth or enlightenment. Along with the carrots comes the relentless use of sticks, such as humiliating character assassination and threats of expulsion, meant to persuade the followers that their own subjectivity is inadequate and corrupt compared to the leader's and therefore in need of extensive correction that only the group and its leader can provide. (p. 49)

Shaw's analysis of the traumatic assault on subjectivity in cults lays the foundation for his approach to the problem of the origins and perpetuation of social oppression and injustice. Shaw aligns himself explicitly with Eric Fromm's work on the "escape from freedom," a social psychological process in authoritarian and democratic regimes alike in which individuals are induced to sacrifice their autonomy and subjectivity. Fromm explored, "both the mind and motives of the traumatizing. . . narcissist [leader] as well as. . . the individual who escapes from freedom by idealizing and submitting to infantilizing, controlling others" (p. 56). Shaw's claim is that the ideology of "American Exceptionalism" is a form of traumatizing, subjugating narcissism acted out on a national and international stage. American Exceptionalism represents a sadistic narcissistic impulse to dominate and control others. It motivated the genocidal slaughter of Native Americans, the institution of slavery and, more recently, the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq. Following Fromm, Shaw claims that the American populace—or large parts of it—embraced this ideology and these acts of brutality because this was a way in which we could vicariously partake in a charismatic leader's sadism, domination, and control. This submission and identification with sadistic, charismatic leadership also explains the appeal of the Tea Party—a group funded by the "corporate ruling class" that acts contrary to the interests of almost all Americans

but is embraced nevertheless because it offers its followers the vicarious acting out of domination through identification with charismatic/sadistic leaders. (According to Shaw, Rush Limbaugh is one such leader [p. 57].)

There is much that is important in this attempt to reconnect relational psychoanalysis with Fromm's work—work which was itself on application to psychoanalysis of Marx's theory of *false consciousness*. An approach like this can help us to understand why the American public was relatively quiet in the days leading up to the invasion of Iraq, whereas Europeans, apparently horrified by American Exceptionalism, staged anti-war protests that were the largest public demonstrations in human history. Shaw's analysis is also tailor-made to help us understand the appeal of someone like Donald Trump, a bully offering frustrated Americans the vicarious sadistic pleasure of "beating" our myriad enemies so that we can "win and be great again."

More work needs to be done, however, to bridge the gap between Shaw's analysis of traumatic narcissism on the individual level and the kinds of social psychological and political phenomena Shaw seeks to explain through Fromm's work. When he is talking about traumatic narcissism in the clinical setting or in cults, Shaw commits himself to a view that highlights the relative rarity of this form of developmental trauma. Because most parents are not traumatizing sadists, most children do not experience the kind of developmental trauma that predisposes them to "repetitively find . . . [themselves] in relationships in which [they are] subjugated by the other" (p. 36). "Good-enough" parenting confers a degree of protection from submission to sadism, and it is for this reason that Shaw takes issue with Robert Jay Lifton's claim that almost anyone could be drawn into a cult. (According to Shaw, Lifton believes that the victimized are "people who just happened to be unlucky enough to get sucked in and exposed to mind control" [p. 47].)¹ Shaw's view is rather that those drawn to cults and to authoritarian leaders are precisely those who were most likely to have been exposed to traumatizing narcissists in childhood. But how then are we to explain the mass appeal of American Exceptionalism and the wide public submission to charismatic/sadistic leadership? Why isn't good-enough parenting protecting the mass of the public from the temptation to submit to and identify with sadistic leaders?

¹ Lifton's claim was that liberty is socially constructed and that the habits of mind and heart that foster it can be driven from the individual under conditions of totalistic control.

Two kinds of theoretical difficulty seem to lie behind this contradiction. First, Shaw tends to see sadistic leadership in universal terms, as a kind of constant in human history. He does not take up the question of the specific social and historical circumstances under which democracies fail nor does he carefully examine the contexts in which sadistic leadership becomes more appealing for a populace that is frustrated, demoralized or terrorized. Second, because the lessons from traumatizing narcissistic parenting are drawn rather narrowly and concretely, Shaw does not see that today a dynamic *system* of control and domination has reached a level of sophistication and entrenchment such that it can assign victims and victimizers to their roles *regardless of their relational histories*. The system's viciousness no longer depends on a leader's pre-existing sadism. Victims and perpetrators alike can be drawn from the ranks of those whose attachment histories are apparently unremarkable. A dynamic system of oppression creates its sadists as needed, not the other way around. Thus, for example, while American slavery and Jim Crow were perpetuated through sadistic acts of terror against the subjugated, an analysis that views slavery primarily as a method for the expression of slave owners' sadism ignores the fact that slave owners gained economic advantage from the system and used violence and sadism *as an instrument* for slavery's perpetuation.

