

SOUL MURDER

The Effects of Childhood Abuse and Deprivation

“Superlative...

The reader comes away with an educated and focused compassion for the victims, and a renewed awareness of the sometimes awful variety of forms in the moral landscape.... His devotion to his patients...gives the book immense dignity and beauty.”

*The New York Times
Book Review*

LEONARD
SHENGOLD, M.D.

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The Effects of Childhood
Abuse and Deprivation

LEONARD SHENGOLD, M.D.

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The Effects of Childhood
Abuse and Deprivation

To M., L. and L., N. and D.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In this book and in a previous one (Shengold 1988) I have published most of the ideas and discoveries that have been derived from my practice of psychoanalysis over the past thirty years. In my earlier book I thanked my patients and the teachers, family members, and friends who have instructed, influenced, and assisted me. Here I want again to acknowledge my indebtedness to them and to add an expression of gratitude for the helpfulness and clear thinking of my two editors at Yale University Press, Gladys Topkis and Fred Kameny.

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INTRODUCTION

Too much and too little are qualities of experience. From the child's experiences we induce our theoretical psychoanalytic concepts of psychic energy and the "economic." Too much too-muchness we call trauma. Too much not-enoughness inhibits proper maturation. Child abuse means that the child has felt too much to bear; child deprivation means that the child has been exposed to too little to meet his or her needs. What the child's mind and body have been subjected to evokes discharge of body feeling and emotion; these in turn require defensive psychological measures against feeling—both discharge and defense are needed to avoid or lessen unbearable intensities. What comes from outside the body and mind in the form of stimulation operates in conjunction with constitutional givens and constitutional deficiencies (both can involve the all-important instinctual access to body feeling and emotions) to contribute to the normal and the pathological development of the structure and functioning of the mind.

The too-muchness of child abuse can be primarily sexual, as in being seduced or forced into sexual action and feeling. The overwhelming impact of the adult's sexuality and what it imposes on the child's relatively undeveloped physical and psychic capacity to function sexually and discharge sexual affect ensures that what can initially be pleasurable and promising to the child will produce overstimulation and pain. Psychologically, seduction can produce the same effect as outright rape (although the latter can result in greater physical damage). The frightening overstimulation inevitably leads to rage and an overwhelming mixture of sexual and aggressive feelings. If the abused child's experiences are primarily those stemming from aggressive attacks—being beaten and tormented—there is almost always a defensive sexualization of those experiences, which results in a similar sado-masochistic mixture of unbearable affect. To survive, the child must have enough gratification of the physical need for care and the psychological need to

be wanted. The palpable absence of being cared about usually inhibits the developmental maturation of the mental structure and functioning needed to master intensities of affect. So for the developing child, deprivation can lead to the same traumatic and sado-masochistic imbalance as overstimulation. There are inescapable mixtures and alternations of overstimulation and neglect in everyone's development. These should be called child abuse and child deprivation only if "economic" conditions of intensity, duration, or both make for enough psychic damage that the result can be described as soul murder.

Soul murder is neither a diagnosis nor a condition. It is a dramatic term for circumstances that eventuate in crime—the deliberate attempt to eradicate or compromise the separate identity of another person.¹ The victims of soul murder remain in large part possessed by another, their souls in bondage to someone else. Thus Winston Smith at the end of 1984 loves the Big Brother who has taken over his mind. Torture and deprivation under conditions of complete dependency have elicited a terrible and terrifying combination of helplessness and rage—unbearable feelings that must be suppressed for the victim to survive. Brainwashing makes it possible to suppress what has happened and the terrible feelings evoked by the erased or discounted experiences. When it is necessary to retreat from feelings, good feelings as well as bad ones are compromised, and the victim's deepest feelings are invested primarily in the soul murderer (as Big Brother dominates the emotional universe of Winston Smith). Therefore murdering someone's soul means depriving the victim of the ability to feel joy and love as a separate person. In 1984 O'Brien says to Winston Smith: "You will be hollow. We will squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves" (p. 260).

Sexual abuse, emotional deprivation, physical and mental torture can eventuate in soul murder. Brainwashing keeps the condition of emotional bondage going. Children are the usual victims, for the child's almost complete physical and emotional dependence on adults easily makes possible tyranny and therefore child abuse; because he or she cannot escape from the tyrant-torturer, the child must submit to and identify with the abuser. ("The cut worm forgives the plough," Blake 1793, 96.) A consummated soul murder is a crime most often committed

1. Lionel Trilling wrote that the essence of morality is "making a willing suspension of disbelief in the selfhood of somebody else" (1955, p. 94).

by psychotic or psychopathic parents who treat the child as an extension of themselves or as an object with which to satisfy their desires. Lesser effects ensue from intermittent parental cruelty and indifference. I will try to demonstrate in my clinical examples something of what is done to effect soul murder and of how it comes about.

