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Introduction to Trauma Bonding

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Book Overview

Trauma bonding is a paradoxical, psychological response that is often inadequately measured by researchers and misunderstood by the public. At the most basic level, trauma bonding is one of many labels that has been assigned to the phenomenon of victims developing emotional attachments to their abusers or captors. Consequences of trauma bonding are endured by individuals, and at times by their families and friends, because those who perpetrate interpersonal crimes create conditions ripe for the formation of a trauma bond. Trauma bonding allows perpetrators of interpersonal crimes to further exploit and take advantage of crime victims. From children who are psychologically attached to a sex offender and therefore do not disclose the enduring of daily molestation (Summit, 1983) to youth who are conscripted in criminal enterprises as drug mules or sex-trafficking victims (Windle et al., 2020), trauma bonding exacerbates and extends the devastating consequences of interpersonal trauma and violence.

Despite repeated observations of trauma bonding affecting victims of interpersonal crimes, little is known about its formation or persistence, and even less is known about positive resolution in survivors. The scope of this book encompasses a review of the existing theoretical conceptualizations and research findings on trauma bonding in relation to various forms of interpersonal crimes, including human trafficking, intimate partner violence, child sexual abuse, cults, kidnapping, gangs, and terrorism. Each chapter highlights the complexities of intervention and treatment for survivors, first responders, and clinicians. The chapters feature case studies, voices of survivors, and insights from practitioners on the frontlines to provide the reader with a blending of the experience of trauma bonding in real life with well-researched information. Critical concerns regarding gaps in research focused on trauma bonding as well as guidance regarding potential avenues for the integration of theory and research are addressed. Lastly, implications for policies related to trauma bonding within the field of interpersonal violence are considered throughout the book.

A Survivor's Voice

My final abuser was an intimate partner. He started his manipulation of me by accepting my kids as his own and pretending to be a good father. His main way of controlling me was to use my children. He fed into my need for a family and pretended to be one with me by going so far as to have my kids call him dad. I wanted a family more than anything. I wanted to do better for my children than what had been done to me. And I knew that I didn't know what a "normal" family looked like. So anything he told me about how a "good mom" behaves, I believed because his family seemed so normal. He convinced me that we were a family, albeit an isolated one. It was just us. He kept us away from others who may have seen what was happening by convincing me that we were above those other people. Our family was special. He convinced me that the acts he made me commit were for my children. He convinced me that I was taking care of my children by bringing in the money and protecting the children by keeping everything a secret and pretending to be a stay at home mom. He convinced me that everything I was doing was for the family. He convinced me that I was actually in control of the situation because I could pick the "dates." He would send me out to make money as a prostitute to finance our lives, but then he would control what I wore around town so that I didn't "look like a slut." His emotions were all over the place.

One day, he would be kind to me and loving and talking about the future. The next, he was calling me names, putting his hands on me, and sleeping with other girls. And that cycle of thinking I finally had everything I had ever wanted and then wishing he would come back to that happy place is what kept me trapped. He didn't have to hurt me physically anymore. The words he used and his withdrawal of affection were enough to keep me actually trying to stay with him, to work it out with him, to help him. His control of me was complete. I would do anything to have my family.

Then, after many years of enduring this abuse, I left. I had enough support so that I could leave. I had support to find an apartment and enroll in college. But then, that support dwindled. I looked like I was doing fine outwardly because I could fake it so well. I had not yet learned about trauma bonds and the hold my abuser would have on me even after I had left him. He knew. He kept planting seeds of doubt in my mind about my new life. Every phone call and every visit, he would remind me that he was a part of the family. That I was stopping him from seeing the kids. That anytime he suffered, those kids suffered. He moved in with me several times because he "needed" a place to go, and I was a "bitch" if I wouldn't help him. He "borrowed" money from me (or had me steal it for him when I didn't have any) because of some "need" that arose or bill that was due, and I had to help him because I was the person who had promised to be there forever and then left. He used the "a good mom would..." tactic that had worked to keep me for so long. He used me being a Christian against me. What would Jesus do? He would help his fellow man, so I am not a good Christian if I turn him away. He would tell me how much he loved me and had changed or wanted to change or was going to change. Sometimes I would believe him and try again, and sometimes I would just give in to his demands because it was easier than the fight.

