Abstract

PSYCHIC COLLAPSE AND TRAUMATIC DEFENSE: HOW THE MIND MEDIATES TRAUMA LIVING IN THE BODY

by

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The aim of this exploratory pilot study was to link psychoanalytic theories of trauma and its impact on the mind with psychobiological research of how trauma lives in the body. The study has expanded on prior research (Cramer, 2003) to evidence that defense mechanisms do in fact, moderate the relationship between stress and physiological response. Moreover, there may be individual differences in physiological response to traumatic stress. This study’s findings are consistent with this idea. This study goes further to identify the psychological concomitants of these individual differences within an adult population exposed to PTEs (potentially traumatic events), and their proclivity for using different defense mechanisms. Comparisons were made between adults with early onset of PTEs and late onset of PTEs. There is evidence to support that there may be distinct dissociative-like processes that differentiate the use of Projection and Identification for early onset individuals.

Results: Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that symptomatic adults who had been exposed to PTEs prior to age 14, and who tended to use Projection as their main defense (over Denial and Identification), demonstrated significantly lower physiological arousal than adults with late onset of PTEs. Those that used Identification as their main defense evidenced higher physiological arousal. Altogether, this study further evidenced the multi-determined nature of
posttraumatic response. Early exposure to PTEs may recalibrate defense use and/or stress response systems and must be viewed within a developmental psychopathology framework.