ISRAELI AND PALESTENIAN TEACHERS LEARN ABOUT CHILDREN AND TRAUMA: SECURITY, CONNECTION, MEANING

Alan Flashman, MD

Setting the stage

The Middle East Children's Association is a nonprofit Bi-National Israeli-Palestinian Organisation. Created by its directors, Dr. Ghassan Abdullah of Ramallah, P. A. and Ms. Adina Shapiro of Jerusalem, Israel, the association works to bring together Palestinian and Israeli educators for joint efforts in a variety of educational areas such as "oral history", "non-violence", "civics" or "mathematics". The original intention was to hold bi-weekly bi-national meetings for some dozen parallel groups. Due to the outbreak of violent conflict between Israelis and Palestinians since the fall of 2000, this structure became untenable, as all possibilities of finding a mutual meeting place were curtailed. During the height of the violence, many teachers on each side expressed the wish to come to grips with the impact of the morbid traumatic situation on the children in their classrooms. As a response to these needs, the Association sponsored in the summer of 2002 an exceptional bi-national meeting for some 80 teachers from the two sides on a neutral ground in Rhodes, followed up with uni-national meetings on each side in the fall of 2002. This reports summarises the theory and practice that informed much of these meetings. The dilemmas are reported as they are experienced from the Israeli side alone. Hopefully a later report could summarise the Palestinian experience directly.

It should be stressed that the material presented here was designed for application by Israeli and Palestinian teachers in their classrooms, as a primary community intervention for the alleviation and secondary prevention of excessive stress due to the on-going violence and its traumatic effects.

Levels of coping with trauma: theory and practice

Children are faced with three levels of difficulty facing trauma. These levels can be described as relating to needs for personal *security,* for a sense of *connection* with others facing the trauma, and for giving voice to the personal *meaning* that the traumatic situation bears for each child (Flashman, 2002). Each level of difficulty deserves close attention in its own right. This report is devoted to an overview, to demonstrate each level and the differences between them. A brief sketch will be made of one possible approach to the needs of each level. Finally, one approach that could *integrate* the three levels together will be demonstrated. The participant teachers were encouraged to bear in mind all three levels while trying to help their students cope with the trauma of the current situation.

Security

Definition

Trauma is a condition in which children feel overwhelmed, and the child's regular defence mechanisms are unable to provide the child with a feeling of security. Such a situation can be described by a developmental analogy. A young baby does not feel master or author of her/his body. Rather, one-year-olds feel that their body is the "larger framework" of their experience, and the experience of the self, the "I", is one part of this body. This situation could be visualised as follows:

MY BODY

me

By the age of two years, children have grown into a different relationship with their bodies. They now feel that "I" is more broad and includes within it the body. They are then able to speak of and relate to their body as a part of the self, the "I" (Kegan, 1981).

ME

my body

In a similar way, trauma feels at first too large for the child. The child feels that the feelings aroused in her are greater than herself, her "I". This creates a feeling of regression, that is, the child feels reduced to a less independent developmental stage. This regression in itself creates a feeling of helplessness and shame.

Restoring security to the child involves repeating the same basic developmental sequence, this time, with the overwhelming pain:

MY PAIN

me

$\longrightarrow$
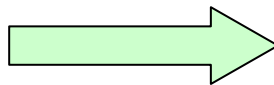
ME

my pain

Practice and experience

One way to invert the I/Pain relationship involves giving name to the pain. Giving name both encourages emotional ventilation and provides mastery in that the child is the one who names the pain.

In the bi-national training in Rhodes, Dr. Ofra Ayalon taught a method for giving name to pain called the FEELING WHEEL. (Ayalon & Lahad, 2000) In our small training groups, both Palestinian and Israeli teachers practised making their own FEELING WHEEL, experienced the process of naming feelings and of associating the different feelings written before them to recent events. Only after having processed their own reactions they moved to discuss different applications in their different school environments.

According to the instructions for using this method in schools, children are offered a circular format, on a large sheet on which they can stand. In the circle the children write the names of their feelings. Younger children may be offered a wheel with feeling-words that they can recognise by name or by an image. In this way a "wheel" is created of the different experienced emotions, and the feelings are given a place and a name. In the classroom, children could be asked to plot the first thing they felt on hearing of a recent terror attack or a military raid. Active listening and acceptance of each individual story without criticism create the conditions of re-building security.