And, there's the clincher. It may take us years to recognize the control tactics our abusers used. It will also take us years to undo the negative self-talk they shoved into our brains for us to ruminate. Often, when we leave the abusive situation, people expect that to be the end of the abuse. But, as many of us survivors of abuse know, that is when it really amps up. Our abuser is in a panic because he/she has lost his/her object of aggression. That abuser will pull out all of the stops to bring us back to the fold. And for a person like me who had been searching for someone or something to fill a void, all of those sweet promises seem to fit that void well.

It took years of dedicated effort to undo the voices he put in my head. And during that time in which I was unlearning abuse, I had to question everyone and everything. I felt if he had tricked me so easily, then others could as well. I no longer trusted my own brain to make safe choices. I second guessed everyone's motives. I second guessed my own thoughts and my own feelings. I had always considered myself smart and strong. To learn that I had been tricked for so long made me feel even more vulnerable. I had to learn how to rewrite the lies he told me about myself. I had to learn how to trust my brain again. And I had to learn how to have a safe relationship with a former abuser because, after all, we are a family.

Marianne Thomas, PhD
 Founder
 My Name My Voice

KEY TERMS

Bond: A bond is a connection. Bonds may be of a special mutual emotional nature, such as a romantic attachment, or they may be based on other emotions (e.g., fear, such as seen in the bond between the captor and the captive).

Bonding: Any activity, action, condition, or behavior that helps establish or maintain a connection.

Brainwashing: The term closely related to trauma bonding is often used in conjunction with prisoners of war (POWs) and cult members. Brainwashing has been defined as “the deliberate creation of culture shock through isolation, alienation, and intimidation in order to weaken a person's ego strengths” (Kaplan & Sadock, 1998, p. 863). All individuals are thought to be susceptible to brainwashing if the exposure is long enough, they are alone and without support, and have no hope of escaping (Kaplan & Sadock, 1998, p. 863).

Hostage Captor Effect: A term used by law enforcement professionals and criminal justice researchers to identify the phenomenon of trauma bonding in the context of hostage taking.

Stockholm Syndrome: The most recognized and colloquial term related to this phenomenon of bonding with an abuser. The term was first used following a bank robbery that evolved into a hostage situation in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1973. During the prolonged event, the captives acquired positive attachments to their captors, later posting bail for them, with some captives even expressing a desire to marry their captors (Dutton & Painter, 1981). The term

Stockholm syndrome is generally used to describe attachments developing between captors and captives during kidnapping or hostage events.

Trauma Bonding: A term used by Dutton and Painter (1981) as a descriptive label for the development of a psychological connection between an abuser and the abused and is primarily used in the context of intimate partner violence.

Trauma-Coerced Attachment: A more recently developed label to describe the attachment process within the relationship dynamics of sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC; Doychak & Raghavan, 2020, 2023; Sanchez et al., 2019). Sanchez et al. (2019) theorized that trauma bonding in CSEC is “uni-directional” rather than bidirectional, with the exploiter terrorizing the victim for the purposes of obtaining profit without a reciprocal emotional connection with the victim (Sanchez et al., 2019).

Terminology and Contexts

The phenomenon of victims developing emotional attachments to their abusers or captors has been observed in situations involving intimate partner violence, child abuse, hostage taking, human trafficking, and cults. While the circumstances may differ in each context, there is significant overlap in both the conditions that drive a trauma bond and in the response of those experiencing a trauma bond. Historically, there have been an array of terms used to label the complex and paradoxical attachment that often forms between the victim and the victimizer to abet victim survival and harm avoidance (Casassa et al., 2022; Doychak & Raghavan, 2020, 2023; Reid et al., 2013; Sanchez et al., 2019). These labels (e.g., brainwashing and Stockholm syndrome) are discussed in length in the chapters that cover the respective forms of interpersonal violence in which these labels for trauma bonding are used. Several of the most recognized labels for trauma bonding are noted among the key terms in this chapter.

