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Sección Monográfica / Monographic Section

Ambiguous Loss: a loved one's trauma

Pérdida ambigua: el trauma de un ser querido

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Abstract

Research on interpersonal trauma tends to focus on the effects of traumatic encounters on those one who directly undergo the experience. In this paper, I seek to understand the experiences of the friends and family of the one who has undergone trauma, a paradigmatic case being the relatives of veterans (O'Nell, 1999). I argue that one way we can understand the experiences of friends and relatives is through Pauline Boss' concept of *ambiguous loss* (Boss, 1986, 2007). The kind of ambiguous loss relevant for our purposes is when a family member is physically present but psychologically absent, for example, in the case of a relative with advanced dementia. This is what I purport happens in some instances of traumatic experience. I argue that third-person traumatic encounter can be experienced as a loss due to the changes in the person who has undergone the traumatic encounter and that this, in turn, causes changes in the person experiencing the loss and their relationship with their traumatised family member. I argue that first-person traumatic encounter is a transformative experience (Paul, 2014), i.e., an experience which causes personal and epistemic changes in the subject undergoing it, and that third-person traumatic encounter can also be a transformative experience.

Keywords: ambiguous loss, trauma, transformative experiences.

Resumen

La investigación sobre el trauma interpersonal tiende a centrarse en los efectos de los encuentros traumáticos en aquellos que sufren directamente la experiencia. En este trabajo,

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intento comprender las experiencias de los amigos y familiares de quien ha sufrido el trauma, siendo un caso paradigmático el de los familiares de veteranos (O'Nell, 1999). Argumento que una forma de entender las experiencias de amigos y familiares es a través del concepto de pérdida ambigua de Pauline Boss (Boss, 1986, 2007). El tipo de pérdida ambigua relevante para nuestros fines es cuando un familiar está físicamente presente pero psicológicamente ausente, por ejemplo, en el caso de un familiar con demencia avanzada. Esto es lo que pretendo que ocurre en algunos casos de experiencia traumática. Sostengo que el encuentro traumático en tercera persona puede experimentarse como una pérdida debido a los cambios en la persona que ha sufrido el encuentro traumático y que esto, a su vez, provoca cambios en la persona que experimenta la pérdida y en su relación con el familiar traumatizado. Sostengo que el encuentro traumático en primera persona es una experiencia transformadora (Paul, 2014), es decir, una experiencia que provoca cambios personales y epistémicos en el sujeto que la experimenta, y que el encuentro traumático en tercera persona también puede ser una experiencia transformadora.

Palabras clave: pérdida ambigua, trauma, experiencias transformadoras.

1. Introduction

Research on interpersonal trauma tends to focus on the effects of traumatic encounters on those one who directly undergo the experience. In this paper, I seek to understand the experiences of the friends and family of the one who has undergone trauma, a paradigmatic case being the relatives of veterans (O'Nell, 1999). I argue that one way we can understand the experiences of friends and relatives is through Pauline Boss' concept of *ambiguous loss* (Boss, 1986, 2007). The kind of ambiguous loss relevant for our purposes is when a family member is physically present but psychologically absent, for example, in the case of a relative with advanced dementia. This is what I purport happens in some instances of traumatic experiences. I argue that third-person traumatic encounters can be experienced as a loss due to the changes in the person who has undergone the traumatic encounter and that this, in turn, causes changes in the person experiencing the loss and their relationship with their traumatised family member. I will argue that ambiguous loss for the family and friends may, as well as first person traumatic experiences, be a transformative experience, i.e., an experience whose phenomenal character is epistemically inaccessible prior to undergoing the experience and which causes personal and epistemic changes in the one undergoing it. Often those to whom we feel strongly are those to whom we stand in *identity-constituting relationships*, and thus the changes to them and the relationship may result in changes to oneself. Therefore, there is a personal transformation. Further the relatives get some epistemic access to the what-it's-likeness of trauma by how it impacts their loved ones. In this way, the experience is also epistemically transformative. To be clear, I do not mean to say that in all cases of traumatic encounter, there are feelings of

ambiguous loss and that family members of the traumatised person undergo a transformative experience. Rather, I argue that one way we can understand the experiences of people whose loved one's have experienced trauma is through the concepts transformative experience and ambiguous loss.

In section 2, I introduce L.A. Paul's concept of transformative experience and Woollard's distinction between the narrow and wide sense in which an experience can be transformative. In section 3, following Carel and Kidd, I argue that traumatic experiences are both epistemically and personally transformative using the work of Ronnie Janoff-Bulman and her World Assumptions Scale. In section 4, I explain Boss' concept of ambiguous loss and argue for the main thesis of this paper: that third-person traumatic encounter can also be transformative.

2. Transformative Experiences

I love him dearly,

But I lost myself.

Farida, D. (2019, p. 230)

Writing about how she felt following the birth of her son.

L.A. Paul developed the concept of transformative experiences which are experiences that result in some change in one's sense of self and/or one's epistemic standing. Prior to undergoing such an experience, the phenomenal character is epistemically inaccessible because the experience is so different to ordinary human experiences, and one lacks relevant experiences that would enable one to grasp the what-it's-likeness of the experience. Paul distinguishes between *personally* and *epistemically* transformative experiences. Personally transformative experiences "radically change what it is like to be you, perhaps by replacing your core preferences with very different one's" (Paul, 2015a, p. 156). One's sense of oneself *as* oneself changes as one develops new preferences, beliefs, desires, etc. Epistemically transformative experiences provide access to knowledge that could not otherwise be acquired without undergoing the experiences, such experiences cause a change in one's epistemic standing (Paul, 2014, pp. 10–11). There are experiences, such as trying a new fruit, which are transformative in miniscule ways. After trying a durian for the first time, you gain knowledge of the what-it's-likeness of trying that particular fruit; in other words, you have epistemic access to the phenomenal character of the experience. This is transformative in the epistemic sense, but not in the personal sense. And even in the

epistemic sense, there's only a slight change to one's epistemic standing. Other experiences, like pregnancy, are transformative in far more interesting ways — we will return to this.[1]