Following the participants' positive experience of relating their personal stories within an atmosphere of acceptance, additional suggestions for enhancing *security* emerged. Children could be encouraged to make good use of their physical environment to restore *security*. Teachers could help a class define the kind of environmental touches, that help restore security. These could include particular music, fragrances, food and drink and even lotions and creams that are felt to be calming - especially for younger children. Choice of calming music would be especially important for adolescents.
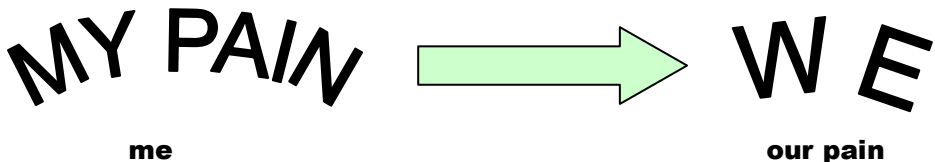
Connection
Definition
In addition to a sense of security, children need to feel that *what they experience connects them as members of a group*. Particularly when faced with overwhelming trauma, a child may feel only s/he is being affected so strongly, that s/he is different from others and thus isolated in her reactions.

Often creating a group "position-statement" regarding the source of the child's pain restores the necessary sense of *connection*. Thus a group feels connected, for example, when they can feel and express anger together at a particular "enemy". Usually, the clearer the trauma, the more defined and possible the creation of a group "position-statement." One of the special difficulties of the current security situation in the Middle East is that a group "position" is very hard to come by despite the direct and painful trauma. Children face a society of adults who feel frustrated and paralysed. This fact itself is poorly recognised or acknowledged. To my experience, a great number of Israeli adults themselves find it difficult to be sure whom to "blame" for the current impasse, or what steps could be expected or demanded and from whom - in order to reach a reality of basic security. This very quandary makes it doubly hard for adults to speak with children.

One possible group "position" would involve articulating together the dilemma in which children find themselves. The "position" itself would involve *giving voice to the perplexity and uncertainty in which children live*, to the vacuum of clarity about what to expect from the adult world, to the shared sense that while each child feels something different at any given time, all the children *share the burden of an uncertain childhood.* This would restore the sense of WE-ness, of connection between the children, and would relieve the isolation of each individual child.

One important way to conceptualise the importance of the "WE" continues a theme of trauma stated before. While children need to move from being overwhelmed by pain to being the master or author of that pain, the "WE" contributes an intermediary phase. It is far easier for children to feel as a group that "WE" are able to contain "OUR" pain. This later helps the child to feel the master of her own pain:

MY PAIN ⟶ W E

me   our pain

Practice and experience

In the Rhodes training, we used "therapeutic cards"[1] as a group activity that could create this sense of *connection*. We used the HABITAT[2] set of cards, which Dr. Ofra Ayalon selected and donated for the demonstration. A group of six teachers volunteered to sit in a small circle. All the HABITAT cards were spread out on a table nearby.

---

[1] www.OH-Cards.comhttp:// http://www.nordbooks.co.il

[2] Habitat is one of a dozen or more sets of therapeutic cards used to enhance group activities, described in the book: Strawberries Beyond my Window, by Waltraud Kirschke.

1. Each teacher was asked to choose one card that gave expression to a dominant feeling she experienced when her community had been threatened, as a response to a recent terrorist attack (against Israelis) or a military raid (against Palestinians). Teachers approached the table one or two at a time until each had chosen her card.
2. All the teachers revealed their cards together while sitting in the circle. Thus each teacher could see the inner experiences of the other group members represented simultaneously.
3. In turn each teacher took all the cards. She placed on the ground in the middle of the circle first her own card. Then she positioned the other cards which she collected from her colleagues according to how her feelings related to the other feelings. Thus this teacher now could see how her feelings connected with the group feelings.
4. The other members of the group (both Israeli and Palestinians) were invited to experience through the cards how their colleague experienced herself in relation to their feelings. This way each teacher saw how this colleague experienced her own feelings and absorbed the feelings of the group.
5. Steps 3 & 4 were repeated for each member of the group.
6. In the end the group created a sense of WE by seeing how each individual found a particular place and related in a special way to the feelings of the rest of the group.

This exercise was demonstrated to the entire group of participants. Teachers were encouraged to think in their own culturally appropriate ways of modifying such an approach in their Israeli and Palestinian classrooms.

