Ghostbusting Transgenerational Processes

Laurel Moldawsky Silber, Psy.D.
Bryn Mawr, PA

Transgenerational processes contribute to organizing and disorganizing attachment. The past (in all its forms and potentialities) lives on in the present, influencing the affective field of the parent–child intersubjective matrix. In a child’s construction of self, he or she may run up against the confounding presence of ghosts: the dissociated, and thereby unreflected upon past of their parents. This implicitly felt, yet explicitly unknown transmission interferes in the processing of emergent experience and impedes the child’s development.

Attachment theory, informed by psychoanalysis, and nonlinear dynamic systems theory, is the main theoretical underpinning of this paper’s examination of the mechanisms involved in the transfer of dissociated dynamics from parent to child. The child’s symptoms grow out of an incoherent affective field that defies representational mapping into a flexible usable theory of mind. Through play a child therapist finds openings to enter the attachment system, reflecting on how a child’s experience is being felt, yet unthought about by both child and parents. A parent’s recognition process, thereby making what was implicitly felt explicit and consequently more coherent, supports the child in his or her efforts to reorganize aspects of the attachment relationship. Both clinical experience and quotations from literary works are woven into this paper in an attempt to convey the texture, emotional depth, and universality of the subject under discussion.

INTRODUCTION

“Ghosts in the Nursery,” Selma Fraiberg, Edna Adelson, and Vivian Shapiro’s (1975) groundbreaking article, established the clinical relevance of processing intergenerational transmission of trauma with young children and their parents. While working with a mother and her baby in their home, Selma Fraiberg and her co-workers came to understand that the mother was unable to “hear” her baby’s cries. Only after the mother’s own internal pain and sadness had been recognized could she tune into her baby’s cries.

Ghosts move beyond the nursery and haunt the intersubjective space of the family. Attachment researchers, Erik Hesse and Mary Main (1999) reported a “second generation effect” of trauma. That is, the infant/toddler may not have been directly traumatized, but the child’s disorganized behavior can be linked to parents who behave in frightening incoherent ways due to unresolved loss and trauma. New clinical questions emerge when ghosts move beyond the nursery. They

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Correspondence should be addressed to Laurel Moldawsky Silber, Psy.D., 28 Garrett Avenue, Bryn Mawr, PA 19010. E-mail: Laurelsilber@gmail.com
haunt in more nuanced permutations in the intersubjective space of the developing child and his or her attachment figures.

The confounding presence of intergenerational transmission of trauma in a child’s life needs to emerge from its shadowy influence into the visible, knowable, shareable experience of both parent and child. This emergence is necessary to reduce the destructive influences of the transmission on the parent–child relationship and to promote the child’s development. The purpose of this paper is to make more explicit the clinical work of interrupting the transmission of trauma to the next generation. The port of entry into what is confounding the child in his or her efforts to make sense of her emotional experience begins with understanding the child through her play.

The action of play is ideally suited to communicate metaphors of enactive relational representations. Through play, the implicitly experienced “procedures for being with” (Lyons-Ruth, 1999) are engaged, made shareable, and offer the potential to be destabilized. The move to the parents’ subjective experience for the purposes of more collaborative dialogue helps elucidate the incoherent transmission. The reconfiguring of the multiple subjectivities is, in a sense, tri-constructing a reflective collaboration. It is in this space that ghosts can be busted: ghosts who come to serve joint dissociative defensive purposes. This process offers parents an opportunity to reconfigure experience; to mourn, re-represent it, and to see the mind of their child.

Child and parent form a triangle with the child therapist and alternate resisting and supporting access to knowing. The child therapist survives a very ambivalent relationship transformation through this triadic systemic collaboration. The child takes courage in the felt collaboration of his parents with the therapist and the parent’s confusion regarding what is being transmitted finds a way to be made coherent through their relationship to the same therapist. The therapist holds the multiple subjectivities in mind and finds a way to reflectively link them. The child’s wish to transgress the parents’ defensiveness and come to know what had been unknowable is met in an enactment with the child therapist.

Interestingly, intergenerational transmission is a major theme revealed in the sixth volume of J. K. Rowling’s (2005) Harry Potter series. He-who-must-not-be-named, the evil Lord Voldemort, has a scheme for immortality; he has fragmented his soul in parts and placed them in inanimate containers in secret places. The containers are called “horcruxes.” Harry, under life-and-death circumstances, finds one of them. However, horcruxes are both cleverly concealed and guarded. Harry’s task is to recover all the horcruxes to reintegrate Voldemort if he is to be destroyed. This contemporary series beloved by children and adults portrays the transgenerational transfer of fragmented self-states as its basic dilemma. Dissociated transgenerational processes are carried forward in a “horcrux type format.” The child therapist helps children crack the code and come to symbolize the “things-that-can’t-be-named,” which leads to greater degrees of freedom in their intersubjective space with their parents.