No label or terminology used for trauma bonding is without its proponents or detractors as the phenomenon itself is poorly researched and often misunderstood by the public. Terms and labels are powerful components in the construction of knowledge within a society. In particular, labels used in the media impact public discourse (Goddard et al., 2005). Moreover, values and social capital can be associated with particular words, thereby influencing public policies (Goddard et al., 2005). One concern regarding certain labels associated with trauma bonding is that the labels themselves could cast blame on victims for the violence and abuse committed against them due to the misguided notion that victims of interpersonal violence are somehow colluding with the abuser. In order to counter misguided victim blaming, this book aims to bring a greater understanding of trauma bonding in order to reduce victim blaming and misappropriation of blame from the abuser to the victim. Language and terminology cannot be allowed to transform the devastating consequences of interpersonal trauma into a discourse of victim blaming, or to insinuate victim-and-offender complicity, nor to allow the criminal behavior of abusers to be disguised. The focus of blame should clearly be on the abuse and the abuser. The alternative grants the abuser absolution.

The term trauma bonding is selected for use throughout the book as it captures the central essence of the phenomenon of the formation of a psychological connection between the abuser and the abused across numerous forms of interpersonal violence. Let us take a deeper look at the meaning of the words used in the construction of this term.

Bonding is the noun and primary construct in the term trauma bonding. Bonding has been defined as the process of forming a connection. When we glue or weld two objects together, we use the term bonding. Similarly, bonding is the label used to describe the psychological glue that connects one person to another. Some bonds are positive when they are characterized by a special, mutual emotional nature such as the emotional bond between a parent and a child or romantic bonds between partners. Conversely, bonds may be based upon other emotions (e.g., fear—such as seen in the bond between the abuser and the abused) or arise from differing conditions (e.g., debt—such as between the borrower and the lender). Another word using the same root word bond is bondage, which means “a state of being bound usually by compulsion (as of law)” or “servitude or subjugation to a controlling person or force” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The term debt bondage conveys that there is an obligation akin to slavery that exists between two individuals based on debt. The obligation can be completely based on a set of false pretenses. For example, with youth entrapped in debt bondage to a drug trafficker: “Debt-bonding and ensuing enslavement can be facilitated where a ‘fake’ mugging takes place by an unknown gang member while a victim may be carrying a quantity of drugs and/or money” (Pearson & Cavener, 2024, p. 3). Therefore, bonds occur when a set of conditions or behaviors—whether positive or negative, authentic, or connived—result in the formation of a connection.

In the term trauma bonding, trauma is used as the adjective or descriptor of the type of bond formation. Trauma is defined as “a psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience, often involving a sense of intense fear, terror, and helplessness” (Perry, 2007, p. 15). The label trauma bonding indicates a connection that is conditional upon or generated by a distressing event involving fear, terror, and helplessness. More specifically, this book focuses on trauma bonding in the context of interpersonal violence or a bond that exists between the one causing the trauma and the victim of the trauma. Given the meaning of the noun and adjective forming the term trauma bonding, we are purposefully taking a victim-centered perspective by emphasizing the condition of bonding generated by the trauma experienced by the victim in the label used to describe this poorly understood phenomenon.

Outline of the Following Chapters

The chapters of the book are interconnected and may be read sequentially by the reader who desires to understand trauma bonding in all contexts. Alternatively, each chapter is sufficiently comprehensive to allow readers to delve into select chapters to gain an understanding of trauma bonding within one or two specific contexts or for use as supplemental content for courses focused on a particular form of interpersonal violence. More specifically, each chapter provides a list of

key terms and definitions, critical thinking questions, and suggestions for further reading for students and researchers who would like to take a deeper dive into the specific chapter topic.

