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Toxic Knowledge: Self-Alteration Through Child Abuse Work

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Abstract

The purpose of the present article is to examine the multiple ways in which the private lives of professionals are affected by involvement with child abuse intervention and prevention. Using a descriptive-phenomenological perspective and 40 in-depth interviews with professionals to present a model based on qualitative data, we studied the ways in which child abuse professionals conceptualize, understand, and integrate their experiences into their personal and family lives. We find that the process of internalizing child abuse knowledge occurs in two domains: One affirms or denies the existence of the phenomenon; the other concerns the strategies used to contend with the effects of working in abuse. Knowledge of child abuse is toxic, in the sense that it serves as a catalyst leading to the alteration of one's self-perception and parental identity. We present a typology of self-alteration resulting from child abuse knowledge and describe the mechanism of this change.

Keywords

child abuse, child abuse professionals, types of knowledge, identity formation, parental identity

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There is growing concern about child abuse in Israel and worldwide. To develop a broad understanding of the societal response to this phenomenon, we examined the experiences of professionals in the fields of health care, law enforcement, mental health, and education. Research has found that working with traumatized or suffering victims triggers, among other experiences, secondary and vicarious traumatization (Lynch & Lobo, 2012). Moreover, working with survivors of abuse has been found to have discernible effects that include changes in self-perception and identity, and in the structure of relationships with significant others (Bailey, Buchbinder, & Eisikovits, 2011). The purpose of the present study is to describe and analyze the ways in which professionals who work with child abuse victims are affected by their work. We ask how the experience of working with child abuse victims structures the professionals' perceptions of self and relationships with significant others in their personal lives. We achieve this by examining the mechanism by which professionals internalize knowledge about their work and integrate it into their perceptions of their own personal and family lives. The study uses a descriptive-phenomenological perspective and 40 in-depth qualitative interviews with professionals from various fields. All of the participating professionals had direct exposure to child victims of abuse.

Personal Consequences of Professional Work With Traumatized Victims

Research on professionals who work with traumatized or suffering victims, including abused children, has identified several salient processes associated with exposure to trauma, including secondary and vicarious traumatization, which have been found to have significant effects on the personal lives of these professionals (Anderson, 2000; Lynch & Lobo, 2012; Many & Osofsky, 2012; Richardson, 2011). Thus, individuals working within fields of trauma intervention have been found to undergo transformations in their personal and professional belief systems (Saakvitne, Pearlman, & the Staff of the Traumatic Stress Institute, 1996; Sabo, 2006), and their views of themselves and of the world at large were altered (Najjar, Davis, Beck-Coon, & Doebbeling, 2009). Such transformations are believed to relate to the way knowledge about child abuse is translated into understanding.

The Transformation Process: From Knowing to Understanding Child Abuse

Research has suggested differences in the manner that knowledge is organized (e.g., Rabinowitz & Goldberg, 1995; Wyatt & Rabinowitz, 2010).

Indeed, theories of knowledge are categorized by the ways they conceptualize the relationship between knowledge and understanding (Iran-Nejad & Stewart, 2010). Three important theoretical approaches address this relationship. Everyday language theory argues that facts become understanding through a linear process that begins with the individual's exposure to facts taught by someone else (socialization), followed by a process of repetition, reproduction, comprehension, analysis, synthesis, application, and evaluation (Shulman, 2002). In contrast, symbol processing theory suggests a two-dimensional structure in which knowledge constitutes one dimension and cognitive processes another (Krathwohl, 2002). Born out of dissatisfaction with the explanatory limitations of the previous two theories (Harnad, 1990; Searle, 1980), revelation-reflection theory argues for the primacy of cognitive structures over facts (Bowden, Jung-Beeman, Fleck, & Kounios, 2005). Knowledge becomes available to the individual in the form of insight or revelation that emerges as an outcome of intelligible cognitive structures extant prior to the eureka moment. To "understand," people first construct a suitable cognitive model and only then are able to acknowledge and accept facts (Lehrer, 2008). According to this theory, acquiring knowledge is much like placing the missing pieces of a puzzle (new facts/professional knowledge) into an already existing mold (cognitive structure). In this article, we show how knowledge of child abuse transforms into understanding.