Transformative experiences are new *types* of experiences, not new *tokens* of types already experienced (Paul, 2014, p. 36). Someone who has not tried pineapple on pizza but has consumed both pineapple and pizza on separate occasions, may produce a 'gross' response when presented with the concept of pineapple on pizza, and while her experience may confirm or disconfirm her initial response, she has enough relevant experience to produce an idea of what it will be like without trying it herself. David Lewis explains how having previous relevant experiences can inform new experiences:

If you are taught that experience A resembles B and C closely, D less, E not at all, that will help you know what A is like — *if* you know already what B and C and D and E are like. Otherwise, it helps you not at all. I don't know any better what it's like to taste Vegemite when I'm told that it tastes like Marmite, because I don't know what Marmite tastes like either. (Lewis, 1999, pp. 265–266)

For an experience like pregnancy, however, aside from parenting itself (or alloparenting), there are no relevant or resemblance experiences that could give the subject insight into the what-it's-likeness (or the what-it-may-be-likeness).[2] It is of a unique *type* of experience.

The difference between an experience like trying a new fruit and pregnancy is the difference between what Fiona Woollard (2021) terms *epistemically transformative*$_{\text{narrow}}$ and *epistemically transformative*$_{\text{wide}}$. "An experience is epistemically transformative$_{\text{narrow}}$ if the experience gives the subject access to knowledge that they could not have if they had not had the experience" (Woollard, 2021, p. 157). An experience like trying a new fruit for the

[1] When talking of pregnancy as an 'experience', I use the language used by Paul, but I recognise this could lead to misunderstandings. Pregnancy is an 'experience' in the ordinary sense, but not in the sense often used in the philosophy of mind (i.e., of a mental state endowed with phenomenal character). Pregnancy, when considered in the terms of the philosophy of mind, is perhaps more accurately to be considered as being in a state or in a process that involves mental states endowed with phenomenal character (i.e., experiences). Considering pregnancy as involving experiences, in the sense used in the philosophy of mind, may be important when thinking about pregnancy as transformative because it may be important to consider which experiences involved in pregnancy are unique to pregnancy and which may be characteristic of pregnancy but are not unique to it. But, for now, we talk of pregnancy as an experience in the ordinary sense, as Paul does.

[2] Elizabeth Harman uses anecdotal evidence to claim that pregnancy is not a transformative experience (Harman, 2015). She argues that through having a parent-like relation to her much younger sister and her friend's baby, she knew what to expect when she had her own child[ren] (Harman, 2015, p. 326). However, experiences as Harman's of 'alloparent[ing]' *are*, as Paul responds, experiences of the *relevant* kind that gave her the what-it-is-likeness of having a child (Paul, 2015b, p. 518). Just as having previously tasted Marmite gives you experiences of the relevant kind to know the what-it's-likeness of tasting Vegemite, alloparenting gives you experience of the relevant kind to know the what-it's-likeness of becoming a parent. Therefore, Harman's critique does not take away from the argument that pregnancy is a transformative experience.

first time is epistemically transformative$_{narrow}$: the subject has epistemic access to the phenomenal character of the experience, but it is a trivial kind of transformative experience. There are other types of experiences that cause a significant change in the epistemic standing of the subject, these Woollard claims are epistemically transformative in the wide sense: "An experience is epistemically transformative$_{wide}$ if, after the experience, the subject is in a significantly different epistemic position than they could be in without having the experience, with access to knowledge that there are *significant* barriers to acquiring without the experience" (Woollard, 2021, p. 157).[3] An experience like pregnancy is epistemically transformative in the wide sense.

One way Paul makes clear the concept of a transformative experience is by reference to Frank Jackson's Mary's Room thought experiment. Mary is confined to a black and white room, everything she learns about the world she acquires from within this black and white room, wherein every object in the room is also black and white (Jackson, 1986, p. 291). Mary has never experienced colour. Prior to leaving her room, Mary is in a state of epistemic impoverishment, she does not know the what-it's-likeness of seeing red nor can she grasp from the facts she does know about the world what it may be like to experience redness (Jackson, 1986; Paul, 2015a, pp. 154–155). In the Lewisian sense, she also does not have any experiences of the relevant kind that may aid her in trying to grasp the what-it's-likeness of seeing red prior to leaving her room. Therefore, when she does leave her room and sees red, the experience is epistemically transformative.

In Mary's state of epistemic impoverishment, she could not have anticipated what it would be like nor what she may think, feel, etc., upon encountering phenomenal red for the first time. Paul argues that someone deciding whether to become a parent is in the same state of epistemic impoverishment as Mary prior to leaving her room (Paul, 2015a, p. 156). She cannot know what it will be like to become pregnant nor to have a child; further, since pregnancy and childbirth are unlike any other experience (Paul, 2015a, p. 156; Woollard, 2021, p. 161), there are also no similarity experiences that she can use to get *some* idea of what it may be like for her. Since she can only grasp the what-it's-likeness from becoming pregnant and having a child of her own, the experience is epistemically transformative.

For Mary, it is likely that her experiencing phenomenal red for the first time is merely epistemically transformative and not also *personally* transformative (it may be personally transformative also, but this is not a given). By contrast, for someone who has chosen to have a child, the experience will likely be both epistemically transformative as well as personally transformative. She will get the what-it's-likeness of the process of pregnancy, birthing, and having a child; the phenomenal character of such processes would be

[3] What is important is that the experience gives *access* to knowledge that could not be accessed absent of undergoing the experience; it may be that the knowledge is not *acquired*, even though there is access (Woollard, 2021, p. 156).

otherwise epistemically inaccessible.[4] Also, pregnancy will involve a personal transformation: the experience will change what it is like to be her (Paul, 2015a, p. 156), not only her role in society (she is now a mother) but also her identity: she is likely to acquire new preferences, beliefs, desires, intentions, etc.