Meaning

Definition
Once children feel individually secure and collectively connected, they can safely be helped to give voice to the *meaning* of their situation. Now they can express their differences one from the other, standing together on connected ground.

I think that the important meanings that need room - and help to be expressed, are the *meanings that the adult world does not like to hear*. These are meanings connected to how children feel towards the adult world that has failed them. They are the voice of protest, of anger with adults, of a sense of being entitled to a better world, of betrayal by adults who do not protect them, of fear of having to rely on these adults and of despair with the world of their parents.

These are entirely normative questions. Naturally, children may confuse a good question with a definitive answer (not only children do this). They will need the help that comes from careful listening to the details of the protest or despair, the way in which each child has something unique to say. This listening provides recognition, an echo that gives the child assurance that there is value in what s/he has to say, even if the answer is not at hand.

It is very easy to gloss over the level of meaning. It is rather natural for adults, especially teachers who devote their lives to helping children, to want to provide the answers for the children. Now, *security* and *connection* are really more like answers, they are feelings we help children to acquire. *Meaning*, however, is the place for the unanswered question. It is here that the child confronts the gaps in reality. No one can spare a child confrontation with these gaps, the same way that no one can spare a child the necessary pains of growing up. But the child's experience of herself is entirely different when the truth of her painful questions is acknowledged as important.

Imagine the opposite situation. Imagine that children, who are upset by traumatic events, are helped to calm down and to feel part of the class. Then they are expected to proceed to "business as usual", as if to say that being calm and connected is enough. The children in this class may well feel silenced by a well-meaning teacher who "takes care" of them without then listening to them. Children will feel that they are expected to feel according to what adults want them to feel. They will become confused by the feelings of anger or despair that they still feel but will understand that they are not to give them voice. Anyway, if they were to persist, they would only be "calmed down" more.

This subtle but serious silencing will become the lot of all children, who are not actively helped to find and express their full inner voice, including the protest against the very adults who are trying to help them. Adults hold all the power over expression, because children need the help of adults to formulate their authentic voice. It is far too easy and self-serving for adults to be "silencers" in the guise of protectors. Of course, adults must be ready themselves to listen to a voice that currently many adult Israelis find difficult to express or receive. This will be part of the teachers' preparation. A "silenced" adult will have trouble helping a child to give voice. Current feminist developmental literature has demonstrated this amply (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Taylor, Gilligan & Sullivan, 1995).

What would be the result of leaving children silent? What do children do when faced with inner feelings of protest that are not acknowledged? I think they will seek a pseudo-resolution for these feelings. In our situation of armed conflict, children will be vulnerable to a process of *demonisation*. It will feel safer for Israeli children to direct all of their frustration and anger at the anonymous other, "the Palestinians", as Palestinians could just as easily relate to "the Israelis" or "the Jews." In my experience the only antidote to demonisation is to give adequate voice to the meanings of protest. Otherwise, teaching "against" demonisation will be experienced by children as another form of silencing and be deeply resented and rejected.

Demonisation
Violent conflict arouses violent emotions. During Israel's current violent conflict with the Palestinian Authority one violent emotion to which we are particularly susceptible is the demonisation of the Palestinian people. The mechanism of demonisation is the psychological defence mechanism of projection: parts of our

"selves", which are temporarily difficult to accept, are seen as belonging solely to the other (Ayalon, 1998). Projection has its uses in normal everyday psychological balance. And the battered and bewildered Israeli psyche surely needs better defence than Israeli bus stations and cafes. Demonisation of an entire people is the expression of massive group projection. What are the effects of such demonisation upon our own children's development?

Defence mechanisms play a useful role in our emotional life when they create temporary and partial solutions that remain open to further work and to further input from reality and from our thinking. The crucial question for children becomes its effect on further development: Does the temporary arrangement enhance and facilitate further development or does it retard or obstruct such progress?

