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A Lacanian Approach to the Treatment of Trauma

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Some of our members have an understanding of Lacanian Psychoanalysis. Most of our larger than usual turnout were interested in this approach but have found it hard to grasp. Julia helped us to work with this struggle and to move to an understanding of her way of thinking about and working with trauma.

Julia Evans is a practising Lacanian Psychoanalyst and member of the London Society of the New Lacanian School. She is a member of the Earl's Court Collective who are translating Jacques Lacan's Seminar IV from unedited tapes, the Earl's Court Clinical Group and a cartel exploring 'Trauma'. Her website is *Lacanian Works*. <http://www.lacanianworks.net>

She began with a summary of the conventional approach to the treatment of trauma as outlined by DSM 5 and NICE. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders is the standard handbook for diagnosing mental disorders in the USA. NICE is the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence which advises upon evidence based approaches to care in the NHS.

The psychotherapeutic idea of trauma was originally a metaphor based on the medical idea of a physical trauma which is a physical injury of sudden onset leading to a physiological state of shock and requiring emergency treatment.

A second source of psychological ideas of trauma was Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. While this is not directly related to physical trauma it does carry the sense of exposure to a traumatic event and the idea that the intensity of the symptoms is related to the seriousness of the event.

Previously PTSD was classified as an anxiety disorder. In DSM 5 it is in a new category of *Trauma and Stressor Related Disorders*. These classifications underlie what is presented as standardised treatments by recognised experts. Often their work is related to neurophysiology and particularly locating traumatic symptoms in the limbic system of the brain. For an example go to the website of Bessel Van Der Kolk MD at: <https://besselvanderkolk.net/index.html>

This way of thinking about trauma is now so well established that the official report on the Grenfell Tower fire said that two thirds of the survivors of the fire had symptoms of PTSD and there was also secondary trauma in people not directly exposed to the original event. This way of thinking about trauma does not consider whether the Grenfell Tower survivors had poorer mental health than most people or whether they were exposed to previous trauma.

It was helpful for Julia to link her ideas to television interviews with Dany Cotton, the Commissioner for the London Fire Service. Dany described fire officers openly crying and distressed at the scene and said that she finds it hard to remember Grenfell and to see images of the fire.

Julia's approach is different from this standardised approach and is related to the work of the Lacanian Eric Laurent. As with much Lacanian work this links back to the ideas of Freud. You can read more on Laurent on Julia's website at <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12272>

Laurent, following Freud, talks about a breach of uncontained energy within the structure which leads to a traumatic repetition. This happens at two levels.

Freud wrote that for children the missing mother is a danger situation. Missing here can mean psychologically missing as well as physically missing. It is a loss of perception of the object. This anxiety affects us all. The second level is the imposition of language which puts a repetition in the place of the mother loss. The imposition of Language is a key Lacanian conception.

For Freud trauma is repeated in dreams because of a breach in protection against stimuli. Julia gave the example of a man who won a Nobel peace prize. He could not believe the phone call and thought it was a prank. Rather than feeling euphoric he was numb and paralysed. His anxiety was about how to manage the new situation of becoming a public figure. Within twenty four hours he had thought this through and had an idea of how to present himself in public. Hence the breach was repaired.

By contrast Dany Cotton was unable to repair the breach of the Grenfell fire. She had spent thirty years being contained by the Operations Manual where even exceptional circumstances could be brought within known and trusted procedures. Her long lived means of containment could not cover this breach. Unlike the Noble winner there is a lack of meaning in her system and her trauma cannot be treated at the level of language. Her language system has not protected her. For Cotton her manual is system that is limitless. In fantasy limitless but in reality she was trying to deal with an experience that leaves a hole in her system but with no way to repair that hole.

The standard treatments for trauma do not recognise the operations of the unconscious. A Lacanian needs to work out what is going on beneath and understand the continued breach of the language barrier. Trauma, whether past, present or anticipated, is a hole in the system of the symbolic and needs to come back into sense.

Paradoxically the Lacanian analyst also needs to avoid an overdose of meaning. At some level trauma has no sense. Hence in treatment we are giving sense to something that has no sense. The Analyst should not be reduced to a dispenser of meaning and repressed meaning. For a Lacanian conventional treatments could not bring trauma in to the world of sense.

Thank you to Julia Evans for the thoughtful way she brought us to an understanding of complex and important ideas.