Connected Knowing

Gilgun (2008) furthers the theoretical discussion of how knowledge becomes understanding by specifically delineating the lived experience of the transformation of her own understanding of violence, an understanding that was gained through her work as a researcher of interpersonal violence (IPV). In describing the price entailed in acquiring a sense of the experience of violence, she depicts the process of coming to grips with emotional pain and fear for her physical and psychological safety and survival. Most significantly, this reflective phenomenological experience enabled her to understand violence within her own self, an experience referred to in the literature as "connected knowing." Connected knowing is described as the transformation of knowledge and experience into understanding.

Thus, the social, contextual perspective of "connected knowing" contributes to the discussion of how the relationship between knowledge and understanding is conceptualized. Reflexivity, as a component part of connected knowing, is the assumption that researchers themselves are as much a part of the research as the participants, and reflexivity is one means by which this transformational process occurs. In this body of research, connected knowing

is achieved through the alteration of the emotional and cognitive structures of self and identity (Belenky, Clinchy-McVicker, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Gilgun, 2008). Proposed by a number of feminist scholars (e.g., Belenky et al., 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984), connected knowing is the concept that individuals use their own selves—emotions, cognitions, memories, and personal experiences—to gain understanding. Gilgun reflects on the state of being in continual negotiation between wanting to listen to the phenomenology of violence and being horrified by how it sounds. A researcher, immersed in the field of violence like the participants in our study, understands violence through connected knowing.

Although the various theoretical approaches describe different relations between knowledge and understanding, they all agree that intelligible cognitive structures are vital elements in the process of transforming raw facts into comprehended knowledge. Through relating to one's own experiential knowledge in the field of child abuse, a series of cognitive structures emerge by which knowledge is transformed into a sense of understanding which goes beyond mere knowledge. Analyzing this process of internalization is the major aim of the study.

The present study focuses on this acquired "connected knowing," which is addressed in previous research in the context of professionals working with child victims of violence. We aim to examine how working with child victims affects and structures one's "connected knowing" as seen from an insider's perspective, regardless of one's personal status (married, divorced, number, and ages of children) or professional orientation (mental health, law enforcement, medical, or education perspective). Specifically, we seek to present common and comparable emerging patterns that are relevant to all professionals working with child victims; we explore what can be learned from this emerging conceptual structure of "connected knowing" and its effect on the professionals' personal relationships. To achieve these goals, we utilized qualitative methodology to collect and analyze data from professionals working with child victims of abuse and neglect.

Method

The present article aims to contribute an insider's view of the ways in which the professional experiences and roles of child abuse workers interact with their personal and family lives. Our research is guided by a descriptive-phenomenological-psychological perspective. This view allows us to capture the lived experiences of participants and conceptualize them, offering insights into how individuals in particular contexts make sense of a given

phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Spinelli, 2005). Phenomenology involves the use of thick description and close analysis of lived experience to understand how meaning is created through embodied perceptions. In phenomenology, reality is constructed through embodied experience. Through close examination of individual experiences, phenomenological analysts seek to capture the meaning and common features or essences of an experience or event (Sokolowski, 2000). The study aims to illustrate how the experience of working in the field of child abuse is conceptualized and internalized and becomes part of a changed self (Giorgi, 2012).

Sample

Participants in the present study were a purposeful sample (Patton, 2002) of 40 child abuse professionals, including educators (10), medical professionals (e.g., physicians and nurses; 10), law enforcement officers (10), and social work and mental health professionals (10). Purposeful sampling provides access to multiple perspectives, both within and between professions, ranging from line workers to policy makers and high-level administrators, who were distributed geographically throughout the country. The interviewees were between 30 and 70 years of age, and their work experience in the field of child abuse ranged from 3 to 46 years. All of the participants were selected for the study, based on and due to their direct experience with child victims of abuse and violence. The criterion of our purposeful sample was direct and intensive involvement in intervention by the professionals with the child victims. Professionals were selected from diverse occupational groups to represent the widest possible variation of professional goals and ideologies as well as modus operandi.