Shaw has embraced a negative version of the "great man of history" approach, and as a result, he seems to suggest that our salvation lies in the elimination of evil leaders. According to Shaw, traumatizing narcissistic leaders are responsible for "Biblical slavery. . . serfdom, the Crusades, the Inquisitions, American slavery, the Holocaust, Apartheid" (p. 58).

Whether in the family, the workplace, the religion, the political party, the nation, a coalition of nations, or in a group of any size that some might identify as a cult, the traumatizing narcissist leader's program of seduction and exploitation results in a kind of rape of the personhood, the subjectivity of the other. . . . The possibility of intersubjective relatedness and mutual recognition among members or between leader and follower is entirely foreclosed. . . . Traumatizing narcissism seems to have been with us since the dawn of humanity. It is the source of all the ways that humans have objectified, enslaved and dehumanized other humans. (p. 58)

Shaw contrasts all of this evil with *mutual recognition* "as taken up by relational psychoanalysis" (p. 58). Here is a black-and-white version of

history in which we—the relational analysts—are cast as those with access to a truth otherwise foreclosed by traumatizing sadists and narcissists.

A simmering rage against sadists and sociopaths, who use their power to exploit and subjugate and the spiritual revulsion and anguish we feel when confronted with the enormous range of human suffering and brutality, animates much of this writing and accounts for its rhetorical appeal. It is difficult though—especially after Kenneth Burke (1945, 1950, 1966) and Rene Girard (1978/1987)—not to suspect that this dramatic narrative is also constructed around a hidden victimage mechanism that implicitly demands the elimination, destruction or sacrifice of the evildoer. (This was indeed the rhetoric of Bush's invasion of Iraq.) While there is no explicit call for retaliatory violence from Shaw, the sadistic brutality and injustice he describes will inevitably stir retaliatory feelings in the reader. Indeed, the book's unconscious narrative structure will activate in the reader some of the dynamics it seeks to diagnose. Girard and Burke (and Freud too—in *Totem and Taboo* [1913/1958a] and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* [1921/1958b]) have made a strong case that sadistic leadership inevitably calls forth rivalrous (“mimetic”) envy, retaliatory violence, sadism and murder, even in “normal” people. For Burke and Girard, narcissistic sadism, identification with brutal leaders, and retaliatory violence are all instruments at play in a fundamental dynamic of *scapegoating and sacrifice* that undergirds social cohesion, fosters human brutality, and has the potential to reshuffle the roles of victim and victimizer.

Shaw's approach to the social and political realm hints further at an ideological slippage and regression in the concept of *mutual recognition* itself. It is deeply ironic that Shaw uses the concept of mutual recognition to ground a claim about the intractability of traumatic narcissism when Hegel's original concept was meant to describe the process through which traumatic narcissism is overcome. At its core, Shaw's vision is one of a conflict between evil and innocence. The positions are binary opposites, implacably essentialized and calcified in the subjectivities of victim and victimizer. No longer achievable in Shaw's approach is the social-historical transcendence (*Aufhebung*) of this binary opposition that Hegel (1807/1977) claimed *mutual recognition* would provide to Master and Slave. In Hegel, mutual recognition was to be the resolution, dissolution, and overcoming of slavery itself. It was the transcendence of slave

holding and being a slave. While Shaw believes that relational psychoanalytic treatment can provide victims with some solace and healing—perpetrators typically don't show up for treatment—this is not yet the Utopian transcendence of Hegel's dialectic. In Shaw, Master and Slave, Traumatizing and Traumatized, have returned to their pre-dialectical positions: an implacable evil, endlessly recreated and foreclosing recognition, imposes itself on the world.