I cannot present a definitive exploration of child abuse and neglect, nor a solution for it. My case material will seem mild indeed to those dealing with battered and sexually assaulted children who turn up in police stations and hospital emergency rooms. I will describe people who were assaulted as children and have been scarred, but who have enough ego strength to maintain their psychological development and have summoned the considerable mental strength needed to present themselves as patients for psychoanalysis. The attempt to murder their souls was not completely successful. They are only a handful of people, but I would judge them representative of many others; I think my generalizations apply to many of the more disturbed victims too. But I have not studied any of the countless number who have ended up as derelicts, in madhouses, or in jails, or those who have not even survived an abused childhood.

I want to emphasize the complexity and the mystery involved in any attempt to connect pathological effects with specific causes. I stand against oversimplification, against reducing explanations just to external events or, conversely, just to intrapsychic forces. Children register in their minds, or at least are capable of registering the experiences of having been seduced or beaten, as well as fantasies of being seduced or beaten (based on universal inborn wishes). Psychological therapists are confronted with their patients' interrelated mental images of the world inside and of the world outside the self, which make up the individual's "representational world" (Sandler and Rosenblatt 1962)—the frontier at which patients interact with their therapists. Victims of attempts at soul murder find it very difficult to be responsible for their mental pictures of themselves, of others, and of the world around them. They often cannot properly register what they want and what they feel, or what they have done and what has been done to them.

Child abuse is the abuse of power. We do not have a coherent psychology of power; much is unknown. Soul murder is as old as human history, as old as the abuse of the helpless by the powerful in any group—which means as old as the family. But soul murder has a particular resonance with the twentieth century—with the world of Orwell's

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1984—and a particular relevance to it. This is the century of the computer, the concentration camp, and the atomic bomb, of the presence of such destructive potential that all life on earth is threatened, and of a centralized power so monolithic and intrusive that it has been aimed at mastery over the individual's mind as well as body. This power has been implemented by twentieth-century discoveries in psychology and communications that have made brainwashing and mind control easily attained effects of terror and torture. Hitler and Stalin have proven that the strongest adults can be broken and deprived of their individuality and even of their humanity. That is one of the lessons of Orwell's 1984—one that can also be learned from the lives of those who have grown up in the charge of crazy, cruel, and capricious parents, in the totalitarian family ambience that Randall Jarrell calls "one of God's concentration camps" (1963, p. 146).

In relation to both our external and our inner psychic lives, Freud viewed as all-important the influence of those first carriers of the environment and first objects of our instinctual drives, the parents: what they do, what they evoke in the child, how they are registered within the mind of the child and become part of its mental structure, how they are separated out to leave the child with its own individuality. For the developing infant, these gods of the nursery (or their caretaker substitutes) *are* the environment. They have power over the helpless, and they can easily get away with misrule and tyranny. They are also under a powerful unconscious compulsion to repeat the circumstances of their own childhood. We regularly find that abusers of children have been abused as children by their own parents. This is not heredity (although we cannot completely rule that out) but rather a passing down of a traumatic past from generation to generation. The sins of the father are laid upon the children—but not, as Freud has shown, upon innocent children. Children are easy to seduce because they want to be seduced. And we have learned that in the terrible circumstances of parents who do not love, are indifferent, or hate, children will turn to seduction, even to provocation to be beaten, to fulfill the imperative need for some parental attention. Those who have devised procedures for causing mental breakdown in inmates of prisons and concentration camps have resorted to a regimen of emotional deprivation and isolation, alternating with humiliation and torture. Child abuse is a consequence of our need for dependence and our innate sadism and

masochism, and it enhances that sadism and masochism in its child victim.²

We find in our patients that they regularly identify with the aggressor. To identify means *to be* and *not to see* someone. It follows that when these people find their own victims they do not experience them as separate individuals—they do not empathize with them. The abused child's siblings, already subject to the primal displacement of murderous impulse from the parent to the intruding infant (this is the theme of the story of Cain and Abel), tend to be the first scapegoats of the abused child. Although individual variations may ensue, usually the hostility is eventually displaced onto people outside the family: underlings, especially those who play vague parental roles and yet are dependent—like servants, porters, waiters. This kind of hostility that denies the other's humanity is very often shifted onto those who are already the victims of persecution—the racially different, foreigners, "official" enemies, like the ever-changing warring opponents in 1984. (These can all unconsciously stand for the denied and projected bad aspects of one's parent, self, and family.) Ultimately the compulsion to repeat a traumatic past focuses the rage of the former victims of attempted soul murder on children in general, and on their own children.³ (As expected in psychic events, feelings of caring and concern, consisting of reaction formations against the hatred as well as genuine counterfeelings to it, can exist alongside it.)

