HELPLESSNESS IN DEPRESSION: THE UNBEARABLE RIDDLE OF THE OTHER
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From early on in his thinking, Sigmund Freud was attentive to the issue of helplessness in psychic functioning. Whereas Freud linked helplessness primarily to the affect of anxiety, later theoreticians like Edward Bibring conceptualized it as linked to depressive affects. The idea that helplessness is connected to depression is now well established in both psychiatry and psychology. Within a contemporary clinical psychoanalytic perspective, too, helplessness continues to be an important topic.

The framework in psychiatry and psychology within which helplessness is most often studied is the learned helplessness paradigm. Based on laboratory experiments with animals in the 1960s and 1970s, Seligman (1972) observed that animals experiencing inescapable events such as electric shocks, which no actions can control, develop dramatic symptoms of helplessness (e.g., passivity and despair). This phenomenon of "learned helplessness" has since then served as a paradigmatic model for studying human depression. Psychologists have elaborated the original learned helplessness model, which explicitly referred to psychoanalytic thinking, in a cognitive direction. The focus shifted toward the explanatory or attributional style a person uses in dealing with negative life events. A depressogenic cognitive style, in which negative events are interpreted internally in stable global terms, was considered an essential mediating variable for the development of depression. Recently, critical voices have pointed out the limitations of this dominant paradigm.

We studied helplessness using a different approach, that of narrative inquiry. We start, then, from a most interesting branch of research in current psychology, one unknown to many psychiatrists and clinical psychologists.

Narrative inquiry addresses the particular ways in which people use language and narratives in creating and elaborating their mental realities. A basic assumption is that people construct representations of the world by using speech. More specifically, narrative research assumes that language is the tool we use in building mental constructions of what is going on in the "real." By incorporating language,
and by using it the way we do, we organize reality and build a body of knowledge of how things are. In this respect, narrating is a most important human activity. By means of discourse, humans structure their subjective world and build frameworks organizing and expressing their understanding of aspects of reality. In this way, we attempt to make sense of our experiences and attribute meaning to what we call reality. Narrative inquiry considers the inner logic of how people narrate on this reality, or on aspects of it. Narrative inquiry maps aspects of reality as they are perceived and interpreted from the perspective of the narrating subject. Noteworthy is the implication that narrative analyses do not examine the extent to which narratives adequately represent an outside “objective reality,” or their consequent degree of correctness. People’s subjective use of narratives is what this research focuses on.

The study we report here addresses how a specific group of adolescents narrated their experiences of helplessness. By studying transcripts of semistructured clinical interviews of an hour or two with psychiatrically hospitalized youngsters, we map the logic of youngsters’ explanations as they talk about experiences of helplessness, and examine how they embed their helplessness in broader story lines. We studied interview data from forty youngsters, all hospitalized in a psychiatric inpatient unit at the time of the interviews. These youngsters were admitted to the hospital for serious (and often multiple) suicide attempts, school failure, and/or chronic escalating difficulties within their families. The research question we explored is, Can repetitive patterns or types of narrative construction be found in patients’ accounts of experienced helplessness?

In analyzing the data we first read the transcripts, systematically identifying specific accounts of helplessness. In identifying helplessness accounts we took into account two criteria: (1) the protagonist (the “I” referred to by the narrator) presents him- or herself as being or having been in a situation in which he or she does not grasp what is going on, or does not know how to manage the situation; (2) the protagonist gives accounts of overwhelming and upsetting affects offering evidence of mild to severe despair or embarrassment. Applying this definition we located all episodes in the interviews in which helplessness is expressed. Following is an illustrative example of an interview segment that we consider indicative of helplessness.
I couldn’t concentrate on anything; I couldn’t read anything. . . . I would end up getting so bored (component 2) that when I tried to do anything I couldn’t force myself to do anything I’d just be really bored. . . . I was just really, really unhappy (component 2). . . . I sort of wondered why things weren’t going right but I couldn’t come up with any answers (component 1). . . . the logic gets sort of pushed aside and your emotions take over.

In the second stage of our analyses we located and highlighted the broader narrative contexts or episodes in which the helplessness accounts are embedded. In a third and last stage, we systematically studied all broader episodes, guided by the goal of gaining insight about the ways in which each particular account was represented.

In the 40 interviews, we detected 26 accounts of helplessness located in the stories given by 12 adolescents. As we studied the narrative lines that adolescents built around their accounts of helplessness, we discerned three types of narrative composition, which we characterize as three different story lines.

In our poster we discuss only the most dominant of these constructions. In this story line the protagonist links an experience of helplessness to disturbing encounters with others. Four sequences have been discerned in this narrative composition (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sequential steps implied in Type 1 narrative construction around accounts of helplessness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Interaction with a significant other.</th>
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<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Significant other engages in an unexpected action.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>Effort of understanding the other's action. Conclusion: an unspoken law has been transgressed / no stable law can be attributed to the other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>Confrontation with a riddle at the level of the other's intentions: he/she appears to be threatening.</td>
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First of all, an interaction takes place with someone the protagonist considers a significant figure—someone who is trusted and in whom one believes. Second, the significant other engages in an unexpected action. It is as if there is a short circuit in the relationship between the other and the protagonist, which causes tension in the latter. In a third step, an effort of understanding the other’s action takes place. However, the action does not at all fit with the protagonist’s ideas on how the other should be, and thus leads to outrage. The protagonist either concludes that an unspoken law has been transgressed, or that no stable law can be attributed to the other’s behavior. In the fourth and last step, the
protagonist expresses ideas about the nature of the other. The protagonist feels confronted by a riddle or enigma at the level of the other’s intentions. It is no longer obvious to the protagonist that the other has good intentions. He or she now appears to be threatening.

An example of this type of narrative construction around experiences of helplessness can be found in the interview with Billy (fictional name), a youngster troubled by the divorce of his parents (step 1): “My mother and father got divorced and I, like it was, I was in the middle.” What he defines as disrupting is not the divorce as such, but the particular way in which his parents involved him in their troubles. “My mother or father they’d tell me something, about what was going on and everything” (step 2). The way in which they shared details of their conflict is painful and intolerable to him (step 3): “It was hard on me... I don’t want to have them telling me what’s going on and on, I know it’s, being divorced they don’t get along, but they don’t, like say, if my mother calls up I don’t want my father to say, well, she was complaining about this or that, or my mother, if my father calls or something like that.” Billy narrates that he was particularly disgusted by the idea that he ought to decide issues his parents couldn’t decide, but that were in fact their responsibility (step 3). “I was supposed to make a choice between living between my mother or my father. I couldn’t.” After narrating the intolerable responsibility he says he is burdened with, Billy describes his father as intrusive (step 4): “It just seemed like he was getting on my back. I thought it was like picking on me.”

This fourfold structure of narrative explanation could be discerned in the accounts of eleven participants. In total we observed it fourteen times in its complete version, and six times in a shortened version.

We conclude that in this dominant narrative construction a disturbing confrontation with another is pivotal: the other’s intentions are obscure; the protagonist is frightened; but he or she does not know what to do. The protagonist’s helplessness arises as a direct effect of not knowing how to manage the “unbearable riddle” in the midst of the other’s intentions.

This result implies that therapeutic interventions with respect to helplessness should not focus solely on mental states, cognitive or affective. The function and the role of helplessness in the relationship with the other should especially be explored. An implication for future research is that types of narrative construction should be explored,
refined, and validated with different populations, psychiatric and other (e.g., school dropouts, delinquents).

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