To hold the complexity of the change process for a child in connection to his or her family there is much to be gained by incorporating nonlinear dynamic systems theory into the professional lexicon, (Seligman, 2005; Siegel, 2003; Tronick, 2007) as is demonstrated in the clinical examples. With this frame the child therapist can better recognize the systemic reverberations and interconnections of a developing child in a system. In line with the principles of systems theory, the child is an open system and development moves forward by way of increasing complexity and coherence to her self-organization. The transmission of trauma to the next generation is an incoherent implicit communication and is therefore a dissipating if not disorganizing influence to the attachment system.
To illustrate this point clinically, I describe two cases, one of a 7-year-old boy and the other a 10-year-old girl. In both cases the child was seen initially in individual play therapy for approximately 1½ years before combining it with more focused, intensive work with parent(s), family sessions, and then a resumption of individual therapy with the child. In both cases the parents had been and/or were in concurrent independent, individual therapy. The transgenerational transfer was active through the parents’ individual therapy. It became the crux of the relational work through the child’s therapy. With a systemic framework the dynamics were more readily linked within and between the parent and child.

CLINICAL EXAMPLES

John’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. L, decided to move to a new state so that Mrs. L could accept an important job. They also decided that Mr. L would take care of their two children, and postpone going back to work for a period after the move. They reported that 7-year-old John was having temper outbursts, and at times seemed lost in his own world. Additionally, they felt he was overly aggressive toward his younger sister. As we set out, I explained that I didn’t know what form parent participation would take in John’s treatment until I could see what would emerge in John’s play. Once weekly appointments were set up for John with “as needed” appointments for the parents.

John’s play in the early months was focused on the toys more than direct engagement with me. I often observed and commented on his play but was relegated to a role outside of it, as if he were playing alone with me there. Characters in John’s play were routinely frightened by a superhero figure and he very deliberately buried this figure under many toys at the play’s end. The act of burying became noteworthy. I thought that John’s play was symbolic of burying feelings and particularly relevant to the quality of disconnection between us. I wondered, what is being buried and at what cost? The affective experience between John and me and what was symbolized in his play led me to inquire into his real-life experience. I observed with John that the characters were afraid, and I wondered if he too were afraid. He said he sometimes did feel afraid when his father was angry. Our pivoting between John’s fantasy play to his real life challenged John’s defensive organization, and he named these transitional moments “text-to-text.” He said our making these interconnected meanings reminded him of his teacher’s phrase “text-to-text” used when a student was able to identify a similar theme in one story to another. Much like Bromberg’s (1998) notion of “standing in the spaces,” John’s metaphor allowed him more control as we together made these interconnected shifts within the spaces of his play, to what was on his mind, to what was happening between us, and to his life. In reference to his fear, I suggested to John that it might make sense for his father to come in and talk with me about his feelings. John thought that made sense. These steps to link his fear to his father suggested a number of things to John and his father. John’s symbolic act of burying was met with an active reversal. I suggested we “dig” to understand meaning and needed to include his father in the effort. I hypothesized that John’s father was relying on dissociation and that it was now, unwittingly and unnecessarily, having an effect on John, the second generation. Within their strong bond, there was a quality of disconnection within them and between them. This clinical sensibility along with the way John put so much energy into burying the toy until it was gone, out of sight, lead to forming my hypothesis about relationally active dissociative processes. Mr. L remarked that he did not want to repeat
his relationship with his father and agreed to come in for individual sessions with me. We were beginning to contextualize the dynamics as intergenerational.

Mr. L did not anticipate that, when he changed his life to stay home with the kids, he would be entering an important “present remembering context” (Stern, 2004, p. 197) with its attendant affective turbulence. Although Mr. L said he couldn’t remember much from his childhood, now in his focused work with me he remembered that his father never played with him and that his father didn’t really want kids. Mr. L’s father had an elaborate electric train set he labored over in the basement, but he never allowed his son to play with it. Mr. L remembered watching his father play with it, much like I was imagining John relegated me to watch him play (“procedural way of being without”). As Mr. L began to grieve aspects of his childhood, a major depressive episode was stimulated. I felt, and communicated to him, that I thought his depression, even though unpleasant (stomachaches, body aches, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, tears, sadness) was his effort to work through the pain of his past, and that this was necessary to achieve what he wanted—to have a better relationship with his son. I reassured him that the depression wasn’t an end in itself, but a route to feeling more alive. I talked with John about his father’s remembering how his father was with him. John said his father had told him how his father was mean to him, essentially sharing that he had been afraid of his father when he was a boy. Mr. L connected with his mother to learn more about his past. They became allied in their efforts to understand complex intergenerational patterns that were complicating their relationship.

As a child therapist the explicit details of the parent’s relationship with their parents’ may be under elaborated as the parent sessions are focused on their child; the implicit details form much of the data. Mr. L was deeply affected by learning that his son feels afraid and wanted to ally with me to change that. As Mr. L (who also had continued phone sessions with a therapist from his prior home) began to feel less depressed after approximately 10 parent sessions and beginning use of an antidepressant, John’s play reflected this shift. In an effort to symbolize his experience, John invented a game in which he made many “paper people”: the people were monochrome and were engaged in battle. When their paper bodies were torn in battle he decided they needed to go to the “security station” where he wanted me to be posted so that I could patch them up with scotch tape. Concurrent to his father’s parent sessions, John created a new paper person that was very colorful (in striking contrast to his prior constructions) and much more carefully rendered. It was never torn in battle. The play construction represented a shift in the affective field: like his paper person, his father was becoming more colorful and alive. By Mr. L’s collaborative efforts in the parent sessions he had become less defended and more engaged. John talked with me about how he enjoyed playing with his father. John’s mood was also lighter and he began to make jokes that were really funny.