Paul's argument is that deciding to become pregnant cannot be made by considering what it will be like in virtue of the epistemic inaccessibility of the phenomenal character of the pregnancy experience. In deciding, one must be willing to accept that one will undergo personal and epistemic changes without knowing what these are. In this way, pregnancy is a transformative experience (or, in Woollard's terms, it is epistemically transformative$_{wide}$). However, of course, pregnancies differ so widely. Experiences such as becoming pregnant as a result of a rape and forcibly having to carry a pregnancy to term involves no prior consideration of the decision to remain pregnant. For example, the recent overturning of Roe v Wade in the United States means having to continue with an unwanted pregnancy is a very real possibility for many women and girls (Housman, 2022). That this is a *non-volitional* experience and that it is a transformative experience puts women who fit into this category in a unique epistemic position relative to non-pregnant people and relative to voluntarily pregnant women. There are experiences like these and more (such as interpersonal traumatic experiences) that are transformative but involve no prior decision-making in virtue of them being non-volitional. This is to say that there are cases of transformative experiences for which Paul's analysis through the lens of decision theory does not apply.[5] These are mentioned by Paul but not explored (Paul, 2014, p. 16). Havi Carel and Ian James Kidd share similar concerns when they argue that Paul omits to consider a broad range of human experiences that are transformative but that are non-voluntary or involuntary (Carel & Kidd, 2020, p. 200). Carel and Kidd argue that the nature of human experiences is such that we are vulnerable to transformative experiences that we do not volitionally undergo. Paul focuses on transformative experiences that come about as a result of an expression of agential power, but she acknowledges there are other

[4] Woollard argues that pregnancy is transformative at both a general level and a particular level (Woollard, 2021, p. 163). Becoming pregnant gives you epistemic access to the general experience of being pregnant and to one's own specific pregnancy experience as located in a similarity space. Each person's pregnancy experience is located as a point in a similarity space (Woollard, 2021). Experiences that are similar will be closely located in the similarity space, while experiences that differ will be further apart. Thus, recognising that there are pregnancy experiences whose phenomenal character may be difficult to grasp due to how it differs from one's own. Contrast, for example, the different kind of experience between a planned, anticipated pregnancy vs a pregnancy resulting from a rape.

[5] Decision theory concerns how rational agents make decisions. When there is a range of options, a rational agent ought to form orderings based on their preferences. However, for experiences for which the phenomenal character is epistemically inaccessible without having undergone the experience, the argument goes, one cannot know what it will be like to undergo the experience so one cannot form a preference over it, and, consequently, cannot place it in a preference ordering.

transformative experiences that do not occur in this way (Paul, 2014, p. 16). This is not, therefore, a criticism of Paul's work, rather an expansion of the application of the concept of 'transformative experiences'.

3. Traumatic Experiences as Transformative

Carel and Kidd propose a broader taxonomy of transformative experiences which includes involuntary and nonvoluntary experiences, as well as the voluntary cases that Paul focuses on (Carel & Kidd, 2020, pp. 200–201). I am interested in a particular subtype of involuntary/nonvoluntary experiences, namely, interpersonal traumatic experiences. In a study on veterans and their partners that supports the claim that such traumatic experiences are transformative,[6] it was found that:

> patients with PTSD often say about themselves that they have changed and become different persons who also behave differently toward others. Their wives also describe them as emotionally distant, irritable, and unable to participate in everyday family life as they had before the war. The wives who knew their husbands before the war had more difficulties accepting their husband's illness and the fact that they had changed. (Frančišković et al., 2007, p. 182)

Interpersonal trauma is particularly interesting because there is research to suggest that attributions of blame to human agents in cases of trauma causes greater psychological distress than when blame is attributed to natural or supernatural causes (Sezgin & Punamäki, 2012, p. 437). There is a unique phenomenological quality to experiences of interpersonal trauma compared to non-interpersonal trauma, this is "the experience of an environment as unsafe and unpredictable, due to the potential of human threat" (Forbes et al., 2013). It is found that experiencing interpersonal trauma disrupts one's sense of safety, trust, and causes a greater severity in PTSD symptoms. Compared to non-interpersonal trauma, those who have experienced interpersonal trauma not only have more severe PTSD symptoms in the immediate aftermath of the traumatic experience, but also have persisting fear-based symptoms long after the traumatic experience (Forbes et al., 2011). This reinforces the work of Ronnie Janoff-Bulman who conducted several studies measuring the perceptions of those who had experienced trauma vs those who had not and formed the World Assumptions Scale. She bases the World Assumptions Scale on the term 'assumptive world' which she borrows from C. M.

[6] That traumatic experiences are transformative has been extensively studied (see, for example, Park, 2004 and Kashdan & Kane, 2011). These studies acknowledge the changes individuals undergo as a result of having experienced a traumatic encounter, yet they do not write of them being 'transformative' (if they even use the word, specifically) in the way Paul does. For example, Park, and Kashdan and Kane write of 'post-traumatic growth', positive changes following a traumatic experience. These merely recognise that there are changes in the individual who has experienced trauma. Paul's contribution is on the specific definition of transformative experience in the two senses explored above: 'epistemic' and 'personal'.

Parkes who defines it as "a strongly held set of assumptions about the world and the self which is confidently maintained and used as a means of recognizing, planning and acting […] Assumptions such as these are learned and confirmed by the experience of many years" (Parkes, cited in Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p. 10). Janoff-Bulman found that those who have not undergone a traumatic experience hold three beliefs: 'the world is benevolent', 'the world is meaningful', 'the self is worthy' (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, pp. 10–11).[7] These are foundational assumptions in the belief system of most people. These assumptions help us navigate the world and ensure we accomplish "feel[ing] at home in the world" (Améry, 1980, p. 40). Janoff-Bulman found that for those who have undergone a traumatic experience[s], these basic assumptions are shattered. They see the world as malevolent, as meaningless, and the self as unworthy. Janoff-Bulman found this to be a pattern: those who were most likely to hold negative views about the world and themselves were those who experienced interpersonal victimisation (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, pp. 77–78).