Massive projection becomes a developmental danger for children because it is too absolute, too final, and too irreversible, in short - virtually irresistible. It offers a pseudo-solution, a partial truth, which is "too good", and thereby obstructs rather than facilitates seeking and finding better solutions (Waelder, 1936). Massive projection takes a toll on every aspect of emotional balance and development:

- **On aggression**: By projecting murderous impulses upon Palestinians alone, Israeli children become estranged from their own aggressive instincts. They feel less control over their own natural inner violence, as the violence they project upon Palestinians is considered out of control. This will make it more difficult for them to be normally aggressive with each other and thus learn how to make their personal aggression work in concert with other parts of their personality. Projection makes our own aggression a "loose cannon."
- **On conscience**: It is only in grade school that children begin to reliably feel responsible for their own actions. They gradually take inside themselves the voices of parents who tell them what is right and wrong, permitted and forbidden. We help a child all along this path by pointing out that while it is hard to criticise herself, she gains more self-control and autonomy by learning to see her own failings and take responsibility for them (Furman, 1980). Massive projection runs directly counter to this sensitive, new developmental achievement. By demonising the Palestinians, children are encouraged to feel that *our* side is free from self-critique or responsibility, because *their* side deserves anything we do. A parent would be horrified if his child insisted that this was the only way to understand why the child has done something. "It's *his* fault" is exactly what we are trying to help children grow beyond.
- **On thinking and learning:** Children go to school not just to learn information. They learn about learning, and particularly they learn the *pleasures* of learning and thinking, what psychoanalysts refer to as sublimations (A. Freud, 1965). They learn that thinking before acting, that talking about feelings give them pleasure and mastery, and are effective in mastering reality. Demonisation of Palestinian children leaves little room for thought or learning. Projection is a far more primitive – and therefore

attractive – psychic mechanism than sublimation. In an atmosphere that condones and encourages massive projection, children will find it very difficult to attend to the more complex and tedious formation of sublimations necessary for learning.

- **On reality:** Knowing an answer may seem to be preferable to having a question. We generally wish to help children to approach reality with questions. One of the most pressing questions of our current reality would be, "What is it like to be my age and live in the Palestinian Authority today? How do children there cope day by day? What losses and fears and threats do they encounter?" These questions are foreclosed by the answer that demonisation provides. Foreclosing one question risks foreclosure of other questions, indeed the risk in foreclosing just one question runs the risk of barring an open attitude to reality altogether. Children burdened by demonising the Palestinians become burdened with answers that precede questions.

- **On fantasy:** Human creative experience depends upon the existence of a realm where the imaginary and the real can intermingle. The British Psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott called this the "transitional zone." (Winnicott, 1971) A common example involves the suspension of the question "is this real" that allows us to become emotionally involved in a film or novel. Artists commonly rely on this lifting of the barrier between fantasy and reality to create with materials form each realm. Access to this transitional zone is as vulnerable as it is essential for growth.

  Now, demonisation is an example of invasion of fantasy into reality. Devils, hobgoblins, vampires are all the lawful denizens of our fantasy world. We can meet them safely in our transitional zone. But when an entire, neighbouring people are made into demons, and the media upon whom we rely to report reality confirms this assignation, then this fantasy becomes too frightening and too convincing – precisely because it has roots so close to home, right in out own fantasies.

  This invasion creates a need to close down the transitional zone, and separate reality from fantasy. Some children will respond with a choice of reality only, although that reality will be infused with fantasy in a frightening, flooding, unproductive way. Such children will become aggressive towards their "real" enemies, including Israeli children who are "soft" on the enemy. Other children will retreat into fantasy, and leave no place in reality for even assertion or self-protection form others. Both children will have their creative life narrowed severely.

- **On voice:** Carol Gilligan and her colleagues have recently described the way in which girls "know" and "say" a lot more about social relations during their primary school years than they do as adolescents. These researches have shown how the need to become a "good girl" who is acceptable to all friends and pleasing to adults creates the risk that the girl may "lose her voice" and settle for pseudo-relationships at the cost of real relationships. (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Now many an Israeli schoolgirl could naturally imagine her age mates in the Palestinian Authority suffering

a nightmarish daily reality. This intuition would be easily suppressed by the demonisation expected by parents and peers. But the girl who loses voice about one matter runs a developmental risk of loss of voice regarding many other social insights. So I believe there could be a particular risk to girls who are silenced from casting doubt on the demonisation process.

- **On history:** Children take part in the great group narrative we call history. They need a story that provides coherence and affiliation. They need a "we" that is present through time with whom they can feel connected. Demonisation tends to collapse the story of who *we* are into the much less helpful story of who *they* are. Our own complex, fascinating and inspiring history needs no demonic Other to be told. Children can understand that there is a tragic conflict and that the solution is not yet clear. Once they are offered the demonic Other, their interest and ability to appreciate the story of who *we* are pales into the hatred of that Other.