On one occasion, further into the treatment (and beyond the short-term work with his father) Mr. L called to say he had something important to report. This was my real post (built and shaped by the play post)—at the “security station”—to receive this call. This time what was being “torn” or reconfigured was not paper bodies but the attachment. Mr. L shared with me that when he leaned down to kiss John goodbye before he ran to the bus for school, John resisted him. He grabbed his arm and John complained bitterly. Though Mr. L felt his hold was not hurtful, he proceeded to rub his arm, to which John said, “That’s never going to make it better because the hurt is mental.” John had stopped burying the toy long ago and now stopped burying these feelings in relation to him. The feelings could not only be symbolized in the play, they could be
known. Mr. L said that while he felt hurt by John’s comments (as John proceeded to share with his dad what he felt was hurtful was his father’s criticalness which Mr. L was almost unaware of) he ended up feeling encouraged that his son could speak his mind. Mr. L chose to come back in and talk about this development with me. He marveled at John’s ability to speak about his experience, something he never could have done with his father. Before his eyes and with my help he could see that John is a different child than he was and he (and John) is different than his father was and that he was instrumental in effecting this change in their relationship. He began to better recognize John’s experience and, in so doing, differentiate from unwittingly reenacting his relationship with his father. The intergenerational procedural way between son(s) and father(s) was being destabilized; as John took a risk, owned his experience, and was being recognized by his father.

Reflecting on sessions with John that preceded his confrontation with his father I discovered the following: John’s comment directly followed a session in which John and I played a particularly lively game of baseball using a pillow for a bat and a Nerf ball. The play had the quality of surrendering to the fun. We were laughing a lot about his ability in the office to be on two bases at once, making it, paradoxically, impossible to get him out. He was reluctant to leave at the session’s end and I said, “Don’t forget your sneakers.” He paused and after three years of treatment asked, “Do you have children?” I told him that I did (thinking, why now?). I said, “I wonder if I didn’t just sound like a parent? Perhaps, it is strange to think of me as one?” He said, “No, you probably help your children,” as he left. Because John was feeling more secure and his mind was holding a more complex theory of mind, he was able to make his own differentiated “text-to-text” connection about me; shifting away from who I am with him to who I am away from him. Our shared affectively engaged play, in which we were laughing at the felt inconsistency, was a striking contrast from his playing alone in my company burying toys. This session, significant for its spontaneous engagement, came just before he told his father what was making him angry. John’s full engagement in play was due to greater comfort in regulating affect, and I think it was this outcome that he found helpful.

To feel more secure about regulating affect, John had been working within his relationship to me to recognize implicit processes. John sometimes entered my office, for example, by running in, hiding behind the chair, peering around the corner, and asking me, “Is it safe?” I’d say, “You tell me, is it?” He’d laugh and say, “I’m not sure; your hair looked a little messed up today” as he flopped over and into the chair. At another point after I recognized a connection in our work, he said, “There’s that spark.” I said, “Spark?” He said, “Yeah, in your voice.” I said, “Now that you say that I see what you mean, I am excited about what we are coming to understand and you hear it in my voice.” Also at this time, John came in, sat down in my office and stared at me, paused, then slammed his hand down on the couch and dramatically stated, “Break the silence” before bursting into a smile. The symbolic representation of silence between us that he proceeds to effect a change in is another indication of his playing with and finding more security with transgression. John becomes more alive to his affective experience, and he proceeds to act on his perception, breaking the silence not only with me but with his father as well. Further reflecting on another nonlinear link in his play, it occurred to me that perhaps his being on two bases at once (in the baseball game) paralleled my need to think about the duality of the father and son’s subjectivities at once? Did he need reassurance that his real “tear” at the attachment relationship in the form of a hurtful comment would culminate in no one being “out”? No Scotch tape was needed, his father was in the game; he was listening.
Subsequent to his confrontation with his father and after his father and I had processed his feelings by phone, I then spoke directly to John about it in session. John became very agitated and said he felt too embarrassed to talk about it. He buried his face in the couch telling me I was not to talk about it. I asked him if I was making him feel unsafe. He said that I was, he couldn’t look at me, and cried. This rupture was perplexing to me. One could wonder, was there an enactment of his having felt badly, his father feeling badly, and there I was wondering what I had done? Linking back to the Harry Potter imagery of a “horcrux,” there is real felt danger (to the ongoing viability of the relationship) to breaking the silence. The rupture and the shaming confusion, it later occurred to me, is the affective relational consequence of dismantling the transmitted dissociation. Over time the rupture was repaired, and a greater openness to his expression emerged. Several months later two family sessions were scheduled in which John was an active participant and engaged in a give-and-take with his sister with whom he formerly had been overly aggressive and was now asking for her opinion.

Following this work, John’s parents felt confident in John’s ability to manage his feelings. As John’s therapy was being adjusted to meeting less frequently he spoke of feeling like he didn’t have any friends at school and told his parents that he didn’t want them “to try and fix it.” Notice in John’s request a wish for “relational affective mirroring” or congruence with what is felt inside to what can be outside. John’s parents told me that they sat on the floor with him while he cried and expressed sadness. John shared his feelings, which were likely brought on by the change in his therapy, and shifts in the family system. Together they mourned loss, John, in this instance, could not be described as “lost in his own world” and the parents are less frightening as they comprehend and share what had heretofore been too scary to feel.