One Egyptian activist who was tortured describes the changes in his worldview and the break from the world he occupied prior to the traumatic experience:

> You cannot put it in words. You live in a different world than other people. Once you have experienced what I have experienced, you have experienced the worst and you live with death inside of you every day. (Matthies-Boon, 2017, p. 628)

According to Matthies-Boon, this sentiment was not uncommon: all the interviewees expressed how they felt they had changed and how the trauma had changed their relationship to the world and other people (Matthies-Boon, 2017, pp. 622, 628). Matthies-Boon, using the work of Janoff-Bulman, argues that the trauma caused an alienation about how the world works due to the shattering of the interviewees' basic assumptions about themselves, other people, and the world (Matthies-Boon, 2017, p. 624; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). They had lost the sense of *feeling at home in the world*. And without these basic assumptions forming their worldview, the interviewees isolated themselves from things they enjoyed and other people. They succumbed to a feeling of helplessness and experienced changes in who they felt themselves to be, as this interviewee remarks: "If my past self of 2010 or 2011 met my present self right now I believe I would not have known me to be the same person" (Matthies-Boon, 2017, p. 629). A common experience is that of a "gaping hole between his reality and that of the non-traumatised" (Matthies-Boon, 2017, p. 628).

[7] Note that I have simplified Janoff-Bulman's World Assumptions Scale. Janoff-Bulman's World Assumptions Scale is frequently used as a measurement in trauma research. It contains 32 items intended to illuminate 8 foundational assumptions. But it can, for the purposes of my paper, be reduced to the simplified version I use here. I would also like to note that studies on the validity of the World Assumptions Scale are varied (in support of its validity see, for example, Van Bruggen et al., 2018; against its validity, see, for example, Kaler et al., 2008).

The epistemic inaccessibility of the phenomenal character of experiences like torture as well as the changes it causes to one's self and one's worldview characterise such traumatic experience as transformative, in the wide sense. As Paul said of pregnancy, if one permits that there are, indeed, transformative experiences, then traumatic encounters are such experiences.

Philosopher Susan Brison, about her rape and near-murder, writes that "[t]he trauma has changed me forever" (Brison, 2002, p. 21). For instance, she had a different relationship with her body, she had shattered assumptions about her safety in the world (Brison, 2002, p. 44), she struggled to be herself with others and herself (Brison, 2002, p. 40). She had felt that she had "somehow outlived" herself (Brison, 2002, p. 9). Brison underwent a transformative experience; she was left with personal and epistemic changes. Personal changes included changes to her beliefs, for instance, about her safety in the world; changes in her desires, for instance, she found for some time after the traumatic encounter she was glad to not have a child; changes in her behaviours, for instance, she took up self-defence classes and cut her hair short to increase the possibility that she be mistaken for a male from behind (she was attacked from the rear). That she struggled to be herself in relation to herself is known as identity ambiguity. Identity ambiguity concerns an uncertainty in one's sense of oneself. It "will likely follow certain scenarios of change" (Hakak, 2015, p. 129) and occurs "especially when traditional referents for understanding that identity lose their relevance" (Corley & Gioia, 2004, p. 173). Both these elements occur in traumatic encounters. Given that traumatic experiences are transformative, there occurs personal changes that cause a changed relationship with oneself. And referents losing their relevance is particularly amplified when one's worldmaking and self-making assumptions are shattered as does occur in cases of trauma. One becomes unsure of oneself as a result of the changes to oneself. There is an "undoing of the self" (Brison, 2002, p. 39). Often in cases of transformative experience, and, in particular, non-volitional transformative experience, identity ambiguity will accompany, or, rather, be a side effect, of the changes undergone as a result of the experience. Brison found a consequence of her traumatic encounter was that she "was no longer the same person [she] had been before the assault" (Brison, 2002, p. 44). The ambiguity in one's identity, as I am considering the term here, is not necessarily absolute. Rather, one feels a loss of, *at the very least*, a part of one's sense of self. The identity ambiguity, further, in these kinds of cases may be *temporary* (Hakak, 2015, p. 133). It is to be noted that Hakak's analysis is in the context of organisational change that causes individual losses of identification, but upon reidentification with the new organisation, the identity ambiguity is resolved, and, hence, is only temporary. Whether it is also temporary in the case of trauma is not so clear. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest it is temporary; for example, Brison, in writing of her recovery, talks about how if recovery means a return to who she was prior to her assault, then she is not recovered. But if recovery means incorporating the changes resultant from

her assault into her sense of self, then she is recovered (Brison, 2002, p. 21). However, there is also anecdotal evidence suggesting that the identity ambiguity is never resolved; for example, Holocaust survivors, Charlotte Delbo and Jean Améry, talk of being forever changed as a result of their traumatic experiences, that who they were prior to their traumatic experiences and who they are presently are different people (Delbo, 1995; Améry, 1980).