Chapter 2: General Theories of Trauma Bonding

Most theories of trauma bonding are abuse-specific theories, meaning they were developed to explain trauma bonding in a single abusive context. A few theories of trauma bonding are more general and have been applied across more than one type of interpersonal violence and are considered abuse-general theories. In Chapter 2, we provide an overview of the abuse-general theories of trauma bonding that have informed current thinking. We classify abuse-general theories of trauma bonding into psychological, evolutionary, and neurobiological theories. Each theory is described in detail, and relevant empirical research is summarized. The final section of the chapter concludes with a discussion of where the theories may intersect and the areas most urgently in need of further research.

Chapter 3: Measures of Trauma Bonding

Despite empirical evidence of trauma bonding among survivors of various forms of interpersonal violence, no measure of trauma bonding has been fully developed, evaluated, and standardized. With lack of a reliable measure, it is difficult to identify trauma bonding among survivors of interpersonal violence or to evaluate treatment effectiveness. Chapter 3 first explains the purpose of measures and the process of measure development and then reviews the development of existing measures of trauma bonding. Lastly, the need for standardized and validated measures of trauma bonding as well as the ways to advance research on trauma bonding are discussed.

Chapter 4: Trauma Bonding and Intimate Partner Violence

This chapter addresses the formation of trauma bonds in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV). The chapter begins by covering the typical abusive tactics observed in IPV and commonly misunderstood responses of victims of IPV. Our understanding of the trauma-generated dynamics of IPV, such as trauma bonding, has its roots, in large part, in what Walker (1979) termed “battered woman syndrome,” now known as “battered person syndrome” or “domestic violence syndrome.” Moving beyond these initial theoretical foundations, this chapter examines a collection of existing theoretical conceptualizations explaining trauma bonding in IPV as well as the research findings from studies exploring trauma bonding in the context of IPV.

Chapter 5: Trauma Bonding and Childhood Sexual Abuse

This chapter includes a review of the existing theoretical conceptualizations and research findings on trauma bonding connected to childhood sexual abuse (CSA). The chapter will highlight the connection between CSA and trauma bonding, which has been explained through the lens of the child sexual abuse

accommodation syndrome (CSAAS). CSAAS was developed to explain the clinically observed yet perplexing responses of children who had been sexually abused. CSAAS proposes that when a child is sexually abused and not immediately protected, the child chooses the only survivable option available to him/her to accept the situation and accommodate to the reality of continuing abuse.

Chapter 6: Trauma Bonding and Human Trafficking

The devastating impacts of trauma bonding on survivors of human trafficking have been repeatedly observed by researchers and practitioners alike. Considered “the super glue of sex trafficking” (Reid & Jones, 2011), trauma bonding prevents survivors from exiting exploitive environments and facilitates a toxic cycle of repeat exploitation. This chapter reviews the empirical evidence of trauma bonding in the context of human trafficking as well as the impact of trauma bonding on the observed patterns of revictimization in human trafficking. We discuss trauma bonding in the context of child sex trafficking and adult sex trafficking, including a discussion of the differences due to developmental life stage of the victims. The chapter also covers the scant evidence of trauma bonding among victims of other forms of human trafficking, including labor trafficking, human trafficking in the context of gang-related or organized drug trafficking, and child soldiers.

Chapter 7: Trauma Bonding and Hostage Taking/Kidnapping

This chapter includes a review of the existing theoretical conceptualizations and research findings on trauma bonding connected to hostage taking and kidnapping. This chapter covers trauma bonding between captors and captives during a kidnapping or hostage event, which encompasses several unique victim and offender dynamics as well as psychological processes that differentiate trauma bonding in the context of hostage taking from trauma bonding in the context of other forms of interpersonal violence discussed in this book. Moreover, the history of the concept of Stockholm syndrome is discussed more extensively in this chapter.

Chapter 8: Trauma Bonding and Cults

This chapter highlights the existing theoretical conceptualizations and research findings on trauma bonding connected to cults. The most common feature of abusive relationships in the context of cults is the assault on the victim’s identity. Accordingly, this chapter discusses how cultic systems attack the central elements of the self, including worldview, ego strength, and social interaction, that results in repression of the pre-cult identity of group members. The chapter includes content regarding the recent exposure of NXIVM, conviction of cult leader Keith Raniere and others associated with NXIVM, and the evidence of trauma bonding among NXIVM members.