Data collection consisted of in-depth interviews, using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide covered several content categories and was used in interviewing all four groups of professionals included in the sample. The content categories included definitions of abuse, belief systems regarding abuse, perceptions about disclosure and reporting, the challenges of reporting, and the overall challenges that the professionals face in their daily work. The informed content categories of the interview guide were based on both a literature review and initial in-depth pilot interviews with key informants. The interview guide categories were used solely for the purpose of collecting data from informants. The data collected were analyzed and analytic themes were identified which did not overlap with the interview guide categories. The interviews lasted between 1 and 1½ hr. They were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

Data analysis included open coding to identify the units of meaning, followed by cross-case analysis in which segments from each interview were condensed until core themes emerged (Patton, 2002). In the first stage, the interviews were read several times until the researchers felt familiar and fully immersed in the experiences represented in the texts under scrutiny. Such repeated reading enabled in-depth empathetic acquaintance with how the participants experienced their working lives in the field of child abuse. In the second stage, the authors were focused on identifying and organizing the relevant units of meaning from the interviews (Roulston, 2010). The units of meaning were the recurring statements that greatly influenced the participants' interpretations. When no new issues arose, saturation was reached, and the stage was concluded. In the third stage, the similar units of meaning were clustered together by comparing them and synthesizing them into themes that constitute the study findings (McLeod, 2011). In this manner, themes were formed. To ensure inter-coder reliability, the researchers each performed thematic content analysis separately, regarding the content of the themes and the interpretation of their meanings. Subsequently, they compared the individual analyses, discussed disagreements, and looked for conformity regarding theme content and interpretation of meaning. We rejected themes considered to make minor contributions to understanding the examined phenomenon.

The analytic themes are based on a range of accounts of professionals holding various attitudes about child abuse. For example, the theme "It can't be that it happened," focusing on the negotiation of the reality of abuse, is a collection of all the different accounts which fall under a unified spectrum ranging from denial to acceptance of the abuse. This spectrum is the content of our first theme. Two themes emerge from the data, which serve as the foundation domains of our phenomenological model (Giorgi, 2012).

Trustworthiness

In the present study, credibility is accomplished through the systematic presentation of quotes and their analysis, allowing the reader to evaluate the ways in which reality was constructed and themes that were derived from the interviews (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992; Maxwell, 2012). In qualitative research, the emphasis shifts from validity to validation. Rather than presenting a finished product, researchers describe the process by which they arrived at the specific constructions underlying the study, enabling readers to make their own judgments and to validate or reject the interpretations suggested (Angen, 2000; Patton, 2002). For example, the theme "We pay a

price for our work" is presented in the following manner: We begin by presenting the context of the information concerning the research participant; we provide the quote; and we analyze the quote, including its context, structure, and relationship to the unified theme and with the subsequent quote. This detailed presentation of findings is open to scrutiny by the reader and serves to validate the researcher's systematic work. The focus in this type of research is on in-depth subjective analysis of experiences rather than on generalization. That said, the analysis provides solid exploratory ground for building a heuristic model on which studies aimed at rigorous generalizations can be based (Babbie, 2004).

Ethics

The study received the approval of the Ethics Committee at the University of Haifa. The participants received a detailed explanation of the study aims. To receive their informed consent and to encourage trust and security in the research process, they were given a paper to sign, explaining the research aims, and asserting their rights, as well as ensuring confidentiality (Patton, 2002). Participants were reassured that in no way will the information affect their professional or organizational status and strict confidentiality will be observed both toward their employers and their families.

Findings

Analysis of the data reveals two primary themes that shed light on the ways in which working with child abuse interacts with the personal lives of professionals. The themes presented here represent majority patterns and were seen in at least 2/3 of the cases. The narratives selected and analyzed are representative illustrations of the two primary, majority themes that emerged from the data analysis. The first theme addresses the ontological status of the knowledge of child abuse obtained by professionals, focusing on the question "What is there to know about abuse?" This theme ranges from denial to acceptance of the reality of abuse. We present and analyze the various expressions that fall between these two poles of the spectrum. The second theme addresses the epistemological status of the knowledge and focuses on the question "How do I handle what I know?" or "What do I do with it?" We explore and analyze the ways in which professionals contend with this knowledge and how it affects their selves, and their private lives. This theme reveals a broad spectrum ranging from separation of professional and personal worlds to total enmeshment.

