



Reframing trauma through social justice:
Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse
Edited by Catrina Brown

Reviewed by Manja Visschedijk



Manja has a long history of responding to trauma in both unpaid queer and feminist activist collectives, and in paid social justice roles in feminist and community service organisations. Manja currently practices independently as a narrative therapist and is a member of the Dulwich Centre Faculty and a clinical tutor within the Department of Social Work at The University of Melbourne. Manja can be contacted care of Dulwich Centre.

Abstract

Manja Visschedijk reviews Catrina Brown's (2024) edited collection *Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse*. Routledge. 356pp. ISBN 9781032459899, ISBN 9781003379591 (ebook).

Key words: *trauma; feminism; poststructuralism; book review; narrative practice*

Visschedijk, M. (2024). Review essay: Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse edited by Catrina Brown. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2), 110–114. <https://doi.org/10.4320/OERZ7952>

Author pronouns: she/they

This book, part of a series on women and psychology aimed at human services workers, students, academics and persons with lived experience, will be of interest to narrative practitioners working with the effects of trauma caused by sexual, family, institutional and systemic violence.

Editor Catrina Brown has brought together multiple cross-disciplinary authors, offering a wide-ranging critique of the pathologising, universalising and individualising trauma treatments promoted in mainstream biomedicalised, neoliberal and “postfeminist” trauma discourse, advocating instead for “alternative feminist and narrative approaches” (p. iii).

These alternative approaches build on historical feminisms’ contributions to the field, declining tendencies to “talk about trauma-informed work as if this were a new discovery ... detached from the important historical work of the women’s movement” (Brown & Tseris, 2024, p. 18). As someone writing this review from the perspective of lived experience and as a feminist narrative practitioner, this sentence resonated with me. In 1979 I joined the Rape Crisis Collective in Garramilla/Darwin, answering the phones and responding to women who had been raped. The role was grassroots women’s liberation work, unpaid and community-led: “by women and for women” was our catchcry. This book is a testament to the ways in which, in the decades since this catchcry framed our work, intersectional, poststructural and embodied feminist theory and praxis have transformed the limitations inherent in those earlier feminist understandings that imagined that as (white) “women” we could casually speak for all women:

When working with intersectional communities, primarily those who have not only experienced personal trauma, but collective trauma over the course of multiple generations, there is a need for validating the wisdom rooted in the collective understanding ... Technologies of joy, gathering, mutual aid, care circles, storytelling and witnessing are intrinsic to Black queer healing justice spaces and have been handed down as sacred to survival ... This form of care was not only birthed from our resilience, but is also rooted in the ancestral principles of Afrocentric teachings, which prioritizes an interconnected approach to life. (Turton, 2024, pp. 235–236)

Bundjalung/Goenpul writer Mareese Terare points to the

necessity of continuing to interrogate the limitations of white feminisms’ responses to trauma:

Service providers also need to identify and reflect on positions of privilege that may impact on clients ... First Nations women survivors of domestic violence need to be able to access human services that have a deep understanding of First Nation worldviews and the sociohistorical and political context that has impacted on First Nations people. (Terare, 2024, p. 231)

Both Terare and Nachshon Siritsky, a nonbinary, transgender descendant of Holocaust survivors, discuss the importance of addressing the structural issues related to intergenerational trauma, which continue to cause harm:

The focus cannot be on individuals through labelling, diagnosing and providing pharmaceutical treatment within a mainstream individualized biomedical lens, but instead on culturally appropriate community-based support ... deeper systemic justice is also desperately needed: the righting of historic wrongs through reconciliation and reparations. (Siritsky, 2024, p. 192)

Both these authors also argue that service organisations funded to respond to trauma must address the needs of workers with lived experience of collective, institutionalised, intergenerational trauma by

demonstrating their ability to decolonize aspects of their service delivery ... [and supporting] First Nations human service workers ... reclaiming their tribal strengths from over 65,000 years. (Terare, 2024, p. 231)

The 18 chapters and 27 authors in this collection deconstruct various historical, political, economic and structural contexts within which traumatic violence takes place, including within “trauma-informed” therapy and psychiatric settings, addiction services, chronic pain treatment and (dis)ability services, birthing centres, homelessness services, criminal justice settings, and in academic and training centres.

The collection critiques the so-called “evidence-based” expert knowledges and biomedical solutions favoured by dominant discourse, arguing that the focus on individual deficit, or the failings of individual brains and bodies, depoliticises trauma. The alternative knowledges and practices offered instead are grounded in poststructural, intersectional feminist and narrative therapy approaches.