The Utopian claim implicit in Hegel's approach, and later in Habermas (1968/1971a, 1969/1971b, 1976/1979, 1981/1984), was that true mutual recognition would not come into being in our world without a transformation of society and an end to violence and exploitation. Democratic transformation is the solution to exploitation. Without this transformation, more humane versions of subjectivity—as yet unformed—cannot emerge. In contrast to this Utopian and political vision, some relational psychoanalysts have argued that mutual recognition *already exists*—and reaches its apotheosis—in the mother-infant dyad. While it is undeniably true—and Shaw's work demonstrates it—that the application of the concept of *recognition* to infancy and early childhood has immeasurably enhanced our understanding of development and brought about a dramatic transformation in the clinical use of what was traditionally referred to as transference/counter-transference, it is also true that these approaches tend to strip the concept of *mutual recognition* of its original political/Utopian significance.

Hegel saw in *mutual recognition* a solution to the problem of violence and exploitation, to the deadly conflict in which some aggrandize themselves through the destruction and dehumanization of others. The Master's sadistic “foreclosing of recognition” was precisely the problem that was to be overcome in the dialectic. A depoliticized psychoanalysis shifts its focus away from this problem, substituting instead a claim that mutual recognition is experienced through the negotiation of conflicts and micro-misattunements between parent and infant or analyst and analysand. While the negotiation of these misattunements and conflicts is undoubtedly crucial for the development of healthy human subjectivity—and an important part of relational treatment—these experiences are not yet the *mutual recognition* envisioned by Hegel. Ironically, healthy mother-infant interaction lacks some of the key features of the Master/Slave dynamic that for Hegel were crucial precursors for the creation of the kind of transcendence that *recognition* brings about. The baby's very survival is at stake in the mother-infant relationship

and so it can seem like an element of life and death struggle lies behind parenting as it does in the master/slave dynamic. But the healthy parent is seeking the increasing *humanization* of the child, while the slave holder is almost always committed to the slave's *dehumanization*. The baby's perspective-taking abilities, self-consciousness, and awareness of self/other difference are not equal to those of the parent. Hegel's claim, in contrast, was that the slave's sense of self and perspective on self/other difference² would eventually come to exceed that of the master, and an inner spiritual development would allow the slave to free herself from a slave mentality. The "mutual recognition" of infancy and childhood—important precursors to the development of a subjectivity fit for democratic participation—are not yet the social, political and spiritual transcendence that Hegel's concept anticipates.

In Shaw, the intractability of the damage done to the traumatized child's subjectivity—which should be seen as an *analog* to the intractability and perpetuation of systems of violence and social exploitation—is mistaken for its *cause*. Shaw's laudable goal of reengaging relational psychoanalysis with the social and political is thus ironically undercut. The application of the concept of mutual recognition to psychotherapy, childhood and infancy, leaves the explicitly political concept AWOL at the moment its original meaning is needed most: to help articulate democratic political alternatives to systems of exploitation. Instead of inspiring political engagement, the concept is now used to demonstrate the intractability of sadistic leadership.

Mutual recognition began its theoretical life as a vision for democratic transformation. Applied to psychoanalysis, it lost much of its political meaning. Now it migrates from psychoanalysis back to the social realm and its Utopian political origins are almost completely obscured.

In the heyday of new left critical social theory—in the work of theorists like Theodore Adorno (1951/1974, 1964/1973a, 1966/1973b), Eli Zaretsky (1973), Christopher Lasch (1979), Juliette Mitchell (1974), Joel Kovel (1983), Arlie Hochschild (1983, 1989), and others—psychoanalysis helped deepen our understanding of the damage that social conditions

² A "Cartesian" concept of self-other difference is an important step in the development of the slave's ability to differentiate her interests and perspectives from that of the master. The master, in contrast, may try to promote an ideology aimed to convince the slave that she and the master already occupy a shared spiritual space that is mutually beneficial and mutually constructed.

of oppression and exploitation did to spiritual life, to interpersonal and romantic relationships, to the family, to the experience of childhood and education, to the situation of women, and to the structure of subjectivity itself. This critical deployment of psychoanalytic theory was coupled with a sober respect for the obstacles psychoanalysis faces in trying to function as an instrument of social change. Amongst the many reasons for this was the insight that the individual's increasing preoccupation with the realm of interpersonal relations and personal well-being was being leveraged (by capital) to develop new markets for an ever-widening panoply of ("personal") goods and services. The increasing preoccupation with personal life created an opening for the deployment of new methods of social control and deeper forms of bureaucratic/authoritarian intrusion into realms of experience that were previously understood to be private, spontaneous, or "unmediated." Psychoanalysis and psychotherapy as a treatment and a product was therefore understood to be part of a burgeoning neo-liberal preoccupation with personal life and a move away from the political that made individuals more susceptible to manipulation and less likely to see their own fate and happiness as tied to a democratic transformation of society.