While Mr. L engaged in the process, describing his experience, as an initial step, it was John’s recovering from the disorganizing effects of the transmitted trauma and speaking about it that brought a transformative change to the system. Mr. L could see how his quick temper, his criticalness, and his tone were scary to his son and talked with him about it. John’s self-agency was strengthened when his affective world began making more sense to him.

In turning to the next case of 10-year-old Lindsay and her parents, Mr. and Mrs. B, I add a layer of greater complexity by sharing the systemic interconnections of multiply active transmissions of dissociative states from both parents which contributed to Lindsay’s developmental interference. Lindsay started seeing me after her teacher called her parents’ attention to how unhappy, angry, and alone she seemed in her classroom. In the beginning of our work, in which Lindsay and I were meeting at a twice-weekly frequency, a repetitive play theme emerged with many permutations but essentially, Lindsay had created a call-in station with a help line she titled “Daughters in Distress.” I was instructed to call there for help. My frightening problem was that “Sven” wanted to marry me and was forcing me into an unwanted marriage. My character protested vehemently, felt deeply lonely and confused. When I called “Daughters in Distress” for help, sometimes my mother answered and told me I had to marry Sven. My character had no idea what to do and where to turn; she was indeed a “daughter in distress.” The theme in this play scenario represents the dilemma that underlies disorganized attachment: seeking help from an attachment figure with whom one is frightened. In Mary Main’s (1990) words, it is “fright without solution (Hesse & Main, 2000, p. 1106).” Attachment researcher Karlen Lyons-Ruth (2005) established the connection between disorganized attachment in early years and the use of dissociative defenses in adolescence.
One and a half years into our work, a disruption occurred when my pregnancy and subsequent three-month maternity leave interrupted the therapy. Moreover, I resumed my practice at a new office, an hour away from her home. After we resumed Lindsay’s individual therapy and a therapeutic reconnection was established, Lindsay, who was now 12 years old, wrote a suicide note on the back of her science test at school. I believe she was reacting to the disruption in her therapy that stimulated feelings of abandonment and to the changes in her developing physical self, which culminated in a crisis and, hence, the suicide note. It was during this time that Lindsay felt her father needed to come into the sessions with her. Lindsay’s insistence on including her father at this time felt multiply determined. However, reflecting on the earlier play scenario of the “forced marriage,” lead to emerging work relative to a merged relationship to her deeply depressed father in which her mother was complicit. The play theme foreshadowed the current relational work between Lindsay and her father, and, as it happened, foretold the story of the dilemma she found herself in the family system. By having established a “shared knowing” through the previously cocreated play, Lindsay and I had a metaphorical compass to traverse the complicated relational terrain.

Lindsay was highly resistant to discussing her feelings about the disruption in our work. She became controlling in her interaction and aggressive, for example, throwing Nerf balls at my abdomen (now unpregnant) while at the same time in a confusing, fragmented way, demanding that a character in the play not be gullible. “Gullible about what,” I wondered out loud. No answer. It was at this point that Lindsay wrote a suicide note on which she drew a picture of a person entering a labeled “crazy room.” Our interaction at this time felt crazy. I felt crazy. I was experiencing no room to explore her feelings/actions. The impasse reflected the risky paradox associated with dissociation: it feels both deadly to open it up and also imperative. She insisted and I included her father directly in the work. At that point, in a rage, she immediately complained to him; “She thinks her being out of the office mattered to me!” to which I said, “If you felt it didn’t matter to me that our work was interrupted that would be upsetting; it does matter to me.” “You matter to me.” This interaction in the therapy was very important for Lindsay and her father, and it seemed to address unspoken feelings. Upon reflection, it occurred to me that the many international business trips that her mother took were unprocessed in the family. They behaved like the disconnection didn’t matter. Superimposed on this current struggle within Lindsay and between us and between Lindsay and her father, in retrospect, I came to understand there was another operative “presence,” Mr. B fearing his mother’s emotional stability. Following this interaction in the therapy we began marking a back-and-forth struggle over differentiation, during which time we moved flexibly from sessions for Lindsay with her father, with her mother, for her parents, and as a family.

