

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Bar-On, D. (1999). *The indescribable and the undiscussable: Reconstructing human discourse after trauma*. Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Press. ISBN 963-9116-33-5. 310 pages.

Reviewed by: Tom Strong, Ph.D., University of Calgary

What role, if any, does conversation and language play in helping people recover from traumatic experiences? Nowadays, counsellors wave fingers, tap parts of bodies, bust maladaptive cognitions, or perform healing rituals—none seeming to have anything to do with talk and words. This is, of course, unless one sees counselling as a form of discourse, and discourse as an extension of thought processes assaulted and overwhelmed by traumatic experiences. While surfing Amazon's website, I came across the obscure but interesting and useful book I am reviewing here.

Dan Bar-On has condensed a lifetime of research into *The indescribable and the undiscussable*. He goes after big stuff in trauma research: recovering from sexual abuse, surviving the Holocaust, and outliving heart surgeries. But how he does it is to look at how people talk about their experiences during and after trauma. For example, he interviews people about experiences for which they still hadn't found words (the "indescribable"), and he talks to the children of Nazi soldiers involved in the Holocaust about "undiscussables" in their family communications. He has an interest in impediments to using conversation to socially construct altered meanings and relational connections during and after trauma. For him, our discourse must change because of trauma, since trauma violates how we represent experience and talk in accustomed ways.

Among Bar-On's concerns is the capacity people have for thwarting the healing possibilities of "constructive dialogue," where people can, in a sense, muddle together through the indescribable and undiscussable stuff of life, to give it meanings that otherwise would remain inarticulable. Abusers and Nazi jailers can, for example, direct conversation away from open talk about salient events in families. But our participation in normal cultural or familial discourses open up or close down possibilities for meaning-making and connection as well. Too often, normal dialogue has ways of disqualifying that which doesn't fit its implicit rules. That one should not talk about unpleasant experiences at the family dining table (one of the few places families convene) captures only a sliver of what is meant here. Constructive dialogue is how he suggests restoring a new flow to interpersonal dialogue where traumatic experience has disrupted that.

This is not a book written explicitly for counsellors, but it is a book that says a lot about how meaning and conversation feature in helping people recover from trauma. Drawing from linguistically oriented theorists like Wittgenstein, Foucault, and Lacan, Bar-On looks as much at how conversation occurs in the face of trauma as he does at particular meanings that derive from conversation. He takes his social constructionism into the action research arena when he engages children of Nazi

soldiers in discussions with their parents, and he devotes a full chapter to conversations he sees as helpful in constructing a moral imagination. But he is particularly concerned by “normalized discourse”: clients’ ways of talking and making sense of traumatic experience that are anchored in the normalcies of their everyday conversations. Such conversational normalcies too often inflexibly constrain other possibilities for therapeutic meaning and ways of staying interpersonally connected after traumatic experiences. Our biographical reconstructions after trauma are far from autonomous projects, this book says: they require “constructive dialogues” where new ways of meaning and relating can emerge.

The book itself is primarily laid out into two sections reflecting its title: a section on the indescribable, or what he terms soft impediments to discourse; and a section on the undecidable, or severe impediments to discourse—the practices used in silencing traumatic experiences and the experiences of those so silenced. In the first section (four chapters or approximately 100 pages), he examines how trauma survivors struggle to find words adequate to describe the truth of their experiences. A bridging section—Bar-On’s interlude of 30 pages—examines discourse in terms of cultural contexts, how discourse can be considered “located,” and how all discourse has an ideological component. The final section (a further four chapters of 140 pages) examines why it can be so hard to sometimes speak of traumatic experiences given how others close to us may respond. I found the book, overall, to be well written and full of interesting anecdotes from Bar-On’s extensive and diverse research on the topic.

No counsellor wants to think of her or himself as complicit in conversations that constrain the possibilities for therapeutic meaning-making that a client needs. Bar-On, however, suggests that counsellors welcome the ambiguities involved in “constructive dialogue,” welcoming and jointly learning from clients’ experiences as apt words for them are constructed in the back and forth of client-counsellor interaction. Constructive dialogue requires genuine curiosity and spontaneous responsiveness; this is quite a different approach to expert-based models of counselling where the counsellor structures both the conversation and what occurs within it. While offering a framework for understanding recovery as a discursive process, what Bar-On describes in this worthwhile book is a conversational way of being he sees too often eluding our clients: an opportunity to grapple for and try on the best words for overwhelming experiences in extraordinary ways with caring others.

Rovers, M. (2005). *Healing the wounds in couple relationships*. Ottawa, ON: Novalis. ISBN 289-507569-7. 145 pages.

Reviewed by: Anne Theriault, Ph.D., University of Ottawa

Healing the Wounds in Couple Relationships is written for individuals who are seeking to improve their intimate relationships through a thorough self-exploration of entrenched relational patterns. Based on the premise that insight and self-acceptance will permit novel and healthier choices, author Martin Rovers gently introduces theoretical principles to prompt the reader to establish parallels between current emo-