It may be the case that some negatively-valenced experiences are such that, while undergoing the experience, the subject would not choose to undergo the experience if she was presented with the choice. But, after having undergone the experience, she would not change the experience were she to have the chance and choice. This may occur in a case like a forced pregnancy, where, after the birth of the child, one is overjoyed with love for the child and 'cannot imagine life without her[/him]' as is often claimed by parents. There is research to suggest further that experiencing trauma can result in positive changes and that, reflectively, people are 'grateful', so to speak, for having undergone the changes they did, and they would not change it if they had the chance. In other words, their traumatic experience was positively transformative. Or, rather than that the traumatic experience itself was positively transformative, it would be more accurate to say that there were some positive changes resultant from their traumatic experiences that occurred after the traumatic encounter(s) had come to pass. For example, Tedeschi and Calhoun write about the positive changes in one's self, such as increased strength and self-reliance (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, pp. 30–32); positive changes in one's relationship to others, such as greater vulnerability which led to more self-disclosure, more intimacy, and a recognition of the help available from one's loved ones (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, pp. 34–37); a changed life philosophy, such as an improved perspective on life, greater appreciation for their own existence, finding meaning in life and suffering (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, pp. 37–39). Many, if not all, of these positive changes occur long after the trauma has passed when one is well on the way to recovery. This is to say that the transformational experience that is trauma does not end when the trauma does or shortly after. The personal and epistemic changes continue as one goes through the 'process' of trauma: the event(s), the immediate shattering of one's worldview and assumptions, the learning to trust again, the recovery etc. The same can, perhaps, be said for pregnancy. As one goes through the process, one learns the what-it's-likeness of, say, sleepless nights, dealing with the so-called terrible twos, sending one's child off to school, planning for their future etc. As the process of being a parent develops, so, too, do the personal and epistemic changes. Unlike experiences like trying a durian, some transformative experiences have a temporal element (i.e., the resultant changes unfold as time goes on as opposed to merely during and immediately after the experience). It must, of course, be noted too that positive changes do not always follow. Many people respond with anger or despondency at having undergone traumatic encounters and continue to do so for long after the trauma has come to pass. For example,

in extreme cases of traumatic encounter, like that of some Holocaust survivors, it has been the case that many years after the end of the Holocaust, they commit suicide due to the gravity of their traumatic experiences (e.g., Améry, 1999, p. xiii).

In this section, I have simply aimed to established that traumatic experiences are transformative using Janoff-Bulman's World Assumptions Scale. It should be clear by now that traumatic experiences are transformative and that the resultant changes can be positive or negative. The immediate negative effects are the proximal effects. While the later effects (whether negative, positive, or both) are the distal effects. I am interested in the proximal effects and how the family and friends of the primary victim experience the proximal changes and how it impacts them.

4. Ambiguous Loss and Transformative Experience

In this section, I use Pauline Boss' (1986) concept of ambiguous loss to theorise about the experiences of the friends and relatives of those who have undergone a traumatic encounter. The relatives of the subject who has undergone a traumatic encounter, without being able to fully grasp the experience itself, often experience some effects resultant from their beloved having undergone a traumatic experience. Paradigmatic cases of such third-person traumatic encounter include the partners of sexual assault victims and those of returning soldiers. It is not atypical to hear sentiments expressed to the tune of 'Jeff never returned from the war'. This is, on first encounter, confusing, because *there* Jeff is, he's back. How are we to understand claims such as these? In this section, I will be arguing that, in virtue of traumatic experiences being transformative, the changes in the primary victim may be experienced in the family and friends as a state of *ambiguous loss* of the physically present but psychologically absent variety. And, concluding this section, I will argue that ambiguous loss for the family and friends may, itself, be transformative. As I will elucidate later, as a result of changes to the primary victim, there are changes to how she is perceived by the friends and family, and consequently changes to their relationship. And, most importantly, often those to whom we feel strongly are those to whom we stand in *identity-constituting relationships*, and thus the changes to them and the relationship may result in changes to oneself.[8] Therefore, there is a personal transformation. Further the relatives get some epistemic access to the what-it's-likeness of trauma by how it impacts their loved ones and also get epistemic access to the what-it's-likeness of having a traumatised loved one. In

[8] Families are sites of identity-formation and identity-construction often beginning at birth (Lindemann, 2009, p. 417). Often, narrative accounts of the person help to shape identity too, but in cases such as that of dementia, narratives can help keep alive the person as they were through acts of remembering (Lindemann, 2009, p. 417; Bayley, 1999).

this way, the experience may also be epistemically transformative. Given the epistemic and personal dimensions, it can be said to be transformative in the wide sense.

Boss defines ambiguous loss as "a situation of unclear loss resulting from not knowing whether a loved one is dead or alive, absent or present" (Boss, 2004, p. 554). Boss distinguishes between two types of ambiguous loss: physically present but psychologically absent and psychologically present but physically absent. Cases of psychological presence but physical absence include that of a kidnapped/missing child whose status as dead or alive is unknown. The family cannot mourn the child, nor can they continue with their lives. In the case of physical presence but psychological absence, the family member is there but they are emotionally/cognitively absent, such as an emotionally absent father. In either kind of case, there is no closure/resolution (Testoni et al., 2020, p. 7).[9] This state of ambiguity, Boss argues, is a greater stressor for the family than a clear-cut and definitive loss (Boss, cited in O'Brien, 2007, p. 136). A clear-cut change permits reorganisation of the family structure; a state of ambiguity prevents this. The family is missing a piece, whether physical or psychological — families are both psychological entities as well physical entities (Boss, 2004, p. 553).

Ambiguous loss is a relational phenomenon, it concerns how members of a family relate to each other, their perceptions of one another and of who is a member of the family and who is not. While Boss' focus on ambiguous loss is on physically present but psychologically absent fathers (Boss, 2004, p. 554), the concept extends further, for instance to a relative with advanced dementia. Boss, herself *does* extend the concept to include cases that include dementia: "persons are emotionally and/or cognitively missing to the people who care about them and the system as a whole. Examples of this are dementia, depression, addictions, chronic mental illness, and homesickness" (Boss, 2004, p. 554). In the case of the relative with advanced dementia, it is not so much that he or she is not psychologically present, it is more so that the changes to the psychological person are to such an extent that the person they were prior to getting advanced dementia is different to the person now to such an extent as to cause a feeling of loss among the family of the person prior to the onset of advanced dementia. The absence is cognitive rather than emotional. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say emotional absence follows cognitive absence.