"It Can't Be That It Happened": What Is There To Know About Abuse? The Negotiation Between Denial, Distance, and Acceptance

This theme presents the way in which professionals acknowledge and relate to the child abuse phenomenon. The participants' attitudes toward child abuse revealed a range of positions from denial to distancing and total acceptance.

Rafi is the principal of a large school with several branches in a city in Northern Israel. The students under his supervision range from nursery school and kindergarten to high school.

Rafi is representative of an extreme case of distancing, which borders on denial of the existence of child abuse:

> An abused child is like a malfunction. I know that it exists, and every time it saddens me again. Sometimes there is anger: Why is it like that? Why does it need to be like that? I can actually attest to the negative or opposite case, since thank God we have had no cases of extreme abuse or violence. I pray all the time that it stays this way; that it will not happen to us and it will not be here.

For Rafi, child abuse is a puzzling and distant "malfunction." In his worldview, society should function free of abuse. When it does surface, abuse is perceived as an unplanned and random error, similar to a mechanical malfunction. Abuse belongs to another, unknown world, and its intrusion on our own creates a measure of discomfort. The "real" world of his experience is presented as an extreme opposite of the surprising, chaotic occurrence of child abuse. According to Rafi, violence appears not to have been a part of his professional life as a principal, and he hopes that this will always be the case. Abuse is a form of failure that occurs only to others and only in other places. Rafi's position can be viewed as a form of NIMBY ("not in my backyard"). Although he does not show total ignorance of the existence of abuse in society at large, he is certain that it does not happen within his realm. The only action to be taken to ensure the continued absence of abuse in his world is prayer for the continued sameness of belonging to a benevolent and well-functioning world. This represents not only his wishful thinking but also an underlying belief that abuse and violence cannot exist in his schools, or rather in his territory. By excluding abuse from his inner space, he makes it impalpable, unreal, and therefore foreign to his "province of meaning" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973).

Susan is a high-ranking educational administrator. Among her multiple responsibilities is the development and implementation of violence prevention programs in schools. Susan is a representative voice of professionals

who negotiate the ways of incorporating knowledge regarding child abuse in their own daily experiences:

> I can relate to this issue [child abuse] as a person, and after many years of professional dealings with this phenomenon, I know that it in fact exists. I think that even I could slip, go down that slippery slope of saying "it's not exactly that . . . " But I know that the phenomenon exists. The closer it gets to your own house and your own family, or to close relationships, those universal reactions pop up . . . Like "It can't be that it happened." "It can't be that it happened to my best friend." I think that this is something, the closer it gets, those denial mechanisms come into play. I assume it happens to me too.

Susan emphasizes her efforts to recognize the mere reality of child abuse. She admits that such recognition took time and professional experience to achieve, and that it is still tenuous. She conceives of child abuse as a type of evasive and intangible knowledge because the closer it reaches to oneself, the stronger the need to deny it is. In other words, Susan describes an automatic mechanism beyond her control that springs into action when coming close to knowledge or experience of abuse. Unlike Rafi, she does not deny the existence of abuse in her world, but rather describes the struggle inherent in recognizing and integrating such knowledge.

Boaz is a senior emergency room pediatrician in a large hospital in the center of Israel. He also serves as a physician on a multidisciplinary child protection team and an educator for medical students learning about work in the field of child abuse. His relationship with knowledge about abuse is one of learning and erasing to manage the distance between himself and the level of exposure:

> I made a rule for myself nine years ago when I finished my residency: I don't speak at home about the things that I see every day, not about the leukemia that I diagnosed in the E.R. and not about the girl who was raped. As far as I am concerned, it's the same thing, that's a disease and that's a disease. I detach myself from it at the end of the day. It doesn't always work, but I try. Maybe I am defective, but that's the way I define and explain it to [medical] students in my lectures. They ask me, "How can you cope with it?" And I tell them: 600 Shekels every half a year; a pair of running shoes clears your head best. Again, maybe I am insane, since a day or so after I see the worst type of case [child abuse] I need people to remind me who is the patient when his name is mentioned. I delete everything at the end of the day. I go for a run, clean my head, and think that at least I live a healthy and balanced life.