Chapter 9: Trauma Bonding among Gangs and Terrorist Groups

This chapter reviews the existing theoretical conceptualizations and research findings on trauma bonding connected to emerging/additional forms of interpersonal

violence such as gang exploitation in young people. As trauma bonding has been observed to have a paradoxical effect on victims of interpersonal violence in varied contexts, trauma bonding warrants investigation and could offer an explanation for patterns in attitudes and behaviors observed in additional settings that involve interpersonal violence such as prison or street gangs, extremist or militant groups, and child soldiers or suicide bombers. This chapter discusses the process of solidifying a trauma bond within criminal groups, which often requires assault from within the group through initiation rituals or continuous abuse. Understanding the intricacies of trauma bonding in these settings is crucial for the development of effective interventions and strategies to address the complex and destructive relationships that emerge in these groups.

Chapter 10: Treatment Challenges Related to Trauma Bonding

This chapter highlights the consequences of trauma and its connection to trauma bonding as well as the complexities of treatment for those experiencing trauma bonds. Barriers to treatment are identified including victim identification, difficulty separating from the abuser, and client safety and self-determination. Recommended treatment modalities and suggested best practices for supporting those who have experienced or are experiencing a trauma bond are discussed.

Chapter 11: Trauma Bonding and the Law

This chapter explores the use of trauma bonding within legal proceedings as a strategy for both defense and prosecution. Trauma bonding has been frequently introduced through expert witness testimony to explain victim behavior that may seem counterintuitive without a proper context. The current chapter reviews the admissibility requirements for expert witness testimony, including relevant case law and governing legislation. The use of trauma bonding as a legal framework within the context of battered woman syndrome, Stockholm syndrome, child sexual abuse accommodation syndrome, and brainwashing is discussed. Currently, trauma bonding is often used in the defense of battered women charged with harming their abusers as a support for affirmative defenses, such as self-defense and duress. The utility of trauma bonding for prosecution to restore victim credibility and dispel misconceptions about victim behavior in trafficking, domestic violence, and child abuse cases is also highlighted within this chapter. However, barriers to the admissibility of trauma bonding evidence exist due to limited research on trauma bonding and lack of diagnostic criteria. Overall, expert testimony can provide judges and juries with the necessary context about trauma bonds that shape victim reactions, though stronger empirical foundation is needed to advance the legal utility of trauma bonding frameworks.

Chapter 12: A Way Forward

The final chapter begins with a Strengths–Weaknesses–Opportunities–Threats (SWOT) analysis of the current state of research and response to trauma bonding

in the context of interpersonal violence. Summarizing the findings of the chapters of this book, the SWOT analysis is employed as a way-forward strategy to improve our response to the challenge of trauma bonding. The chapter explores how scholars and researchers in the field of interpersonal violence can build upon prior research and theoretical conceptualizations of trauma bonding in order to advise clinicians, inform policymakers, and protect victims.

Taken together, the chapters of this book postulate ways that can advance our understanding and response to trauma bonding. Historically, trauma bonding research has suffered from a lack of sufficient data and has failed to employ innovative methods required to advance our understanding of trauma bonding. Notably, the most recent *U.S. Trafficking in Person Report* (2020) emphasizes the lack of understanding and research on trauma bonding in human trafficking. Specifically, the report notes the urgent need for tools for assessing trauma bonding, help identifying red flag indicators of trauma bonding, and the need to establish response protocols (p. 21). This book was written to address this need and provides a strong empirically based foundation for both academics and practitioners seeking to gain a greater understanding of trauma bonding in order to disrupt the impact of interpersonal violence. For both early-career and accomplished researchers, this book can serve as a guide for future research projects centering around the topic of trauma bonding. For practitioners and policymakers tasked with championing the needs of survivors of interpersonal violence, each chapter informs and recommends next steps that can be taken to best serve and support survivors of interpersonal violence who have been impacted by trauma and trauma bonding.

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