What I have observed from my limited vantage point, as a psychoanalyst and psychotherapist in private practice who does some supervision of therapy with patients in clinics, confirms Freud's varied and complex

2. There is also a convincing sociological study of this in Colin Turnbull's *Mountain People* (1972), about an African tribe whose members humiliate and torment their children. The children grow up to be cruel to their own children in turn, to be uncaring of one another, and to abandon their old people.

3. In an autobiographical part of his short story "Three Years" (1895), Anton Chekhov writes of the emotions of his grown-up hero on revisiting his father's warehouse, where he was beaten daily (like Anton himself as a child in the family business of his own father): "Every little detail [in that warehouse] reminded him of the past, when he had been whipped and given plain, lenten food. He knew that boys were still whipped and punched in the nose until it bled, and that when these boys grew up they would do the punching" (p. 102). See also Daldin 1988.

views on psychic pathogenesis—views that would lead me to expect the infinite variety and complexity of the effects of child abuse and neglect. I know that the range of psychopathology that is encompassed, of diagnostic categories that are elicited, is broad and diverse. There are of course many combinations of effects. The most important determinant, overstimulation, involves power, or psychic economics. Too much neglect and too much torment and abuse (especially when these occur too early) interfere with development and functioning and can make for the blank slate of devastated psychic structure. The children may not physically survive the assaults, or they may later succumb to an inner need for annihilation analogous to that René Spitz (1945) found in his study of emotionally deprived infants who died after growing up in institutions. For the survivors of abuse and neglect, this self-destructive current develops into a strong, conscience-distorting need for punishment. It is all too easy to murder the souls as well as the bodies of children. There must be some minimum of care and some kind of acceptance from the parents for the child to survive.

What we do not know about child abuse and soul murder is probably more important than what we do, and in addition there is the mystery of greatly varying inherited gifts and ego strength: these enable some abused children to sustain more abuse and transcend it better than others.⁴ Some of these children grow up impelled chiefly to contain rather than repeat the traumata, although differing proportions of both impulses will always be present. With faulty or inconstant defenses, with partially defective psychic structure (here again there is interplay with mysterious, in this case *negative*, “givens”), soul-murdered children can be or become psychotic, or psychopathic and criminal. Or, by using massive and primitive defenses (usually including denial and autohypnosis), they may be able to contain the terrifying, primarily murderous (sado-masochistic) charge of affect that they have been forced to bear. They have to pay a price for these defenses, but they can appear or really be neurotic. Some frequently can or even must function in an “as if” fashion: they act as if they were psychologically healthy, presenting a façade of normality that covers an essential hollowness of soul.

From my experience with patients and my reading about the lives of

4. See the work on so-called invulnerable children by C. James Anthony and others.

others, I know that one comes across the unexpected in these people. For example, alongside the scars and distortions produced by terrible childhoods there are some strengthening effects: some survivors appear to have derived from their experiences adaptive powers and talents that helped them survive. (I will be illustrating this with examples from my patients and from writers who have discussed their childhoods.) This enhancement of certain gifts is analogous to what has been observed in those who have survived wars and concentration camps. I have learned to be wary of generalizations about pathological limitations in people who were abused and neglected as children. But I have observed certain common pathological features, mostly based on specific consequences of prolonged or repeated abuse and neglect: the evocation of murder, cannibalism, and traumatic anxiety by the enforced and reactive overstimulation (frequently but not always marked by the eruption in analytic associations of cannibalistic creatures like the rat); the concomitant imperative need for rescue from the unbearable intensities and defense against them; the need to take on the attributes of the tormentor and turn on other victims the abuse that was suffered.

Before further defining and describing soul murder I will present an instance of it. The childhood experiences of A., a superficially successful man, married and a father, deserve the label of soul murder. The soul murder was not completely successful: A.'s identity was warped and constricted, but it survived. There was no overt physical abuse on the part of A.'s parents—the "crime" consisted of some cruelty toward him, but predominantly what made his childhood a hell was their indifference, their lack of loving care and empathy.