Literature on how people experience the changes in their loved one following interpersonal trauma are few and far between. Therefore, we can consider, analogously to

[9] Closure is a widely used, yet ill-defined, concept for a number of loosely related/correlated phenomenon, from an affect or psychological state to an objective that the law should seek to achieve in prosecuting offenders (Bandes, 2009, pp. 1–3). For our purposes, it is used as in a social psychological state describing an end to a state of ambiguity; for example, a body of a deceased family member being returned to the family for burial (Boss, 2004, p. 553).

experiences of trauma, experiences of [advanced] dementia which, as above per Paul, are transformative. Literature on dementia and the changes it causes in one's loved one and oneself is extensive (see, for example, Taylor, 2008; McShane, 2018). Mapping out the changes in his beloved and how that resulted in changes in himself and their relationship, Iris Murdoch's husband, John Bayley, reflects on who Murdoch was before and after the onset of Alzheimer's. Switching between 'once'/'then' and 'now', he demarcates the Iris he lost and the Iris he now tends to, who she was prior to Alzheimer's and how she was in relation to him and how he was in relation to her, and who she was after the Alzheimer's and how that changed how she related to him and him her (Bayley, 1999). The changes he experienced in his wife were experienced as losses. He also remarks that the changes were not Iris' alone: he too changed. He writes that, "Under the dark escort of Alzheimer's, she arrived somewhere. So have I" (Bayley, 1999, p. 266). As she changed so, too, did he.

McShane (2018) explores how people's love for their beloved is adapted in cases where their beloved is changed as a result of dementia or mental illness. In the case of dementia, it is often the case that the beloved becomes "unfamiliar, sometimes even unrecognizable" (McShane, 2008, p. 3). Mace and Rabins (2011), advising on how to deal with a loved one who has dementia, acknowledge the changes undergone in the beloved and how one may experience "the loss of a companion and a relationship that was important to you" (Mace & Rabins, 2011, p. 221). I deal here only with cases of advanced dementia, where loved ones experience a loss in the "way she used to be" (Mace & Rabins, 2011, p. 221). But there are cases where it does not feel like the family member has essentially died and is just a body. Taylor (2008), while acknowledging that her mother has changed, appreciates the new qualities of her mother and the time they enjoy together. She engages in practices of care and communication with her mother that keep her mother a social entity with whom she can bond and experience new things (Taylor, 2008, p. 327). She acknowledges newfound difficulties in her relationship with her mother, but also newfound ways of caring for her.

Contrastingly, Bayley's experience of feeling himself change as Murdoch did is not atypical. "[T]he problems of the afflicted are not theirs alone, but extend to those who care for them" (Sabat, 1998, p. 35). The afflicted are also the family of the primary victim, not just in the changes they experience in their loved one, but also in how that changes themselves also. In traumatic encounters, too, it is the case that the afflicted is not just the person who has directly experienced trauma. Just as the Alzheimer's patient underwent changes that were felt by those who loved her, so, too, a traumatic encounter can impact on more than the person who directly experienced it. Those around her are also impacted by her experience of trauma and the ways in which she changes as a result.

There are differences, however, between the ambiguous loss of a traumatic encounter vs the ambiguous loss of Alzheimer's. In cases of the ambiguous loss of Alzheimer's, as the

disease progresses there is renewed fuel for grief as the loved one slips further away (Marušić, 2022, pp. 15–16), whereas in cases of ambiguous loss in a traumatic encounter, there is typically a single episode whose impact is such as to cause feelings of identity ambiguity (first-personally) and ambiguous loss (in the third person experience). Of course, it is never as straightforward as this. But there is at least something to be said for the difference in experience between the ambiguous loss of traumatic encounter and that of Alzheimer's. A further contrast between the case of trauma and Alzheimer's is highlighted through an exploration of the changes to personhood, so to speak, in first-personal experiences. Typically, in traumatic encounter, there are changes to the self but nonetheless there is a persisting self. Eventually in Alzheimer's, there is often very little left that can be said to be a self, because Alzheimer's does not just cause changes to the self, but it also has "destructive effects […] on personhood" itself (Robbins, 2019, p. 483).

Just as with Alzheimer's there are degrees of severity and variations on a case-by-case basis, so too there are degrees of severity and variations on a case-by-case basis in traumatic encounters. Single instances of trauma may be easier to recover from than temporally extended experiences. While the changes to the person are present and ongoing whatever the traumatic encounter (hence, the feelings of ambiguous loss), the trauma in single instances can be located at a single moment in the past. Traumatic experiences that are more extended in time, for example, ongoing domestic abuse, may be harder to recover from and may cause greater feelings of identity ambiguity and ambiguous loss. A traumatic encounter that is perhaps more analogous to the case of Bayley and Murdoch in terms of degree of loss and irreparability can be exemplified with the traumatic experiences of the likes of Jean Améry and Charlotte Delbo. In such cases, the changes are vast because the experiences of Améry and Delbo, both of whom were in Auschwitz, are so severe as to cause substantial changes to their person.[10] In the case of Delbo, she claims "I'm not alive. I died in Auschwitz" (Delbo, 1995, p. 267) and "[a]s far as I'm concerned I'm still there dying" (Delbo, 1995, p. 224). In a similar vein, Améry speaks of a sense of homelessness, but the homelessness was an "alienation from the self", that "suddenly the past was buried and one no longer knew who one was" (Améry, 1980, p. 43). The identity ambiguity in this kind of case is more absolute. There is a sharp demarcation between prior to and after Auschwitz. That the experiences of Delbo and Améry are transformative, both epistemically and personally, is clear. It is even more plausible in cases like that of Delbo and Améry that there would be feelings of ambiguous loss among the friends and family.