- **On family:** The family is normally a place for learning about normative conflict. Siblings make rival claims for parental attention or protection. Spouses have competing needs for resources and affection. The Other is always a member of the group. With demonisation afoot, family members may find more freedom to demonise others in the family, the in-laws, and the other sibling camp. Alternatively, the family may become "united" around defending itself against Others who are different. This creates a pseudo-unity in which normative conflicts are erased by the need to "stand united." Pseudo-unity comes at the price of disavowing the presence or possibility of resolving the real conflicts in the family. Students of Family Therapist Murray Bowen know that family health requires the ability of real conflict to find real resolution. (Bowen, 1978; Hoffman, 1981) Families with a higher level of "differentiation" allow room for conflicting members to settle their differences. More poorly differentiated families form "triangles" in which conflicts are displaced upon other relations. For example, spouses may deflect their own conflict by teaming up, with or against a given child, or grandparent, or school. Demonisation of the Palestinians could provide an Israeli family with too-convenient a triangle upon whom to displace all normative inner conflicts, which are then doomed to be remained unresolved, with a lowering of the families level of differentiation.

- **On social relations:** Peer relations are the great training ground for social relations as adults. We would like to believe that children learn to respect their peers, to listen to differences, to assert their own needs without erasing the needs of others. We would be horrified to learn that children have demonised another child or another group. When we find this has happened – as it often does – we like to believe that we respond in a vigorous adult educational manner to challenge the very process of mass projection. But in the current climate of demonisation of Palestinians, children are more likely to learn of the acceptability and indeed advantages of mass projection. They become more likely to apply this strategy in their own relations. Hate and

projection do not tend to stay put, and more commonly fall back upon the group using them.

- **On spirit:** Those Israelis who wish to teach something about the world of Spirit generally look to the notion of human brotherhood as a fundamental principle in which the presence of One Creator is realised. (See Kovel, 1991) In the brotherhood of man there are conflicts, tragedies, enemies, - but not demons. The very notion of a different form of human being, who only hates us and who is not like us in any way – this invites in children a Gnostic dualism on earth that is easily transferred onto the celestial sphere. Those who find in Martin Buber's (1970; Schlipp & Friedman, 1967) theology of dialogue an important statement of Jewish spirit will find the spread of demonisation antithetical to this approach. Even in times of crisis and conflict – and perhaps especially in such times – children are most open to lessons of the Spirit (see Coles, 1986), and most vulnerable to the suffocation of spirit by chauvinism and demonisation.

- **On hope:** I recently concluded a piece for the Jerusalem Post (2002) with the sentence:

  > *"Nothing gives children more hope than the understanding that children of the enemy side are very much like themselves, - also growing up in times of pain, solitude and silence".*

  This sentence was removed by the editor. But I stand by this sentence – indeed its fate prompted part of this essay. To what can Israeli children turn in hopes for a brighter future? To a resumed conquest? To an even more extreme and aggressive "solution?" All of my experience with children suggests that children need to hope that on the other side there are children like themselves, who wish to live in a quiet and just way, protected and safe. I believe that by demonising the Palestinian people – including their children – we deny our children a lost ray of hope, and condemn them to a future of mutual demonisation, bloodshed, and hopelessness.

Practice and experience

Several questions for class discussion were suggested both to the Israeli and Palestinian participants. These are intended to help all children give voice to their inner meanings, and to include the issue of demonisation within such discussions.

1. What do adults expect from children? For example, how do adults insist that children resolve their differences on the soccer field?
2. What do children expect from adults? This could include a discussion of how children experience the behaviour of adults around them, at home or in school, or in society. A consideration of the contradictions between adult expectations and adult behaviour is invited.
3. How does one survive disappointment? Children could be encouraged to give examples of frustrations that they live with in personal, social, and political spheres.
4. What is it like to grow up as a Palestinian in these times? What is it like to grow up as an Israeli in these times?

Integration

Definition

The classroom does not approach the three levels outlined here in an orderly fashion. The levels are separated here only for the sake of definition. In the real world all three levels are experienced together. One example was demonstrated that could create a climate that approaches all three levels. This approach was called: "A Safe Space".