Boaz recognized at an early stage in his career that the factuality of child abuse would prove impossible to ignore. Because accepting this knowledge

is a burden, he developed a tactic that allows him to move back and forth between denial and acceptance. To achieve this, Boaz has developed multiple coping strategies. First, characteristic of the medical model, Boaz minimizes the potential emotional hardship of accepting the actuality of child abuse by equating it with other forms of disease, including those which are purely biological. Such a classification allows him to detach himself emotionally and to treat abuse from a comfortable distance, not allowing it to attain his conception of self. The second strategy that helps blur the acceptance of child abuse knowledge is to delete all relevant thoughts and actions at the end of each day. This is achieved by means of running, a stress releasing exercise that he endows with somewhat mystical powers. He even recommends this method to the next generation of physicians. Boaz considers his ability to erase what he has seen and heard to be a sign of normalcy rather than of pathology. For him, self-reflection is a way to forget what needs to be forgotten, allowing him to maintain a healthy balance.

We have presented and analyzed the range of possible professional attitudes toward child abuse, from denial to acceptance. The next theme explores the ways in which acknowledgment of child abuse is understood and internalized.

"We Pay a Price for Our Work!" How Do I Handle What I Know? Between Separation and Enmeshment

In this theme we included participants' descriptions of the ways in which knowledge acquired in this line of work affects their lives. Their varied strategies for dealing with the knowledge acquired and for assimilating it ranged from complete separation of what they came to know professionally and personally, to total enmeshment of the two. The following accounts represent salient strategies that fall within this spectrum.

Tzipora works as a therapist for children in a shelter for women and their children who are victims of domestic violence. She represents an extreme case of separating the personal and professional realms and of keeping the knowledge and experience of child abuse as far removed as possible from her children and her family life:

> I learned a long time ago to separate between my worlds here. When I enter here [the shelter], I feel that I enter another world. It's an area of my life that is very significant to me, where I spend a great number of hours during the day. When I go home I try to "let the curtain of that show fall" from that realm and to be in another place. No doubt, there is crossover, and it is even difficult for me to talk about the crossover because I try to leave the things behind. I often

> think to myself when I sit with my girls what a great fortune it is that they were born in the place that they were, and then immediately I begin to think what a misfortune it is for other people who were born into a completely different type of world; that's what makes the difference, where you are born. This is what establishes your whole life. How important it is to be born in a place that allows you mental health. And how can I, since I possess the abilities and energies, give to my daughters the very best that I can give, how can I give them the good that I received as a gift, that richness? How can I give that to children who are not my biological children, but whom I love very much? They are children of the world and I have a moral responsibility toward them.

Tzipora intentionally and consciously builds a strategy to separate her world at home from that at work. Without minimizing the significance of work in her life, she actively constructs a wall that serves to organize her world. In her view, the world is comprised of two clear and distinct ethical realms, one positive, and the other negative. Whereas work contains the malevolence of the world (violence, distress, misfortune), personal, family life symbolizes goodness. Tzipora constructs her worldview by postulating predetermination by birth. It is the forces of destiny that establish whether one falls into a life of enrichment or into an impossible and determined fate of depravity, which ultimately leads to an imbalanced and unhealthy life. Nevertheless, one can help those less fortunate, which Tzipora does through her identity as mother, extending it from a private into a public and symbolic identity, a missionary-like service provided for the sake of the psychological health of all abused children. The result of this process is the construction of a clear sense of self, as demonstrated by the use of the distinct and active first person pronoun, "I." In other words, the symbolic motherhood identity and the sense of self merge and cooperate to gain a measure of control over the perceived reality of child abuse. Although Tzipora does not ignore the factuality of abuse, she remains intact in her positive world and elects to influence the world of abuse from a position of power, positivity, and control. She is an active "I" who has a social mission that she pursues, and she is in full control of both the role and of its boundaries relative to her private life.