It was often confusing who was feeling what in the merged intersubjectivity of Lindsay and her father. For example, Lindsay’s father suggested that Lindsay talk to me about something that upset her at school. When she didn’t respond her father jumped in to explain her experience to me. I stopped him saying, “I see that you’d like her to find some relief in sharing the feelings but they are hers to share.” Lindsay screamed, “He can tell my feelings and if he doesn’t I’ll go crazy!” I responded to Lindsay, “That is a choice you can make,” and the session ended. I did not hear the story and did not accept the threat of her going crazy. It was important to not be gullible, as it turned out. Gullibility came to reflect being effected by “presences” that are not real, that one can’t see, that are shaping the present moment.
Another example of marking the boundaries in the back-and-forth struggle over differentiation between Lindsay and her father (and his past) was in how they negotiated two sessions scheduled on the same day (one for the parents), due to their drive. Mr. B set it up that during Lindsay’s session her mother would go to the bookstore as he just assumed Lindsay would want him to stay and join her session. As Lindsay’s session with her father began I commented on the absence of her mother. She then indicated that she wanted her mother to join us and then became furious when she learned that her mother had left the building to go to a bookstore. What she complained about was, “It isn’t fair she gets to go to the bookstore!” Father became confused and said, “But you could have gone before.” I then talked to Mr. B about what had seemed so confusing, perhaps more than a bookstore, you having set it up this way to protect mother from hurt feelings, however, it seems to be experienced by Lindsay as a painful separation. He then said, “As though I purposely did this to keep Lindsay to myself” (as his mother did him?). Lindsay was then able to convey that her mother did matter to her, as she angrily stated, “She shouldn’t have left!” This combined enactment (Ms. B to be described) left them all feeling “whose feelings are whose?” Lindsay’s father experienced a panic attack in a session with his wife where he expressed fears of divorce and losing Lindsay. He discussed his own mother’s inability to support his independence, and we connected these fears to what was happening between him and Lindsay. Lindsay was no longer in a suicidal crisis. However, several months into my work with her father, he stated feeling suicidal. In a parent session, around this time, Mr. B shared a dream of his death. In the dream, his daughter stepped out of a car, and the car then fell over the cliff with him in it. Interrupting the transmission lead to an interconnected affective shifting between Lindsay and her father, so that Mr. B began to feel deep despair. Mr. B’s shift to more recognition of his fears and feelings was hopeful, though Lindsay continued to struggle with the shift. For example, Lindsay laid her head facedown in her chair, kicking her legs, screaming that she couldn’t possibly talk about a recent fight she had with her father with “HER there!” (referring to me). Reflecting on our early play character (distressed daughter) having had no way out of a “forced marriage” elicited more affective nuance and meaning to this struggle. Could Lindsay actively engage me in this struggle because she knew I knew about the distressed daughter’s fears? Having that part of her mind in my mind was therefore represented in the intersubjective space between us. The multiple parts of her self-states in the enacted representation could find a way to be linked with and through me.

Mr. B countered Lindsay’s refusal to talk with me there, saying, “It is no different.” Whereupon I commented, “It is different being here and sharing what goes on between you and Lindsay, with me.” Mr. B stated feeling in conflict now. When I asked what the conflict was, he said (because in this instance he wanted to share his feelings), “I want to do what’s right for me but when I do I worry I’ve made her unhappy.” I told him to go ahead and talk about what happened in their argument, as it is his feelings about it he wanted to share. To Lindsay he reflected, “When I act for myself you can too.” Mr. B’s ability to experience conflict moved their dyad away from presuming a psychic equivalence and into a quality of thirdness—he was holding her mind in mind and having his own mind (while reflecting on the problem with me). In establishing greater differentiation from the past and between them, we pivoted in a non-linear way to include Lindsay’s mother more directly in the treatment. To Lindsay I said, “Perhaps it feels as though your dad is leaving you in acting for himself—leaving you to the dangers of me.” Mrs. B, with support from her individual therapist, in both individual sessions with me and a session with Lindsay, shared memories of her childhood abandonment when her mother’s psychiatric admissions required her to live with an aunt. She began to recognize that Lindsay needed her. Previously, her abandonment trauma and the sequela of dissociated pain precluded her
from seeing that Lindsay needed her. Lindsay’s mother cried as she narrated some of her childhood experiences of loss while Lindsay’s sat and played solitaire and listened. Lindsay began to make sense of why there was a strange absence of affect or sadness at separations from her. Her mother’s expression of sadness and shared efforts to work through this pain helped Lindsay make sense of things and come to feel that she does matter to her mother. Lindsay’s earlier suicidal feelings associated with my maternity leave deepened our recognition of her feelings about the disconnection with her mother. Sharing these feelings lead to a shift, Mrs. B’s complicity with her husband’s exclusion of her and his overinvolvement with Lindsay dissolved. She was more supported to be a mother, lessening her fears.

Lindsay’s mother reduced her job responsibilities for medical reasons and to spend more time with Lindsay. Triadic structures were being scaffold in the infrastructure of this family system. The father’s suicidal crisis was resolved, and after sustaining a period of unemployment for a year, he accepted a job that he was happy to start. His wife reassured him that she had no plans to divorce but that they needed to deal with their relationship. He agreed, and Lindsay, in turn, resumed her individual therapy with me. Lindsay brought me a picture she painted of four trees, each with their own root system. This was quite distinct from a drawing she had made for me at the start of our work—three balloons all tied together in a knot with one bigger balloon floating alongside (the way ghosts do). She symbolized in her second drawing of four distinct trees that she got what she needed, to become untangled and grounded.

During this period of the work and as their family sessions were reduced, all family members went through a process of mourning as they recognized the changes in the therapy and in their lives. Subsequently, as systemic shifts reverberated intergenerationally likely Mr. B was different in his relationship to his mother, and Lindsay’s paternal grandmother attempted suicide. Mrs. B said that, while her husband went to visit his mother, she did not feel excluded, since Mr. B was in much better contact during this time.

Interestingly both John and Lindsay created similar metaphors in their play of stations—“security station” and “Daughters in Distress”—which formed the symbolic basis for an intermediary role I was to play in the treatment. In that role a reflective capacity grew, I was a third “station” linking and holding multiple subjectivities and multiple self-states within those subjectivities.

