

BOOK REVIEW

C.A. Courtois & J.D. Ford (Eds.): Treating Complex Traumatic Stress Disorders: An Evidence-Based Guide**The Guilford Press, New York, 2009, 488 pp., \$55.00****Nora LaFond Padykula**Published online: 6 May 2010
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Complex traumatic stress is one of the most pervasive psychological disorders of our time. When we scratch the surface of many of today's more established diagnoses, we find that the underlying etiology is often the insidious after effects of psychological trauma. Editors Christine A. Courtois and Julian D. Ford have produced what will surely become a classic textbook on complex traumatic stress. This book is appropriate for students, clinicians, and academics alike. Because the concept of complex trauma is still evolving, this text can educate and inform students in training as well as seasoned clinicians. Broken down into three parts, the book offers a comprehensive review of the conceptualization and assessment of the disorder, evidence-based treatment options for psychotherapy and psychopharmacology among children and adults, and interventions for couples, families, and groups. The authors of the book are leaders in the field of trauma and they artfully illustrate the nuances of the disorder as well as subsequent treatment through rich case examples.

Judith Herman's foreword begins by orienting the reader to the ecological context in which abuse is carried out and trauma becomes diagnosable. Herman shares her research experience in the Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Working Group for the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association 1994). Despite providing evidence for the prevalence and internal consistency of the diagnosis of Complex PTSD, it was not included in the DSM-IV text revised version, nor any subsequent proposals for future editions. The proposed diagnostic criteria

includes a symptom picture that overlaps with several other diagnoses, including Major Depressive Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Bipolar II, and Borderline Personality Disorder. Thus, a diagnosis of Complex PTSD would share characteristics of other disorders, potentially putting it at odds with the current system of fixed diagnostic categories. Herman artfully foregrounds for the reader the current sociopolitical climate that underlies the formation of Complex PTSD as a formal diagnostic category.

Part I begins with the editors' validation of the difficulties inherent to accurately diagnosing and treating complex traumatic stress disorder. In the expanded definition of the disorder, the editors (also contributing authors) provide the associated states, features, conditions, and phenomenology while contrasting them with other post-traumatic reactions. This section highlights current research on neurodevelopment and the impact of childhood trauma on attachment, self-regulation, and information processing. The authors continually advocate for case conceptualizations which include the developmental level(s) in which trauma occurs, and provide recommendations for best practices in assessment, treatment, and treatment modalities for children and adults. Specific chapters are devoted to dissociation, the dynamics inherent to the dyadic relationship, building the therapeutic alliance across cultures, vicarious traumatization, and therapist self-care.

Part II covers several specialized treatment approaches that include: contextual therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, contextual behavior trauma therapy, experiential and emotion-focused psychotherapy, sensorimotor psychotherapy, and psychopharmacology. The structure of this section is practically oriented and extremely useful for clinical practice and teaching. Each approach details the clinical rationale, theoretical underpinnings, associated

N. L. Padykula (✉)
Department of Social Work, Westfield State College,
Westfield, MA 01085, USA
e-mail: npadykula@wsc.ma.edu

clinical features and methods specific to the identified treatment, and simulated transcripts of the treatment with accompanying explanations. The authors and editors also provide commentary on treatment interventions to further integrate theory and practice techniques. This is accomplished through a clear articulation of the various presentations associated with this disorder, which is useful as many of the symptoms of the aftereffects of trauma overlap with existing diagnostic categories.

Part III of the text details psychotherapy approaches for addressing the sequelae of complex trauma in couples, families, and groups. Organized in the same manner as Part II, this section describes therapeutic approaches for couples which include internal family systems therapy and emotionally-focused therapy. A strengths perspective underlies the recommendations for two family modalities which emphasize psycho-education and skills-building in the service of achieving both self and family-system regulation. The authors highlight the Trauma Recovery and Empowerment Model as an effective group model for working with adult female survivors of complex traumatic stress. This well-defined and empirically validated model is founded on an integration of interpersonal, psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, and client-centered approaches. Throughout the text, the complexity of the subject matter is enriched from utilizing a biopsychosocial perspective, as well as maintaining a deep understanding of the fundamental role of early attachments. The vast majority of ongoing trauma happens within the context of relationships, and it is from this lens that the book advocates for healing through the formation and preservation of the therapeutic relationship.

The editor's final chapter is on the clinical utility of using Complex PTSD as an framework. In the current climate of mental health care, the criterion for diagnostic categories found in the DSM-IV-TR (2000) seemingly guide clinicians' conceptualization and assessment of a clients' presenting problem. Treatment is typically driven by evidence-based protocols for recognized disorders. Being guided by empirically based evidence about the identified disorders is important in conceptualizing treatment; however, clinicians continue to witness phenomenology associated with traumatic stress that is outside the current DSM-IV-TR nomenclature of trauma. Courtois and Ford have been able to clearly identify the phenomena and provide clinicians with a conceptualization that includes new diagnostic criteria and effective treatments. For clinicians unfamiliar with the nuances associated with suffering from ongoing trauma, this shift in conceptualization from PTSD as it is currently defined in the DSM-IV-TR to Complex PTSD will inform assessment and treatment. For the patient who does not meet criteria for PTSD but suffers the after effects of trauma, this conceptual shift for

clinicians may have profound results on the clients perception of themselves and their capacity for treatment.

While it is impossible to comprehensively integrate all of the covariates associated with traumatic stress, the editors seem to neglect the impact of substance use on traumatized populations. Several of the case examples in the book include childhood abuse or neglect due to caregiver substance use, yet there was no formal discussion on how to understand or provide treatment for those suffering from intergenerational complex trauma and addiction. Consideration on this particular dual diagnosis issue would have been useful. Studies demonstrate that both social work education programs and subsequent training opportunities in the field are lacking in substance abuse curriculum (Bina et al. 2008; Hall et al. 2000). This is particularly important, given the 55–99% prevalence rate of female substance abusing clients with lifetime histories of trauma (Najavits et al. 1997). Despite this omission, the editors and authors have integrated a large body of knowledge into a coherent primer on the current state of the field of complex traumatic disorders.

The text concludes with an afterward by Bessel van der Kolk who poignantly describes the dilemma facing mental health professionals and clients: "...[D]espite the fact that people with complex trauma histories probably make up the bulk of people seen in mental health centers, they remain nameless and homeless" (2009, p. 464). He challenges the field of social science to find a place for this empirically validated disorder that is multidimensional in nature and spans across disciplines and disorders. The battle to shifting diagnostic paradigms is invariably one in which the emergence of new knowledge is accompanied by a struggle to gain authenticity (Kuhn 1962). The mental health field is in the midst of this very important battle. As clinical social workers, we should applaud Courtois, Ford and the contributing authors for heeding the call to fight for legitimacy. In our current mental health climate, there exists a psychiatric debate about formally establishing Complex PTSD as a disorder. In such a climate this book documents the current knowledge and evidence supporting the disorder and will surely help to shift the paradigm of how complex trauma is understood, assessed for, and ultimately healed from.

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