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Crowded Intimacy: Engaging Multiple Enactments in Complex Trauma Work

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By Morit Heitzler. Published in The British Journal of Psychotherapy Integration (2011). This article explores the particular complexity of enactment in complex trauma work — where multiple relational patterns, often contradictory, are simultaneously active in the therapeutic relationship, creating a 'crowded' field that demands sophisticated clinical navigation.

KEY THEMES

— Multiple simultaneous enactments in complex trauma

— The 'crowded' relational field

— Distinguishing different enacted patterns

— When enactments compete and conflict

— Maintaining the therapeutic stance in overwhelming complexity

The Crowded Field

In complex developmental trauma, the therapeutic relationship is never simple. The client brings with them not one relational history but many — different attachment patterns laid down at different developmental moments, often in relation to different caregivers, often contradictory in their implications for how the therapeutic relationship should be navigated.

The result is what this article calls a 'crowded' relational field: a therapeutic space in which multiple enactments are simultaneously active, sometimes in direct contradiction to each other. The client may be simultaneously enacting the experience of being abandoned and the experience of being invaded; of seeking closeness and fearing it; of wanting to be contained and resisting all attempts at containment.

The therapist who tries to respond to one of these simultaneously active enactments will inevitably find themselves colluding with or enacting one of the others. There is no position the therapist can take that is not already inscribed in one of the client's relational patterns. This is not a failure of the therapeutic frame; it is the clinical reality of working with complex developmental trauma.

Navigating Multiple Enactments

The clinical challenge is not to avoid the multiple enactments — which is impossible — but to navigate them with sufficient awareness that they do not overwhelm the therapeutic relationship or result in negative re-traumatisation.

This requires, first of all, the therapist's capacity to hold awareness of the multiple patterns simultaneously — to maintain something like an overhead view of the relational field even while being fully present in it. This is the supervisory function internalised: the capacity to observe what is happening in the therapeutic relationship with a degree of perspective, even at the height of its intensity.

It also requires the therapist's somatic attunement — their ability to track in real time what is happening in their own body and in the relational field, and to use that tracking as information rather than acting directly on it. When the therapist notices their own somatic response shifting in a particular direction — contracting, reaching, withdrawing, pressing — this is often a reliable indicator of which enactment is currently most active and most pulling for response.

Maintaining the Stance

Maintaining a therapeutic stance in the face of multiple simultaneous enactments requires what might be called relational equanimity: not the absence of affect or response, but a capacity to remain genuinely present and affected without being overwhelmed or possessed by what is arising.

This is the deepest form of what the body psychotherapy tradition calls embodied presence: not a technique or a state to be achieved once and maintained, but an ongoing, moment-to-moment practice of returning to one's own somatic ground in the face of whatever is pulling at the field.

Supervision plays an essential role in developing this capacity — and specifically supervision that can hold the complexity of multiple simultaneous enactments without prematurely resolving them into a single narrative. The supervisor who can tolerate not-knowing, and who can help the therapist develop the same tolerance, is making one of the most valuable contributions possible to the sustainability of complex trauma work.

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