Every child and her family are unique and require different contact point(s) to effect change. To examine the questions of what it was about the links within and between John and Lindsay, their parents, and the theoretical context that led to this type of intervention, let us explore the multiple contributing parts, starting with the subject of intergenerational transmission.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF TRAUMA

Unresolved trauma and loss in one generation essentially becomes toxic “psychic-hand-me-downs” to the next generation. While children evoke an important “present remembering context” (Stern, 2004, p. 197) for parents’ activation of the past in the present (or “unremembering and repeating” into the second generation), for the child it is their context. For the child who enters a formative intersubjective context in which dissociated dynamics are present, it is confusing; their parent is strongly reacting to things they can’t see or make sense of. The developmental interest in understanding the intentionality of their attachment figures is frustrated, and consequently the children feel less secure as interpreters of their social world.
The parents’ confusing enactment with their child of transmitted fragments from their past that they are coming to know, finding the realities of the present, and seeing their child as different than what they (un)thought is expressed in the following poem, “White Dog,” by Carl Phillips (2004). In the process of “releasing it,” the parent comes to know it rather than continue to transmit it.

First snow—I release her into it—
I know, released, she won’t come back.
This is different from letting what,

Already, we count as lost go. It is nothing
Like that. Also, it is not like wanting to learn what
Losing a thing we love feels like. Oh yes:

I love her.
Released, she seems for a moment as if
Some part of me that, almost,

I wouldn’t mind
Understanding better, is that
Not love? She seems a part of me,

And then she seems entirely like what she is:
A white dog,
Less white suddenly, against the snow,

who won’t come back. I know that; and, knowing it,
I release her. It’s as if I release her
because I know. (p. 28)

These verses offer a poetic rendering of an emergent process; out of love, a part of the self (and understanding of other) moves out of the shadows and is made explicit. Rather than repeating dynamics from the past, the “ghosts” may be experienced as confusingly shifting from being a part of a parent, a child, and/or both in the intersubjectivity before “becoming less white,” or seen. The parents’ recognition of painful aspects of the past living in the present relationship was a critical juncture in the treatment. Recall both fathers and Lindsay’s mother experienced profound levels of depression/anxiety while moving through this process for the purposes of recognizing his or her child and reconfiguring his or her internal representations. The intense depressive affect stimulated in connection to parenting, was a combination of sadness about his or her own childhood, their parents’ treatment of them, and how they were caught up in parenting in a way that was hurtful to their children. In each case, the therapeutic move into the parents’ subjectivity came about through processing the child’s play.

PLAY

Winnicott (1965) described this space as “transitional” or “intermediate.” The play metaphors children create are hopeful in that they are symbolizing what is felt and needs to be known for
integrative purposes. Reflecting on the universal and multi-developmental levels for which this process is important, Thomas Ogden (2004) comments, “Human beings have a need as deep as hunger and thirst to establish intersubjective constructions (including projective identifications), in order to find an exit from unending, futile wanderings in their own internal object world” (p. 193). John and Lindsay communicated through their play the multiple meanings they made of their experience and where they were stuck and confused. John repetitively buried the toy at battles end while simultaneously being disconnected from me in his play. Lindsay placed me in a confusing set of relationships for which there was no “exit” into mutual recognition (Benjamin, 1995). In the play with John and Lindsay it was a futile search for security at the station. I was adhering with Scotch tape unidimensional characters for John and for Lindsay I was instructed to put poison in “Sven’s” drink to find a safe exit from the forced marriage. These shared enactive representations of relational futility with John and Lindsay gained through the play suggested to me that they could use some help to open up communication within the intersubjective space with their parents. The parents needed help to reflect on how they were being experienced by their child. They couldn’t see it.

For a “picture” of this perplexing moment from a child’s point of view, consider Frank L. Baum’s (1900) classic story, The Wizard of Oz. While the main protagonist, Dorothy, is on a journey to integrate parts of self, she comes into a dark forest with monkey bats and comes upon a sign that reads, “I would turn back if I were you.” The consequence of turning back is that she can’t “go home” or have a way to integrate her identity. I would conjecture that Lindsay and John experienced this kind of perplexing interpersonal and intrapsychic dilemma. I would further wager that many children at this juncture (hitting up against dissociative defenses) do turn back. Both Lindsay and John sought my ability to reflect on this dilemma and alternatively fought me as we stumbled through the impasse to knowing. The child’s need to know to map their theory of mind collides with the parent’s need not to know. How to proceed forward when implicit affective signs tell them otherwise?

To better represent this clinical intergenerational impasse we take a detour into theory, beginning with every child’s wish for an “alive” mother. Luce Irigaray, a French feminist writer, states, “What I wanted from you, Mother, was this, That in giving me life, You too remained alive” (as cited in Gilligan, 2002, p. 151). Is the child hoping for a parent who can paradoxically put some internal representations to death and come alive to what is emerging with their child?

THE ALIVE MOTHER

The French psychoanalyst Andre Green (1986) introduces the concept of the “Dead Mother” to describe the clinical phenomenon of a child experiencing a mother as physically present, yet so deeply depressed so that she feels dead or absent. The child internalizes this deadness and sense of futility about agency. With this concept in mind, we may ask, in contrast, what characterizes an “alive mother” or intersubjective aliveness?