However, narrative accounts of how such experiences impact loved ones of primary victims are hard found. The most popular third-person accounts are from the partners and

[10] I am reluctant to say, 'they survived Auschwitz', in the way that we typically use language. They physically survived Auschwitz but not necessarily psychologically. Indeed, by their own accounts, they did not survive.

children of veterans who have returned home.[11] In looking at the experiences of children who have a parent with PTSD from war trauma, in almost every case, the children (ages 15+) marked stark differences between their parent prior to their deployment and after their return (Harrison et al., 2014). The language, too, that these children use is interesting. One child, for instance, grieves for the person her father used to be:

> Some nights you spend your night crying yourself to sleep, because you miss your dad and you miss who he used to be, and you miss that he used to be really happy all the time. (Harrison et al., 2014, p. 96)

Posttraumatic stress disorder (in veterans) causes identity ambiguity, as in "the loss of the person he once was; the shared roles, responsibilities, and intimacy that characterized the partner relationship; and their mutual dreams and expected plans for the future" (Beks, 2016, p. 652). The partners in these situations often talk of a loss, and "often described a contrast between the loving husband or partner of the past and the distant, unfamiliar person in the present". One woman talking of her experience wrote, "I am so mad at the military because they took my husband away from me. I have no idea who this man is, that is what I tell myself a lot of days" (Beks, 2016, p. 652).

Ambiguous loss is profoundly experienced in regard to those with whom we stand in "identity-constituting relationships" (Cholbi, 2017, p. 99). Those with whom we stand in identity-constituting relationships are those whom, in virtue of the relationship we have with them, form an important *part* of our sense of self (insofar as other people shape our identity) and who also shape what and who we care about (Cholbi, 2017, p. 99). This sense of 'identity-constituting' is not a strong sense. We do not lose our entire self when a significant other is changed or lost, but we are changed, at least in part, by changes in our beloved. Significant others are sites of identity formation and identity construction beginning at birth and continuing throughout one's life (Lindemann, 2009, p. 417).

Related to our worldmaking and self-making assumptions, we, in our "practical identities — the way we understand ourselves and what is valuable in our world" (Cholbi, 2017, p. 101), take for granted certain facts about ourselves, other people, and our relationships; the metaphysical contingency of such facts tends not to be at the surface of our consciousness. When these so-called facts change, especially when the change is sudden, we suddenly become aware of their metaphysical contingency and that they have always and will always be contingent (or rather that awareness comes to the forefront). When our loved ones change, we learn that what makes us who we are, and the people that make us

[11] Literature on the changes in one's loved one following traumatic encounter is also extensively covered in research on cultural memory and Holocaust studies. Studies involving the descendants of Holocaust survivors align on their findings of a history that was never spoken but was ever present, and that became part of the memories of the descendants, termed *post-memory* (e.g., Kidron, 2003, cited in Tumarkin, 2013).

who we are, is liable to change. The changes to others with whom we stand in identity-constituting relationships is felt as a loss "both to and of the self" (Cholbi, 2017, p. 101). Therefore, when our loved one's change, we scrutinise our sense of self.

Given how important other people are for our sense of self, it is expectable that ambiguous loss due to changes in our loved ones will have an impact on our own selves. Boss goes so far as to claim ambiguous loss is traumatic:

> [a]mbiguous loss is traumatic because it is painful, immobilizing, and incomprehensible so that coping is blocked. It is akin to the trauma that causes posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), in that it is a painful experience far beyond normal human expectations. (Boss, 2010, p. 139)

The difference, for Boss, between ambiguous loss and PTSD is that the trauma of PTSD is located in some past moment(s) whereas the trauma of ambiguous loss is located in the present moment and, due to the difficulty in resolving the ambiguity, it is ongoing. Whether ambiguous loss is traumatic or whether to call it such is extending the limits of an already overused concept (Burstow, 2003), there is evidence to support the thesis that those who experience ambiguous loss also face further issues. That ambiguous loss is traumatic is entirely plausible. Using PTSD as an exploration of the criteria for trauma (this is not without controversy), criteria A is: "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" (APA, 2013, p. 271). This exposure can be through "learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend" (APA, 2013, p. 271). Of course, there are other criteria, but considering that PTSD can occur through learning that a loved one experienced a traumatic event plus the changes one experiences in one's loved one and how this impacts the family, it is certainly plausible that ambiguous loss is traumatic. For instance, in studies on the partners of veterans with PTSD it was found that they developed symptoms of secondary traumatisation (Frančišković et al., 2007). It is plausible that these symptoms of secondary traumatisation are a result of empathising with the loved one who has undergone the traumatic encounter. What I am interested in here, though, is ambiguous loss as a possible *additional* source of traumatisation and experiencing an ambiguous loss being, *itself*, a transformative experience.

Whether it can be said to be the case that persons in third-person traumatic encounters experience a change in their worldview and shattering of their assumptions in the same/similar way as in first-person encounters will require further research. It is plausible, but the evidence for the claim, one way or the other, is insufficient. What may be said, however, is that secondary traumatisation is unlikely to be akin to primary traumatisation in, for instance, symptoms. For instance, many first-person trauma symptoms are fear-based (Forbes et al., 2011). This is unlikely to be the case for secondary traumatisation that is experienced due to a loved one's experiencing a traumatic encounter. So, there is certainly a distinction to be made in the phenomenal character of experiences of primary

versus secondary traumatisation. It must also be said that I'm loath to use the diagnostic category of PTSD as *the* guide for exploring traumatic experiences, in large part due to social constructivist concerns regarding diagnostic criteria and diagnoses. And, even if one *were* to use diagnostic criteria, traumatisation is not equitable to PTSD; PTSD is just one among many trauma and stress related diagnoses.

