NYU Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis  
Fall 2016  

**Adult Onset Trauma**  

**Ghislaine Boulanger, Ph.D.**

**Time and date:**  
September 24 10AM-1:15PM  
October 8 10AM-1:00PM  
October 22 10AM-1:00PM  
November 5 10AM-1:00PM  

**Location:** TBA  

**Course Description:** In recent years psychoanalytic clinicians increasingly have found themselves treating patients who have survived life threatening assaults individually or in groups; or witnessed sudden, untimely, and often violent deaths; or learned of the sudden, violent death or disappearance of a loved one. Often this experience has led to profound and long lasting psychological symptoms; the survivor has exchanged the sense of a more or less continuous self or selves, for an unfamiliar mortal self for whom time stands still. She has lost the capacity to experience a range of affects, of senses on which she could rely. Her capacity both to reflect and to relate has been forfeited. Until recently psychoanalysts had few ways of acknowledging these symptoms and incorporating adult onset trauma into their theory and practice, emphasizing instead the consequences of childhood trauma or stressing the importance of psychic reality and overlooking the role of historical reality in the etiology of these disorders. This one credit course, offered in four Saturday workshops, systematically explores the literature and phenomenology of catastrophic dissociation, draws distinctions between childhood trauma and adult onset trauma, and considers the clinical consequences of this disorder.

Subjectively and metapsychologically, adult onset trauma requires careful consideration in its own right. If this position is not clearly understood, those who have survived catastrophic trauma in adulthood are in danger of being situated beyond the reach of effective psychoanalytic practice. Workshop participants will be encouraged to share their own experiences in working with these conditions.

**Readings:** Many of the readings listed below are available on PEP-Web and therefore available to you as Postdoc candidates. More recent readings and articles and chapters that are not accessible will be made.

Two books are recommended as supplementary reading material; they are available from Amazon:


**Week 1: Saturday, September 24th, 10.00am-1.15pm**  
*History, psychodynamics, and clinical presentation.*

Beginning with a brief historical review of the treatment of adult onset trauma in psychoanalytic theory and practice, including the pioneering work of the few classical psychoanalysts who tackled this subject in the shadow of the *Shoah* and World War II, this session emphasizes advances in psychoanalytic epistemology that have encouraged the exploration of posttraumatic symptoms. Recent contributions to this field suggest that there are many lenses through which to view the symptoms of adult onset trauma. Some refer to a collapsed self, an ego in tatters; others point to the destruction of internal ties; others focus on the loss of the capacity to fantasize, the concrete and repetitive dreams, or the unnameability of experience. Understanding the phenomenology and dynamics of posttraumatic symptoms reveals the different and often confusing guises in which these disorders can present clinically.

The first reading, the text of an interview between Dori Laub and Cathy Caruth, addresses each of the themes that we shall examine in this class: What is the place of massive psychic trauma in psychoanalytic theory and practice? How do we understand the symptoms, how do we treat them clinically, and what are we asking of ourselves when we are confronted by such horrifying material? Although Laub is an expert on Holocaust survivors, his words apply to survivors of adult onset trauma in general and to the clinicians who work with them.

**Required Readings:**

**Supplementary Readings:**
**Week 2: Saturday, October 8th, 10am-1pm**  
*Traumatic memories, distinctions between childhood and adult onset trauma, the role of traumatic isolation, and mindlessness*  
Understanding the multiple ways in which traumatic memories are encoded, enacted, and embodied allows us to draw distinctions between childhood onset trauma as it presents in adulthood and adult onset trauma.

Massive psychic trauma has a profound impact on the survivor’s object world. Whether it is seen as the loss of the internal empathic other, the destruction of the container, identification with dead objects, or with the aggressor, the implications for treatment are far-reaching. Intersubjective space has become uninhabitable, leading to a sense of isolation and the belief that nothing can be shared and, consequently, that experience is meaningless. To complicate the clinical picture further, survivors of massive psychic trauma frequently experience deficits in symbolic functioning affecting the capacity to dream, to entertain fantasies, and to think productively.

**Required Readings:**

**Supplementary Readings:**

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**Week 3: Saturday, October 22, 10am-1pm**  
*Resistance, countertransference, and clinical technique in working psychodynamically with adult onset trauma.*  
The phenomenology of adult onset trauma, erratic memory, impaired intersubjectivity, compromised symbolic functioning -- inevitably coupled with the clinicians’ own reactions to the experiences their patients have survived -- contribute to particularly difficult treatments. Do these treatments require
adjustments in technique? What are the goals of treatment? What is the clinician’s role -- witness, container, exorcist? What is the role of narrative, particularly when traumatic experience often defies thought let alone speech? In describing these clinical dilemmas, this session explores the different forms that patients’ and clinicians’ resistance can take in working dynamically with adult onset trauma.

**Required Reading:**


**Supplementary Reading:**


**Week 4: Saturday, November 5, 10am-1pm**
*Applied psychoanalysis and adult onset trauma*
The growing interest in applied psychoanalysis is particularly relevant to working with individuals and groups of people who have survived a massive psychic trauma and who and cannot be treated in a conventional setting. This workshop focuses particularly on those situations, whether it is in a community that has survived a calamity or in a jail where the subject is being evaluated, what can we carry over from more conventional psychodynamic treatments? Is it accurate to call these applied treatments psychodynamic?

The treatment of survivors frequently gives rise to significant anxiety among clinicians whether in traditional or applied settings. Using extended clinical examples, we ask how to understand and work with vicarious trauma.
**Required Readings:**


Schoen, Sarah: The Culture of Interrogation: Evaluating Detainees at Guantanamo Bay, ms in press, will be provided.


**Supplementary Reading**


The Instanbul Protocol. A guide to interviewing and evaluating survivors of torture, the IP is the gold standard for gauging violations of human rights internationally. A pdf may be downloaded from a number of sites including www.ohchr.org/