For the purposes of contrast, and moreover for the purposes of mapping the maternal mind, an alive mother has a fluid mind open to reflection: she can move within and between the intersubjective poles of “being together with” and “being distinct from” (Sander in Amadei & Bianchi, 2008, p. 167). In doing so, she recognizes the paradoxical realities of intersubjective life. The inevitable ruptures in the relationship are repaired “enough” (in reference to Winnicott’s
“good enough mothering”) maybe even learned from, upon reflection. Ultimately, we have a mother with a mind of her own who holds her child’s mind in mind (Coates, 1998; Slade, 2002). Mother is able to hold her aims and desires separate from her child and is able to tell the difference (Benjamin, 2005). An “alive parent” can recognize differences in the way her child responds and upon reflection potentially adjust her understanding of her self and her child. The mourning associated with the emergence of a new way of seeing relational realities could be tolerated. As Mr. B could acknowledge internal conflict, and therefore better appreciate the paradoxical reality of intersubjective life, he could see his daughter better. This relational process demonstrates, when there is a strong reliance on dissociation; one’s mind is not entirely one’s own.

Babies pick up on mother’s aliveness in how they are mirrored (Winnicott, 1965). Gergely (2007) made this more specific by referring to mother’s mirroring responses to the baby as being “contingent” and “marked.” Gergely said mother uses “motherese,” which represents the duality in a pretend quality or exaggerated communication to her baby that she is holding her mind separate as she marks in gesture and affect responsiveness to her baby’s mind. In the pivot to the intersubjective space with their parents, Lindsay and John and I were searching to find markers: where they left off and their parents began. As I pretended with Lindsay and stepped into and out of the distressed daughter character, for example, Lindsay was finding her feelings, they were being shared, felt, and marked as her own mind, as I was having my mind. This aroused her hope to take it forward into her relationship with her parents. She wished to be known by them.

The Adult Attachment Interview (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996) attempts to capture “adult state of mind with respect to attachment,” and therefore offers an important contribution to thinking about this dimension of “aliveness.”

The “alive mother” in Mary Main’s (2000) terminology corresponds to the mother of the secure-autonomous category who employs “metacognitive monitoring.” Main’s findings indicate that mothers of secure babies exhibited more than others the use of “metacognitive monitoring” in forming their coherent narratives. She noted that there was a subtle compassion for others in the interviews and that the interviewee was able to maintain a “flexibility of attention” while discussing attachment-related experiences. For example, it was noted that the mother might use humor and paradox to capture the complexity of her history. “Metacognitive monitoring” and a parent’s ability to use reflective functioning (Slade, 2005; Fonagy et al., 2002) for the purposes of “establishing intersubjective constructions” not only help the parent arrive at a representative complex and coherent narrative, it is a precondition of a loosely coupled intersubjectivity. The child in this relational context has the security to explore and create self.

Lindsay’s mother’s efforts to construct a coherent narrative of her traumatic past were earning security for her and Lindsay. The principles of open systems as demonstrated in Lindsay and John’s developmental striving for more complexity and coherence is in keeping with attachment research findings in regard to what is involved in co-creating secure attachment.

A PARENT’S DISSOCIATION AND THE INTERFERENCE TO EXPLORATION . . .
WHEN THE PLAY STOPS DEAD

As we have established, the mind of the parent has enormous ramifications for the child’s security of attachment. When a parent’s mind contains dissociated trauma, this can serve as a landmine to the parent–child intersubjective space. The untitled poem 599 by Emily Dickinson (1951)
MOLDAWSKY SILBER captures the strength of the defense when there is traumatic pain. The defensiveness is communicated as well as the disquieting absence. Hence, important relational communication is fragmented, unintegratable, and like Harry Potter, the child finds the “horcrux” very forbidding.

There is a pain—so utter
It swallows substance up–
Then covers the Abyss with Trance–
So memory can step
Around-across-upon it-
As one within a Swoon–
Goes safely—where an open eye–
Would drop Him—Bone by Bone.

Dissociated pain is unnamed and actively omitted. During the period of impasse in Lindsay’s work she raised her fingers as the sign of the cross to ward off the vampire (me) which I felt conveyed the fear associated with opening up what she was given to feel was deeply “off limits” in relation to her father. Lindsay feared me (hated me) while another part of her enlisted me to make sense of her experience. When John broke the silence on what could be spoken or known, he buried his head, not only the toy. The rupture that reverberated between us felt dreadful. I had clearly entered forbidden emotional territory.

Bromberg (1998) pointed out, “Dissociation becomes pathological to the degree that it proactively limits and often forecloses one’s ability to hold and reflect upon different states of mind within a single experience of me-ness” (p. 7). The parent’s inability to tolerate the fluid awareness of different self-states extends to simultaneously foreclose her ability to reflect upon different states of her child’s mind and to hold them within a single experience of “you-ness” and “we-ness.” This problem was depicted in Fraiberg et al.’s (1975) article “Ghosts in the Nursery,” mentioned in the beginning of the paper.

Daniel Schechter (2003) elaborates on Fraiberg et al.’s (1975) understanding in his focus on the interactive component in the dysfunction in the mother–baby dyad. In addition to the mother being unable to accurately see her baby, and the parts of her self that are unknown or unintegrated can be projected onto her baby, there is yet, a further problem. In Schechter’s view, the baby’s dysphoric affect can also trigger traumatic experiences and challenge the mother’s role of coregulating affect. We can imagine the difficulties this kind of trigger (her babies’ cries, screams, helplessness, distress) may pose when she relies on dissociation. When a mother cannot reflect upon her baby’s distress, a child is denied the benefit of an incorporative response that brings a cohesive feeling of “I-ness.” The interaction can be fragmented and internalized as a self-experience that is itself fragmented. In the differentiation struggles for Lindsay and her parents it was very apparent that the shifting between who is feeling what was deeply fragmented and confusing for them and took many sessions to sort out. One can recall John’s comments in regard to what he sensed about me (my affect [“there’s that spark”], or my appearance [noting my messed up hair, asking “Is it safe?”]), seeking validation for his recognition of affect to create a more cohesive feeling of “we-ness” and more importantly, “I-ness.”