Shaw's important work on narcissism and trauma highlights again the question of the relationship between psychoanalysis and politics. Shaw's contribution is significant and profound and he has taken an important step in re-engaging relational psychoanalysis with the repressed political origins of *recognition*. But the ideological de-Utopianization of *mutual recognition* pulls theory and practice once again into the same contradictions that an earlier generation of social theorists saw as bedeviling the psychoanalytic project: psychoanalysis inadvertently points us away from political solutions to our dilemmas. A commitment to the democratic transformation of society will require relational psychoanalysis to embrace a more critical self-understanding.

Reconnecting relational psychoanalysis with the more explicitly political and democratic dimensions of *mutual recognition* will make it easier to see that the early pathologies of recognition in the dyadic realm that give rise to sadism are not in themselves the ultimate source of social exploitation, subjugation and suffering. Our focus needs to be on the failure to achieve a democratic transformation of society rather than on sadistic leaders with bad childhoods; the over-valuation of leadership is a by-product of democratic disengagement. In the United States, failures of constitutional democracy and the disillusionment of citizens with the

project of democratic engagement are dangers that increase the risk the populace will turn to sadistic leadership. The question of our day then is not the origin of Evil itself, but the social, political and psychological factors that continually draw our citizens away from true democratic engagement and transformation. If we rehabilitate the explicitly political and democratic significance of *mutual recognition*, it will become easier for us to see that what was exposed during the Bush years was not primarily the sadism or charisma of our leaders, but terrible weaknesses and dysfunctions in our democratic institutions and in the opportunities for democratic engagement afforded our citizens. The constitutional system of checks and balances barely functioned in relation to American militarism and the National Security apparatus. Increasing disparities between rich and poor, violence and brutality against the disenfranchised, mass incarceration, unchecked participation in illegal, unethical and anti-democratic schemes by the “corporate ruling class,” are all distressing signs of the waning of our democratic commitments. Perhaps equally important, opportunities for Americans to experience direct participatory democracy—especially in small group settings regulated by consensus—have almost completely disappeared from everyday life. (These are the kinds of experiences that Tocqueville [1835/2003] claimed were necessary if Americans were to resist authoritarianism.) We no longer see the possibility for these experiences in settings such as the workplace, the school, the hospital, the clinic, the training institute, or voluntary organizations. Instead, violence against the vulnerable and exploitation of the disenfranchised alternates with an increasingly dreary onslaught of bureaucratic regulations and (computerized) paperwork—often devoid of human significance and disconnected from ethical considerations or the rule of law.

The restoration of the Utopian political significance of *mutual recognition* will help us shift our focus back to the social, political and psychological factors that are blocking the vital project of democratic engagement and transformation and making it more likely that our citizens will seek a solution in the future through an identification with sadistic leadership.

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Daniel Greenberg, Ph.D., is in private practice in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He is the former Director of the Michigan State University Psychological Clinic and the former Director of Clinical Training for University of Michigan Clinical Psychology Interns at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

2311 East Stadium Boulevard, 105 S
Ann Arbor, MI 48104
daneli@umich.edu

(T)RAUMA WITH A SMALL T?

A review of *Micro-trauma: A Psychoanalytic Understanding of Cumulative Psychic Injury* by Margaret Crastnopol. New York, NY: Routledge, 2015. 252 pp.

GHISLAINE BOULANGER, Ph.D.

In *Micro-trauma*, Crastnopol identifies a series of ordinary interactional patterns, seemingly innocent everyday exchanges that can and frequently do end in disappointment, confusion, or humiliation for one or both parties to the exchange. She suggests that it is the accumulation of these subtle let downs and put downs that lead many of us and our patients to a chronic sense of demoralization and low self-esteem.

Subtitled her book “A Psychoanalytic Understanding of Cumulative Psychic Injury,” the author acknowledges that in cataloging this series of disappointing and disruptive patterns, she is building on Masud Khan’s (1963) notion of cumulative trauma in infancy and childhood. Khan points to repeated failures of attunement, situations in which caretakers frequently do not provide sufficient protection against encroachments