All of the chapters made for interesting reading, and I will highlight a few that stood out to me.

Emma Tseris, drawing on the testimonies of women who have survived psychiatric incarceration writes:

Although we are living in an era of de-institutionalization, mental health service responses to emotional distress and differences continue to be shaped by coercion and carceral logics. (Tseris, 2024, p. 56)

When the only services available are “short-term, one-size-fits-all, decontextualized and biomedicalized” (p. 64)

they are often retraumatizing and revictimizing ... This means that not only do mental health services enact harm in the name of care, but also that women experience a further act of betrayal when they are advised that the service they have received is trauma-informed. (Tseris, 2024, p. 64)

Canadian authors MacDonald et al. interrogate ableist barriers within health care systems:

The binary split between normalcy and abnormalcy, through a biomedical lens of what constitutes a normal body and a body with impairments, further keeps (dis)Able persons trapped in internalized, neoliberal and structural webs of ableism where they are constantly being measured against biomedical standards of the ideal body, with the ultimate goal of returning them to as close to a normal state as possible. (MacDonald et al., 2024, p. 131)

Dupupet and Boileau (2024) ask critical questions about the social construction of motherhood embedded in the dominant patriarchal medical model, which can render birth trauma invisible.

The systemic structural inequities leading to youth homelessness, and the traumatic acts enacted on young people both prior to and after entering life on the streets, including being subject to discriminatory and racist policing practices, are unpacked by Karabanow et al., with the authors advocating for:

an integrative and outreach-based model that speaks to deep client-based engagement ... [including], community-based, supportive housing ... prioritizing the voices of homeless youth means being responsive to their needs; respectful, knowledgeable and considerate of their situations; non-judgmental and accepting

of differences; participatory and democratic; supportive throughout the long-term involvement; and non-bureaucratic and action-oriented. (Karabanow et al., 2024, p. 173)

Ross and Schumacher, arguing for community-based restorative justice practices, point out the limitations of carceral feminist approaches:

The initiation of [pro-policing] policies was largely the result of advocacy efforts by mainstream White feminists who hoped carceral responses to domestic violence would ultimately lower the rates and increase public awareness of domestic violence as a serious and criminal offence. (Ross & Schumacher, 2024, p. 269)

Instead, these pro-arrest, pro-charge and pro-prosecution policies have largely proven to exacerbate the trauma experienced by racially, socially and economically marginalised populations – including women themselves being charged when they have called police after being subjected to violence – and often leading to the invasive involvement of child welfare and state statutory bodies in their lives.

Tod Augusta-Scott describes the feminist-informed, narrative group-work program he developed for working with men who have used violence:

With the Safety and Repair approach, practitioners challenge both gender expectations and ideas that stem from past traumatic experiences. With this approach, practitioners support men not only to stop the abuse, but also to repair the harm they have caused. Clients are supported in repairing harm with both those who have hurt them and those whom they have hurt. (Augusta-Scott, 2024, p. 287)

However, exploring “the politics of emotions”, Nicole Moulding queries the effectiveness of men’s perpetrator programs, arguing that “such programs have been shown to have at best modest ... to poor outcomes” (2024, p. 253), and that more attention needs to be paid to “the role of gendered, socially embodied emotions and affects as drivers of violent and controlling gender practices in everyday relationships” (p. 249). Moulding argues that:

Gendered violence involves interactions between bodies that are profoundly visceral, intersubjective, embodied, socially situated and political. Yet the body – its sensations, desires, affects and emotions and its interactions with

other bodies that are also in the grip of culture – have received surprisingly little attention from researchers. (Moulding, 2024, p. 254)

Editor Catrina Brown has offered this volume as an act of “discursive resistance” unpacking the ways in which expert-centred so-called “evidence-based” models, including a narrow, individualising focus on neuroscience, have turned the 1970s feminist principle that “the personal is political” on its head, into “the political is personal” (p. 2).

When I first volunteered for the Rape Crisis Centre phonenumber in 1979, there was very little literature for me to turn to, and it’s been interesting, as I have made my way through this book, to reflect on the explosion of research and writing across the decades. And while I haven’t covered all the chapters in this inspiring volume – and no single volume could cover all the topics – I can see some important topics that are missing, including the *continuing* traumatic stress affecting persons subject to occupation or the violent conflict currently taking place in countries around the world (see Giacaman et al., 2011; Sehwal, 2005), or that suffered by the 110 million persons across the globe involuntarily displaced from their homes (Institute For Economics and Peace, 2024).