Practice and experience

One teacher ● volunteered to report on a difficult experience she had with a child deeply affected by the recent disturbances.

She was asked to choose four helpers:
- two to sit on either side
- two to sit opposite her
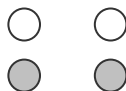
The volunteer was asked to relate a situation in which she felt great difficulty in helping a child traumatised by one of the recent attacks of violence. While she spoke, she was encouraged to make use of her helpers, and they were encouraged to offer support, checking with the volunteer that the help they wanted to offer at any moment coincided with her needs. For example, those sitting by her sides could offer shoulder-to-shoulder closeness, those opposite could ask questions to make sure they were understanding the story well. I want to emphasise here a few additional pointers regarding this method:
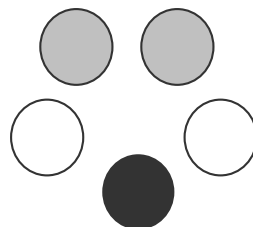
1. The *rationale* involves having the volunteer assume responsibility for enlisting the help of others in creating her own safe environment.
2. The volunteer should be able to experience three levels of help.
   - Those beside her are meant to establish *security*.
   - Those opposite her are meant to acknowledge *meaning.*
   - The entire group is experienced as *connection*.
3. In actual practice such a group would move in and out of these three levels as needed by the volunteer.
4. A facilitator leading such an exercise would be aware that the helpers opposite might attempt to understand meaning before there is enough security and connection. The facilitator would be careful to check with the volunteer regularly whether her needs for help were being met at every moment.
5. In the full exercise each member of the group would in turn become the volunteer.
   - Each new volunteer rearranges her helpers in the way best suited for herself. She will choose whom she wants in each position.
   - When a full round of turns at relating a personal story is anticipated, each helper is always also thinking about what kind of help she will want when her turn comes. In this way the group task is to become each time an effective helping group – the same people, constituted in different roles. This reflects on the connection aspect of the group in the exercise with the cards described above.

6. The exercise gives practical experiential acknowledgement to the tremendous need for a safe and connected environment in which trauma can be related.
7. Teachers were encouraged to explore the possible application of such a technique with their pupils.
8. Teachers were encouraged to remind themselves and each other of their own experiences and especially intuitive successes in creating an integrated experience of security, connection and meaning.

The school
How can teachers create an atmosphere of security, connection, and meaning for themselves? Several participants raised this crucial question. Adults need to create an integrative experience for themselves before they can transmit it to their pupils. Teachers and principals were encouraged to confront the needs of the adults in each school as a necessary basis for deep work with children. This will hopefully be addressed in future meetings.

References
Ayalon, O. (1998). Reconciliation – changing the face of the enemy. In: O. Ayalon, M, Lahad & A. Cohen. (Eds.) *Community Stress Prevention 3*. Kiryat Shmona, Israel: CSPC.
Ayalon, O. and Lahad, M.(2000). *Life on the Edge/2000.* Haifa: Nord
Bowen, M. (1978). *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice.* New York: Aronson.
Brown, L. M. and Gilligan, C. (1992). *Meeting at the Crossroads*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
Buber, M. (1970). *I and Thou.* Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Scribner's
Coles, R. (1986).*The Political Life of Children.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin
Flashman, A. (2002) in Mason, R., Kids caught in conflict: pain, silence and solitude. *Jerusalem Post,* March 13, 2002.
Freud, A. (1965).*Normality and Pathology in Childhood.* New York: International Universities Press.
Furman, E. (1980). Transference and externalization in latency. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 36:267-84.
Hoffman, L. (1981). *Foundations of Family Therapy.* New York: Basic Books.
Kegan, R. (1982). *The Evolving Self*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
Kirschke, W. (1997). Strawberries Beyond my Window, Games of association for opening the door to creativity and communication. Kirchzarten, Germany: OH Verlag.
Kovel, J. (1991). *History and Spirit.* Boston: Beacon.
Schlipp, P. A. and Friedman, M. (1967). *The Philosophy of Martin Buber.* LaSalle: Open Court.
Taylor, J. M., Gilligan, C. & Sullivan, A. M. (1995). *Between Voice and Silence.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
Waelder, R. (1936). The Principle of multiple function. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 21:93-123.
Winnicott, D. W. (1971) *Playing and Reality.* London, Tavistock.