However, what may be possible to be claimed, and indeed what I am claiming here, is that third-person experience of trauma may be transformative. Above, I looked at some of the ways those who experienced ambiguous loss felt changed as a result. That ambiguous loss, itself, causes changes in the person experiencing it, as above, is the personal transformation element. As far as the epistemic transformation part goes, ambiguous loss gives you epistemic access to the what-it's-likeness of having a family member/friend experiencing trauma and how that changes them, you, and the relationship between you both. This is captured in this remark from a child who has a parent with PTSD from war trauma:

> Civilian kids… don't know what it's like to have a sick parent with something like this. …And they don't understand what it's like to lose a piece of someone you love. (Harrison et al., 2014, p. 95)

Another child, in a different study, spoke about how it is 'normal' to not want to talk about his experience because "nobody else — normal people — can't really understand the situation" (McGaw & Reupert, 2022, p. 27). There is, of course, a phenomenal character to having a loved one experience trauma and be changed by it. But, also, the phenomenal character of such an experience is epistemically inaccessible without experiencing it. Further, not only is the what-it's-likeness of having a loved one go through a traumatic experience and be changed as a result epistemically inaccessible, there are also changes one experiences oneself as a result of the loved one's experience. Just as they grieved for the ambiguous loss of their loved one, those who experienced the changes in their beloved, also felt themselves changed by the experience. One person reports that not only did they lose their partner, but also themselves; another claims "I've changed […] I consider myself a survivor as well as my wife because that is what I feel I have needed to do to make it in this new life" (Godwin et al., 2014, p. 404). This process has been described as "the loss of you, me, us" (Godwin et al., 2014, p. 402). Not only do they grieve the psychological loss of their loved one, but also for the relationship they had with them, and the changes they themselves undergo. A husband who was a caregiver for his wife who suffered with traumatic brain injury (TBI) recounts: "the person who survived is someone else, someone other, who carries within haunting echoes of the lost one who was my wife" (Godwin et al., 2014, p. 402). While this kind of trauma — traumatic brain injury — is an entirely different kind of trauma than the kind of trauma which is the topic of this paper — interpersonal trauma — the experiences of friends and family of the traumatised victim

bear some similarities, most especially in the changes reported in the traumatised family member or friend.

Reported in a study on partners of veterans, participants experienced a sense of isolation from the world, an avoidance of people outside the family, and an inability to confide in their friends and extended family for fear of judgement and not understanding (McGaw et al., 2020, p. 460). Further, partners reported a sense of unpredictability, and having to be hypervigilant, and the resultant increased stress this caused (McGaw et al., 2020, p. 461). Family members also reported a decrease in their sense of safety (Collins & Tam, 2023, p. 5). Children had difficulties at school, felt closed off to friends, were less social, became parentified, and had difficulty regulating their emotions (Collins & Tam, 2023; McGaw & Reupert, 2022). "[A]s one member struggled, so did others in the family. As parents struggled so did the children" (Collins & Tam, 2023, p. 6). While having to deal with the ambiguous loss of their traumatised loved one, persons in such situations also must deal with their own changing self and their new epistemic position, in virtue of their experience of ambiguous loss being, itself, transformative, just as their loved one's experience of trauma is transformative.

In a study on male partners of female sexual assault victims, it was found that the partners had some of the same difficulties that the primary victims did. One common theme was that for the men, the trauma their partner underwent "changed [them] forever" (Smith, 2005, p. 149). One of the men in the study, describing how his symbolic worldview had shattered as a result of his partner's rape, expresses:

> The closest thing that I have felt since was… turning the TV on September 11th… that's how it felt… like my whole friggin world had caved in and not just mine, but hers… and not just hers or mine but ours… I felt like it was just as much of a violation of me as it was of her… it felt like he raped me as well… I felt traumatized by it. (Smith, 2005, p. 156)

These changes described are possible sites of personal transformation as a result of a loved one's trauma and include: their sudden lack of trust of other people (Smith, 2005, p. 161), a recognition of their own powerlessness (Smith, 2005, p. 162), isolation and a sense that other people could not understand what they were going through (Smith, 2005, pp. 163–164). Further, the transformative experience for the secondary victims also had an extended duration. For some, even years after the traumatic encounter of their partner, they found they still struggled to deal with the changes to their partner, themselves, and their relationship (Smith, 2005, p. 162). These changes in the family of the primary victim suggest the effects of the traumatic encounter do not begin and end with the one who directly undergoes it.

Just as different pregnancy experiences can be mapped in a similarity space (see footnote 4 above) and experiencing a pregnancy gives you epistemic access to the phenomenal character of pregnancy *in general* and to the *particular* pregnancy as located in a similarity space, so too having a loved one experiencing trauma gives you epistemic access to the phenomenal character of third-personal trauma *in general* (and, *perhaps*, also to the phenomenal character of first-person trauma) and the *particular* third-personal trauma as located on a similarity space. This means that those with closely related experiences will be able to understand each other's experiences better than they will someone who is further in the similarity space. But all will have knowledge of the general what-it's-likeness.

5. Conclusion

Existing literature on ambiguous loss mostly explores the experiences of family members of a psychologically absent father, family members of an Alzheimer's patient, and partners of veterans. Explorations in terms of interpersonal trauma have, as far as I can tell, not much been researched in this regard. Research on third-person experiences of trauma, more generally speaking, are surprisingly few also — surprising because of the diagnostic criteria of PTSD specifying that it is possible to have PTSD from learning of a loved one's trauma. Therefore, in this paper, I have explored third-person experiences of trauma using the concepts of transformative experience and ambiguous loss. I use Paul's notion of 'transformative experience' to make my argument. Paul argues that a transformative experience is one that changes who you are (personally transformative) and/or your epistemic standing (epistemically transformative) in virtue of the kind of experience it is. The phenomenal character of such transformative experiences is epistemically inaccessible prior to undergoing the experience (unless one has previous experience of the relevant kind, such as alloparenting prior to having one's own child). I argue that traumatic experiences are transformative experiences in both the personal and epistemic sense (this is not a novel thought, Carel and Kidd (2020), have also argued for this). What I focused on in this paper is the experiences of loved ones. I have argued that one way we may understand the experiences of loved ones is through understanding how they experience the changes in their traumatised family member as an ambiguous loss of the physically present but psychologically absent variety. The ambiguous loss is due to changes in the loved one who experienced trauma, which itself is due to traumatic experiences being transformative, as argued in section 3 of the paper. I have also explored the plausibility of the claim that ambiguous loss, itself, can also be transformative. It results in both personal and epistemic changes. Due to ambiguous loss being felt most strongly toward those to whom we stand in identity-constituting relationships, we are also changed as a result. And it has a distinct phenomenal character which is hard to grasp without undergoing it.

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