

Making sense of complex childhood trauma:
The power of the therapeutic relationship to derail or validate.

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Declarations

Statement of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library**, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the conditions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Acknowledgment of Collaboration and Authorship

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis contains a scholarly work of which I am a joint author. A/P Lynne McCormack solely contributed to the design of the research, and I recruited participants, conducted the semi-structured interviews, and transcribed the data. A/P McCormack was the independent auditor during data analysis and supervised revision of the thesis. I also conducted an independent audit of the transcripts prior to both authors robustly collaborating on final thematic content. I have compiled this thesis as part requirement of a Masters of Clinical Psychology and as such have taken the lead in writing of the initial and final versions of the thesis.

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Date 14th November, 2018

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Abstract

No known research explores the interpersonal dynamics of the therapeutic relationship in adult life following childhood abuse. For adult survivors of childhood trauma the therapeutic relationship has the potential to mimic the dynamics of earlier abusive relationships with caregivers: power, authority, trust, privacy, aloneness and therapist gender. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) this study explored the participant's subjective interpretation of the therapeutic relationship as an adult in the aftermath of complex childhood trauma. In doing so, it explored both positive and negative interpretation of the participant's experience of the therapeutic relationship. Data revealed one superordinate theme: *Irony of Judgement*, which overarched 6 subordinate themes: *a) therapeutic relationship, b) being ready for therapy, c) self as compassionate forgiving therapist, d) Intergenerational repeating, e) layers of toxicity, and f) naming the demon inside*. These themes explored layers of toxicity that emerged as participants spoke of destructive trans-generational behaviours that thwarted wellbeing across generations. In recognising intergenerational repeating, engaging in therapy and the therapeutic relationship allowed these participants to separate self and begin an individual journey of recovery. Therapy that was sensitive to adult distress as an aftermath of complex childhood trauma, through a collaborative, non-judgemental person-centred approach, often disallowed the necessity for a diagnosis in adult life. Similarly, where a diagnosis brought meaning to a participant's childhood trauma rather than labelling the adult, recovery was also supported. Therefore, for these participants, therapy had the power to derail recovery through a focus on adult functioning often with invalidating diagnoses, or validate the adult psychological burden from a traumatised childhood not of their own making.

Key words: *Complex childhood trauma; therapeutic dynamics; derailment; validation; hope.*