In a dialogue from the novel, Beloved, by Toni Morrison (1987), one character says, “She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It’s good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind” (pp. 272–273).
Memory, Dickinson stated in her poem, “can step around” traumatic pain leaving the parent vulnerable to repeat past experience in the present, most notably with their children. In a similar vein, Andre Green (1999) pointed out a problem with disavowal; it knocks out the possibility of creating interior “souvenirs,” an adaptive way of fathoming absence. The souvenirs take conscious shape (providing the narrative), in contrast to ghosts, in the push toward identifications with missed objects. As Main and Hesse (1990) found, it is unresolved loss and trauma in the attachment figures that disorganizes attachment, as was the case with Lindsay and John. The unregulated and incoherent affect stimulated a need to make sense of things they can’t possibly make sense of. When Lindsay’s mother opened up her pain regarding the abandonment in her history, she began to not only make more sense to Lindsay, but Mrs. B began to recontextualize the pain in relation to her present relationship.

Dissociation offers the “carrier” psychic storage until a possible relational moment when it can be metabolized, most likely through some kind of enactment. The next generation offers a heightened possibility of just such as enactment. By remaining unlinked to other experiences, not able to be recontextualized, dissociated affect/ideas intensify leaving a parent more susceptible to triggers that a child can arouse. A mother who cannot regulate an affect runs the risk of it being co-regulated by an “other,” most notably her child. Herein lies the transfer to the next generation. Stephen Seligman describes experiences that are procedural and prereflective, located in physical and affective registers that are also highly susceptible to transfer (Seligman, 1999). The affect is not only disavowed and unrecognized for what it is, it can also be misattributed to the child (Lieberman, 1997). The stress associated with this relational problem can additionally release stress hormones that can compromise the development of neural pathways responsible for emotional development in the young brain (Shore, 2003a,b; Siegel, 1999). Dissociation can have a literal neurobiological devitalizing effect, reducing complexity of thought.

When one can’t “see it” (referring to Dickinson’s poem, “it” being dropped from view), or “release it” (from Phillip’s poem “White Dog”) there is no enacted representation to know it and mourn it; hence, it haunts the next generation.

GHOSTS

In the absence of working through dissociated pain and loss on the part of the parent, the child can be scripted to replace a loss, or lost relationship, or part of a lost relationship. Due to the continued need to disavow loss, a child in an asymmetrical relationship may be seduced into becoming that “lost (part) object.” Lindsay and John were losing touch with a sense of agency (John “lost in his own world,” Lindsay seen as angry and isolated) in responding to the transmission from their parents. However, the enactments in the present offered the parents a therapeutic opportunity. In making more explicit the parent’s disavowed feelings, and in separating the child from these feelings, one intergenerational step towards making meaning is taken. This is, for our purposes, ghostbusting. As Lindsay’s father could reflect on his mother and feel the way he was re-creating with Lindsay her overdependency with him, and its impact on Lindsay, he shifted to a more differentiated relational stance with his daughter. She, in turn, began to not only move into more triadic relations within the family but also make friends. She could shift out of the ghostly intersubjective role she was scripted for as she became less fearful of losing him or taking care of
him. As Mr. L could hear about John’s feelings he began to truly see how his father was haunting their relationship. As the transmission cycles through the next generation and is recognized, differentiated from, and mourned, the degrees of freedom in the intersubjective space increases for the children.

THE TRANSMISSION, BUSTED

The “alive” parent who experiences mastery at this level of integration can, by extension, offer in Lev Vygotsky’s cognitive developmental terms a “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky 1986). The “alive” parent who is not haunted by dissociated trauma has a mind freer to imagine and wonder and be open to what emerges with her child. The parent, absent the fear, has the luxury of curiosity in response to her child’s explorations (a peek-not-boo game).

Child therapy for Lindsay and John led to focused yet vitally important relational work with their parents. The children brought their parents to a new opportunity in which they were invited to open up hidden memories. Their love for their children overrode their fears. Their own mourning allowed them to both feel better as parents and feel proud of their children.

CONCLUSION

Unresolved loss and dissociated pain creates transgenerational ghosts haunting the intersubjective space of the family. The child therapist, who tri-constructs a reflective space, developing equidistance to the intergenerational processes, has accepted chaos as part of the work. As the therapeutic lens focuses on the intrapsychic life of the child it can then shift focus, following the child’s emergent lead, and pivot towards the interpersonal world of the child. In the interest of establishing a coherent representational map, focused periods of work with the parent(s) to make some aspect of the intergenerational transmission more explicit can help reorganize the attachment system. Part of the restoration of the system includes the affective linking of the child within the rich, vibrant, dynamic roots of his or her family.

REFERENCES


**CONTRIBUTOR**

Laurel Moldawsky Silber, Psy.D., is a faculty member, Institute for Relational Psychoanalysis of Philadelphia; adjunct faculty, at Institute for Graduate Clinical Psychology of Widener University, Chester, PA; and in private practice in Bryn Mawr, PA.
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