There are cases in which professional child abuse knowledge is experienced as beneficial to the fields of personal and professional experience alike. Sara, a police officer who serves in a domestic violence unit, exemplifies this position:

> Look, there are cases that are really shocking and I take them with me. That is to say, you don't completely detach yourself, as if there is a wall and that's it. It comes home. There were a few truly extreme cases [of child abuse] that I came home with and I sat down with my husband and told him about the cases,

> since it was so difficult for me and I needed to let it out. I get home and I look at my children and I say, how can you beat your children? How? Even a slap! It is inconceivable. It makes you more aware at home of your own children. I think this position makes me more receptive to them. Not to ignore things. All the things that come up in investigations, I think of those children, and then you get home and you are more attentive to your own children. I think it has turned me into a better mother.

Sara presents two strategies for coping with the accumulated experience with child abuse. Initially, she airs her challenging daily experience in the secure and intimate environment of her home. Second, she shows increased awareness toward children in both her personal and professional lives. Engagement and motherhood activities with her own children stimulate increased sensitivity to the child victims that she encounters in her work as an officer. Conversely, the act of reflecting upon these victims stimulates the relevant parts of motherhood and improves them: attentiveness, receptiveness, and awareness. Sara's worldview is constructed in an organized, orderly, and contained manner that suggests an integrative sense of self resulting from interactive effects of the two words in which she participates. In sum, exposure to child abuse knowledge has improved motherhood through enhanced awareness on one hand, and simultaneously it has stimulated the construction of a more sophisticated professional self on the other.

Our next participant transforms emotions into behavioral scripts. Shirley is a high-ranking director of a child protection service in Israel. She describes the implications of child abuse knowledge on her relationship with her own children:

> It's not simple. Let's say that I am much more aware than other people about what can happen in every place. The extent of naivety in me is very low and my eyes look at things suspiciously in all types of occurrences. I do know how to create a balance that allows me to live with it and allows my children to live. I am fearful, and it was on the table throughout the years in my home. My children know my work and that made it easier to talk about it. They would tease me: "Yes mom, on the yearly trip when I go to the bathroom I won't be last in line, and I'll be careful." They are aware of everything, and I even feel lucky that I exposed them to these difficult topics and raised their awareness; their awareness is very high and their sensitivity is very high.

Shirley admits to living with fear and anxiety about her children. Contending with child abuse knowledge has been translated beyond emotional reaction into action-oriented approaches within her family. Shirley integrates suspicion derived from her work into her sense of self by the

construction of a new, additional "pair of eyes" through which she "sees" potential abuse in every circumstance of her environment. Furthermore, she both engages her children and takes pride in teaching them to adopt this worldview. Using an open approach to parenthood, Shirley has socialized her children to be continually on guard, alert, and suspicious, transforming them into "young child-abuse professionals."

In some cases, the need to endlessly guard your children escalates to the point of diffusion of the boundaries between victim and perpetrator, which in turn leads to loss of trust in self and reality. Ilana is an extreme example of this reaction. She serves as a police officer of child abuse investigations:

> These are the dynamics of home life: I had a personal situation when my son was three. He came out of the shower and walked over the carpet, wet. I grabbed him with a towel and my husband was nearby, he gave him the shower. It was in our bedroom. I grabbed him with the towel and lay him down on the bed and dried him off. He said to my husband: "Daddy, Mommy is 'sleeping me.'" Listen, at that moment I ran away. I panicked. I started to tremble and cry. Not because I hurt my son, I didn't hurt him, I didn't do anything to him. But the blurriness between the fact that you read all day long child abuse investigation files and the fact that my own son said, "Mommy is 'sleeping me . . . '" This can reach the kindergarten teacher, and then . . . This is a script that you cannot escape. This was frightening . . . There was this father who raped his daughter, he tells me that I don't understand what it is like to love your own child, and he loves his daughter very much. And I'm driving home and I know that my husband also loves my daughters very very very much, so the boundaries become blurred. It is difficult for me to send my kids to other people's homes. That's it, that's the way I am today.