And while a range of community-led, alternative responses to trauma were outlined, there are other activist and community-led resources and perspectives that may be of interest to readers of this book, including transformative justice and abolitionist feminist contributions (see Crystal et al., 2024; Davis, 2023); First Nations narrative practitioners’ work (see Drahm-

Butler, 2017); and the plethora of freely available practice-based resources offered by Dulwich Centre, including courses on African-centred narrative practice; Sexualities, genders and narrative practice; and Feminisms, intersectionality and narrative practice.

The collective message of this book is loud and clear, and one with which I wholeheartedly agree: to resist neoliberal invitations to reduce persons affected by trauma into measurable KPIs and economic units of service provision; to resist the truth claims of universalising, “evidence-based” treatments; and to resist attempts at erasing the richness of diverse worldviews into narrow, pathologising, one-size-fits-all approaches, adopting instead a spirited championing of many, diverse approaches to promoting collective wellbeing and ever-changing expressions of individual freedoms.

Acknowledgments

I am writing from unceded Kurna country and pay respects to the First Nations peoples on all the lands of the readers and contributors to this publication around the globe. My heartfelt gratitude for your long-time and continuing care of the lands and waters on which we live. I acknowledge the groundbreaking work of Kurna Elder Aunty Barbara Wingard and Yankunytjatjara/Antikirinja woman Jane Lester in addressing First Nations trauma in Australia through “telling our stories in ways that make us stronger” (Wingard & Lester, 2001).

References

- Augusta-Scott, T. (2024). Men, trauma and gender: The safety and repair approach to address gender-based violence. In C. Brown (Ed.), *Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse* (pp. 287–308). Routledge.
- Brown, C. (Ed.). (2024). *Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003379591>
- Brown, C., & Tseris, E. (2024). Speaking the unspeakable: Discursive and political resistance to dominant trauma discourse and trauma work. In C. Brown (Ed.), *Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse* (pp. 15–42). Routledge.
- Crystal, Loz, Witt, Tameen, & Anne-lise. (2024, June 24). Abolition in community practice [Audio podcast episode]. In *Satellite Skies*. 3CR. <https://www.3cr.org.au/satelliteskies/episode/radio-episode-15>
- Drahm-Butler, T. (2017). Decolonising identity stories: Narrative practice through Aboriginal eyes. In B. Wingard, C. Johnson, & T. Drahm-Butler (Eds.), *Aboriginal narrative practice* (pp. 25–46). Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Dupupet, A., & Boileau, L. (2024). Birth matters: Understanding the impact of birth trauma on women's well-being. In C. Brown (Ed.), *Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse* (pp. 145–160). Routledge.
- Giacaman, R., Rabaia, Y., Nguyen-Gillham, V., Batniji, R., Punamäki, R. L., & Summerfield, D. (2011). Mental health, social distress and political oppression: The case of the occupied Palestinian territory. *Global Public Health*, 6(5), 547–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2010.528443>
- Institute For Economics and Peace. (2024). *2024 Global Peace Index*. <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/>
- Karabanow, J., Titterness, A., Hughes, J., Wu, H., & Good, S. (2024). The trauma of youth homelessness: Youth on the street. In C. Brown (Ed.), *Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse* (pp. 161–179). Routledge.
- MacDonald, J. E., Singh, R. C. B., Norris, S. E., & Goulden, A. (2024). Trauma, (dis)Ability and chronic pain: Taking up sufferer-informed practices. In C. Brown (Ed.), *Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse* (pp. 128–144). Routledge.
- Moulding, N. (2024). Understanding the politics of emotion in gendered violence: A feminist critique of trauma and cognitivist discourses in research and practice. In C. Brown (Ed.), *Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse* (pp. 249–267). Routledge.
- Ross, N., & Schumacher, A. (2024). Trauma- and violence-informed care: a restorative and just response to family violence. In C. Brown (Ed.), *Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse* (pp. 268–286). Routledge.
- Sehwail, M. (2005). Responding to continuing traumatic events. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (3 & 4), 54–56.
- Siritsky, N. (2024). From generation to generation: The legacy of trauma. In C. Brown (Ed.), *Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse* (pp. 180–199). Routledge.
- Terare, T. (2024). Always political – Indigeneity, colonization and trauma work reclaiming worldviews. In C. Brown (Ed.), *Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse* (pp. 291–234). Routledge.
- Tseris, E. (2024). The myth of trauma-informed mental health services. In C. Brown (Ed.), *Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse* (pp. 57–70). Routledge.
- Turton, T. (2024). *Collective care for collective trauma*. In C. Brown (Ed.), *Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse* (pp. 235–248). Routledge.
- Wingard, B., & Lester, J. (2001). *Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger*. Dulwich Centre Publications.