A. sought analysis because he was chronically and sometimes desperately unhappy. His depression was intermixed with a smoldering hatred for his peers and superiors, especially at his work. He was afraid of retaliation, but it was the feeling of hatred itself that made him most anxious. Occasional outbursts of rage, like temper tantrums, were usually directed against his wife. "I have never been able to enjoy anything," he said with intense bitterness. Although his parents were very rich and had provided luxurious surroundings and the most expensive education, he had always felt deprived and cheated: "What father and mother did for me they did for themselves; they never bothered about what I wanted. They never even tried to find out what I wanted. They told me what I wanted." A. felt that his parents had not loved him or even liked him. "My parents despised their children; I despised my

brothers; and I despised myself." He believed he had been stripped of the capacity for humor: "I can laugh only when I am drunk." Unfortunately, he was drunk all too frequently—his parents were alcoholics, and alcoholism was a family problem that had bridged generations. A.'s monotonous tone of accusatory complaint and his almost unchanging bitter, deadpan expression seemed to me to represent an unconscious challenge: "Just you *try* to like me!" He himself said: "People tolerate me because of my abilities, but I am simply not likable." His masochistic wife was registered as an exception to this rule, but as part of his despising himself he despised her for wanting him.

The story of A.'s childhood evoked for me F. Scott Fitzgerald's psychologically acute, much-quoted remark to Hemingway: "The very rich are different from you and me."⁵ The special ambience of the mansions of A.'s childhood came from the contrast between his parents' visibly lavish fulfillment of material needs and their unawareness or frustration of emotional ones. He was brought up by servants in a nursery seldom visited by his father and mother even when they were at home—and they were frequently away, sometimes abroad. When in his parents' presence A. usually felt belittled and humiliated by them, especially in response to any show of emotion on his part. The family ideal was to be cool, witty, and physically distant. The habitual vicious teasing and sarcasm from both parents amounted to training A. to regard any empathic communication as a prelude to torment. It seemed consistent with adaptation to this background that he talked in a clipped monotone, like a machine.

A.'s mother had often told him that she had been looking for a strong man when she married his father. Indeed, the father tried to act the generalissimo at home and in his business. Both the family home and the country estate had the aura of a cavalry post, and the patient firmly believed that the parents' many horses received better care than the children. The servants in the stable were by and large kept on; those in the nursery were frequently and capriciously changed. The strong-willed parents seemed to agree only in their concern for horses and in their abusive treatment of their sons; they quarreled constantly and dramatically, especially when drunk. Stubborn and prolonged spitefulness abounded. The patient talked of family life in military metaphor—as a

5. Hemingway's cynical rejoinder, "Yes, they have more money," attests to his deficiency as a psychological novelist (see Trilling 1948, 214).

war with battles, retreats, campaigns. Although terrified by this, the boy was expected to express no feelings or complaints; he was reproached for not being grateful for his privileged life.

The parents of A. finally divorced when he was ten. The mother had always said that she wanted her son to be a strong man, like her own father, a professional army officer. The avowedly spartan character training the parents devised for their sons, marked by aloofness, nakedness, and the endurance of cold, was in confusing contrast to the self-indulgent life-style of the parents.⁶

Something of the current relationship of the depressed son with his mother was revealed by a birthday gift she sent to him shortly after she was told he had entered psychoanalysis. In a note accompanying the gift she said she was sorry to hear yet again about the weakness of his character, and the gift itself—a true “gift of Medea” (see Orgel and Shengold 1968)—was a set of pistols that had belonged to her father. It was apparent to me that this twentieth-century Hedda Gabler was telling her weak, deserting son to shoot himself. A. seemed to have some insight into his mother’s motivation—he quoted a friend’s comment that to give a pistol to a depressed man was not exactly a loving act. But this secondhand comment was superficially felt. The meaning of the pistols was overdetermined; A. talked more readily (yet with little feeling) about the paternal phallic symbolism of the pistols than about their destructive potential. Although he spoke of his mother’s murderous intent when expanding on the quote from his friend, he essentially denied it. Medea too had sent her poisoned gift on the occasion of a threatened separation—a breaking of the symbiotic tie. Like Medea’s victim, A. could not resist the magical promise of a present, even from an avowedly hostile witch. There had been many similar gifts in the past, but he could never keep from an insistent, almost delusional anticipation that this time the gift and therefore the giver would turn out to be good (this is characteristic of soul-murder victims). He found himself drawn to playing with the pistols.

A.’s father was a tyrannical, paranoid loner who quarreled with and alienated everyone. With both parents drinking so heavily, the silent

6. I feel that these parents were two of “those who have been maltreated in childhood [and] have an almost uncanny ability to find and to marry someone with a similar background and similar ideas about child rearing” (Steele 1976, 14).