Ilana has lost trust in certain aspects of her social and psychological life, including trusting significant others such as her husband, her community, and possibly even herself. Her experience is that of an abyss of uncertainty, in which previously known concepts of domestic home life, community, parenthood, and couplehood become infected with the possibility of violence. This loss of certainty leaves her insecure, frightened and vulnerable to suggestibility. In such reality, a rape offender can impose his twisted definition of love, and in the absence of clear boundaries undermine her trust in her husband. Ilana seems to fear not only the possibility of herself committing an abusive act but also the script and consequences of becoming a suspect. She has been overpowered by abuse knowledge, which has become her dominant reality both at work and at home. Her admission, "that's the way I am," attests to the fact that she has accepted her changed sense of self to the all-encompassing fusion of her worlds into a single reality dominated by concern for abuse.

Child abuse knowledge stimulates a variety of reactions that take many forms, including a separation of personal and professional worlds (constructing a contained awareness); the enactment of defensive and protective behaviors toward children; socializing children to the reality of child abuse; expressions of anxiety and depression; and the enmeshment of the worlds of private life and work. All these are enacted through two primary constructs: the sense of self and parental identity.

Discussion

The findings of the present study show two different themes that shed light on the ways in which knowledge of abuse infiltrates the personal lives of professionals. The first theme has to do with the ontological status of this knowledge; for example, what is there to know about abuse? Our findings reveal a broad spectrum of perspectives ranging between denial and acceptance. The existence of such a variety of viewpoints regarding the measure of concreteness of child abuse reveals, more than anything else, that its factuality is not easily acknowledged even by those engaged in the intervention into this phenomenon.

The second theme has to do with the ways in which professionals contend with the existence of this phenomenon in their social realities, that is, the epistemological status of the knowledge. As shown, once child abuse is acknowledged and accepted by professionals, their ways of dealing with this knowledge cover a broad spectrum ranging from the separation of professional and personal life to the complete enmeshment of the two. The outcome of integrating such knowledge in daily practice is a profound change of the social and psychological realities, specifically with regard to parental identity and the sense of self.

We offer the following model which has emerged from the data of the present study. It graphically summarizes the relationship between toxic knowledge and alteration of the self (Figure 1).

The flowchart above shows a typology of personal reactions to exposure to child abuse knowledge. Each type of reaction contains a potential alteration of the sense of self and of parental identity. In some cases each self-reorganization can produce benefits, but it always imposes burdens. *The rejecting type* demonstrates forms of distancing from abusive knowledge. These individuals do not conceive of child abuse as a social problem but rather as a disease, an educational failure, or a personal psychological problem. Once the phenomenon is personal and not social, the sense of responsibility toward treating abuse is distanced and the victims remain silenced, further victimized by the professionals' lack of ability or willingness to accept

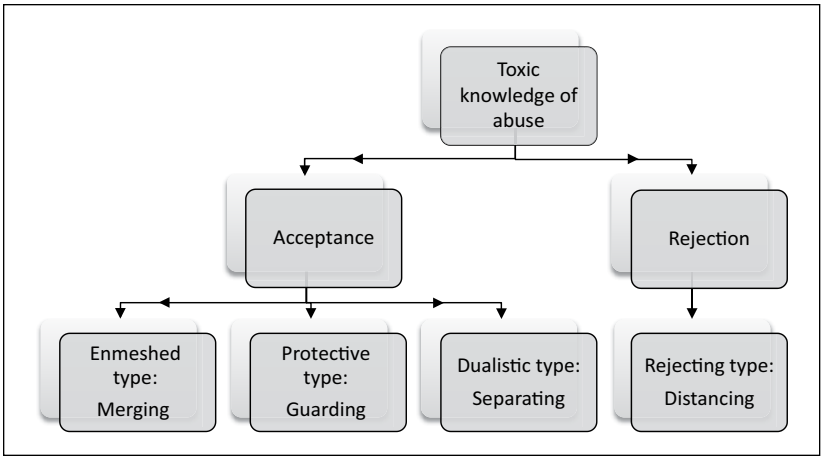

Figure 1. Toxic knowledge and the alteration of the self.

