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Generational Transmission

The Psychotherapy of Legacy and its Legacy in Psychotherapy

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Summary by Frank Kelley

Owen Hewitson is a PhD candidate in Psychoanalysis at the University of Middlesex and runs the website LacanOnline.com.

He gave a well received Lacanian overview of how an experience in one generation is transmitted to a later generation, how it is manifested in that generation psychologically, and the effects that this transmission produces. He contrasted his approach with conventionally accepted views of how the psychological effects of trauma are transmitted across generations.

Part of his interest in generational transmission came from Owens's appreciation of Lacan's engagement with a variety of thinkers in psychoanalysis and beyond. More personally it came from his interest in how his grandmother met his grandfather. Transmission is at the heart of psychoanalysis. It is where we come from.

The conventional view of generational transmission is modelled on the transmission of trauma. There is an event, such as the Holocaust, that is impossible to assimilate and becomes a weight that is transmitted through generations. This unconscious trauma is transmitted from the unconscious of the traumatised generation directly to the unconscious of members of the next generation who then repeat the process. This is a transmission of silence, of what is not said.

You can read about this approach in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* by Cathy Caruth (1995) and *The Shell and the Kernel* by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (1994). The latter is a Freudian account of unconscious transmission.

A central idea of Freudian psychoanalysis is the Oedipus Complex. In the original Greek myth Oedipus is not aware of the trauma of his heritage. Similarly the Oedipus Complex is unconsciously passed from generation to generation. For Freud there are a number of unconscious transmissions, for example the *totem* and the *primitive family*. One of the difficulties Freud always grappled with was how to separate an actual lived trauma from these unconscious fantasies.

Owen talked about the case study of the *Ratman*, who Freud saw for psychoanalysis in 1907. See *Case Histories II* by Sigmund Freud (Penguin Freud Library 9).

Now a conventional reading of this case would involve the linking of the *Ratman's* obsessive fear of harm falling to those he loved, his father's debts, his own debts and how both father and son had to make a choice of which of woman to marry. This patient's obsessive anxieties were related to tales told by a military colleague of a punishment where rats are put in a bucket and inverted over the victim's head.

Owen has a different view which is based on the idea of a *signifier*. Lacan took this from French linguists who used the terms *signifier* and *signified*. The signifier originally meant a sound and the signified a concept or meaning. Later a signifier can mean any material

object, a sound, a written word and so on. Hence what interested Owen, as a Lacanian, are chains of signifiers. So in the *Ratman* case study, we have the following linked German words, sounds as signifiers.

Raten instalments
Ratten rats
Heiraten marriage
Spielratten gambler (gaming rat)

None of this chain of signifiers is the transmission of the silent experience of trauma. What is unconscious is the way the *Ratman* has processed all these experiences.

Owen asked what are the conditions for generational transmission.

Our unconscious is the way our experience gets metabolized. Because they are unconscious our experiences are not organised in a coherent way. Feelings can shift, contradictions are not in conflict or are just not perceived that way, and condensations arise where several experiences are condensed into one. There is no logic and no time. For Owen this primary process thinking gives us myths which we believe solve fundamentally unsolvable questions without actually doing so. For example we can endlessly debate the need for burial or cremation without facing the existential reality of death.

To answer his question Owen said what are transmissible are these fundamental insoluble questions about sex and death. What is transmissible is something that is unresolved within the family. What is transmissible is anything that creates that family bond over time.

For Freud trauma involved two events. The first occurs in early life in relation to caregivers. It is literally unspeakable and possibly sexual. The second experience is later in life and after puberty where we have an understanding, particularly about sex, that we did not have in infancy. A classic example is of a child raped in childhood who gets disturbed by ordinary sexual experiences in adolescence or later. They experience adult sex as this earlier rape.

Owen also talked about chaos theory. In complex systems small changes can lead to dramatic change. Small shifts in our early and unconscious life can lead to disturbing changes in adult life. For Lacan, and Owen, what emerges later in life or in later generations is not the unspoken traumatic silent experience of conventional psychoanalysis. What emerges is the reappearance of signifiers from the unconscious.

Thank you to Owen Hewitson. His review of conventional and Lacanian accounts of generational psychological transmission was a complex undertaking presented with enviable clarity.