the reality of abuse. *The dualistic type* acknowledges the toxic knowledge but keeps it clear and distinct, present only in a foreign world. This separation protects one from admitting violence into one's inner self, helping maintain an intact sense of self. One can offer help in the abusive world and remain shielded from its potentially negative effects. The price of adopting such an approach is the absence of flexibility in one's worldview, which helps maintain this separation and in turn leads inevitably to a deterministic and rigid outlook. *The protective types* seek integration of the consequences of toxic knowledge into their personal lives by either protecting their family and children from the reality of abuse or by teaching and socializing them to protect themselves. No doubt, this type is the most adaptive one and provides individuals with the opportunity to learn how to balance simultaneous negative and positive effects. Nevertheless, these individuals express anxiety and melancholy. *The enmeshed type* experiences an infiltration of toxic knowledge that causes confusion, fear, and anxiety in one's personal life. In extreme cases, this permeation is so massive that it results in a collapse of the sense of self and parental identity and leads to a distressed existence, in a scenario in which all actions and thoughts are governed and controlled by the reality of abuse. The typology that emerged from the analysis presented is neither exhaustive nor exclusive.

However, more than anything else, these types reveal that one cannot remain unchanged when exposed to child abuse. Knowledge of abuse seems to carry a type of venom that forces a professional to react, adjust, and alter

his or her identity and sense of self. The profound alteration of self that is triggered eventually results in an existential change in one's way of being in the world (Heidegger, 1962) to contain and assimilate the poisonous blow. We suggest, therefore, that knowledge of child abuse is "toxic."

Conclusion

Our findings indicate that toxic knowledge associated with child abuse will ultimately affect one's self-perception and identity. Our participants demonstrate that one's personal understanding and experience with child abuse fosters a form of "connected knowing," and thus through one's own sense of self—parental identity specifically—one understands child abuse. In the current study we demonstrated the *mechanism* by which this takes place: Once a professional is exposed to child abuse, her identity (in particular as a parent) and self-perception are gradually altered to the point of permanent change. Recognizing and clarifying the mechanism by which this occurs is central to understanding the ways in which assistance can be best provided to professionals in this field.

Furthermore, the present research suggests that knowledge transforms into understanding in a way associated with the "revelation-reflection" theoretical framework (e.g., Bowden et al., 2005), an approach which suggests that understanding occurs when factual knowledge is organized into adapted cognitive structures (Iran-Nejad & Stewart, 2010). Such is the case in the present study, when an existing cognitive mold—parenthood, identity, and a sense of self—is altered to adjust to toxic knowledge of abuse. In other words, one's identity, in this case parenthood, is the cognitive structure by which child abuse knowledge trickles down from a mere fact in a distant location "out there" to an inner reality that can turn one's life upside-down, to the point where the only reality one recognizes is that of abuse.

Research has already identified the transformation of knowledge and experience to understanding through alterations in gender identity (Belenky et al., 1997) and through incorporation of violence into one's self-concept (Gilgun, 2008). The current study strengthens this argument by offering another instance: In this case, integrating experience and knowledge of child abuse alters one's concept of parental identity.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Professional exposure to child abuse exacts a heavy toll of secondary and vicarious traumatization that affects personal lives in a profound manner (Lynch & Lobo, 2012). The present study provides a high-resolution view of

the process and the mechanism by which this personality alteration occurs. We should therefore consider the broad consequences of placing professionals into the field of child abuse as similar to those of placing soldiers on the front line in war. Both groups pay a price and are permanently changed. We must develop the infrastructure of a supportive network for all child abuse professionals that reflects awareness of the potentially grave implications and personal ramifications this work has on the professionals' personal and family lives. In particular, the vulnerable parenthood identity of child abuse professionals must be considered and targeted for the development and implementation of supportive psychological interventions.

Moreover, we argue that knowledge becomes understanding through the alteration of the cognitive structure of parenthood identity. It may be that identity and the sense of self are key cognitive structures in the transformation process of knowledge into understanding. Further research should examine whether this mechanism can be applied generally to the process of understanding. If this is indeed the case, a significant contribution can be made to theories of knowledge acquisition.

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