

ATTACHMENT, DISSOCIATION, PSYCHOTHERAPY AND SCHIZOPHRENIA: MY HERITAGE TO GIOVANNI LIOTTI

Andrew Moskowitz

Professor of Psychology, Touro College Berlin

Corrispondenza

Im Nikolaiquartier 5a – 14467 Potsdam, Germany

Abstract

Giovanni Liotti's teachings have had great influence not only on the fields of trauma, dissociation, attachment and psychotherapy, but also on more disparate areas, such as the nature of psychosis and schizophrenia. Theoretical speculations as to the development of schizophrenia, and the nature of delusions and auditory hallucinations, have been informed by Liotti's ideas on the relation between dissociation and attachment, the psychological consequences of disorganized attachment, and the path from disorganized attachment to schizophrenia. More broadly, his emphasis on the role of attachment and other motivational systems in psychotherapy have tremendous implications for how therapy should be conducted.

Key words: disorganized attachment, dissociation, schizophrenia, delusions, hallucinations

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Riassunto

Gli insegnamenti di Giovanni Liotti hanno avuto una grande influenza non solo nei campi riguardanti il trauma, la dissociazione, l'attaccamento e la psicoterapia, ma anche negli ambiti più disparati, come la natura della psicosi e della schizofrenia. Le speculazioni teoriche sullo sviluppo della schizofrenia e la natura dei deliri e delle allucinazioni uditive, sono state arricchite dalle idee di Liotti circa la relazione tra dissociazione e attaccamento, le conseguenze psicologiche dell'attaccamento disorganizzato e la strada che dall'attaccamento disorganizzato porta alla schizofrenia. Più in generale, la sua enfasi sul ruolo dell'attaccamento e degli altri sistemi motivazionali in psicoterapia ha enormi implicazioni sul come una terapia dovrebbe essere condotta.

Parole chiave: attaccamento disorganizzato, dissociazione, schizofrenia, deliri, allucinazioni

Introduction

I am honored to have been asked to contribute to this volume and to share the many ways in which Giovanni Liotti has influenced my thinking, writing and teaching over the past 15 years. I have had the pleasure of his company on only a handful of occasions – some of the conferences of the European Society for Trauma and Dissociation, and a few smaller trainings and workshops here

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and there. Most memorable was a lovely and inspiring dinner we shared in Barcelona around an EMDR conference some years ago. Though I was far from a close friend, he shared with me – when we saw each other – some of the painful events his family had experienced in recent years.

Since discovering his work, I have read a number of the papers and chapters Giovanni produced for various volumes and journals; while some were of great professional importance to me, I can honestly say that all of them taught me something new and unique. In every Liotti paper or chapter, I found myself at least once shaking my head and mumbling something like, ‘Of course! I never thought of it that way!’ Giovanni’s capacity to explain complicated things clearly and with great humanity always impressed me.

As the core area of my interest is the relation between dissociation and psychosis, I will highlight some of Liotti’s ideas that have inspired my thinking. But first I must discuss a few of his ideas about disorganized attachment, trauma and psychotherapy.

Attachment, trauma and psychotherapy

Remember, the word ‘trauma’ derives from the Greek word for ‘wound’ (literally, ‘stabbing wound’). Wounds require care and attention in order to heal, not only in the immediate aftermath of an attack, but also over time – in order, for example, to avoid infection. The same is true for traumas – psychological wounds.

From Giovanni, I learned that traumatic experiences, by definition, activate the attachment system. That means that every individual’s reaction to an overwhelming life experience will be powerfully colored by their early attachment experiences, their characteristic attachment style, and – in the case of disorganized attachment (DA) – the controlling strategies or alternative motivation systems they learned to use to *inhibit* the activation of the attachment system. This is because, in the case of DA, painful feelings of longing, needs for soothing and care, and implicit memories of rejection and despair, are triggered. As such, an individual’s immediate response to a traumatizing event, and his or her attempts at coping, will be *primarily* driven by the nature of their attachment system. Thus, to understand and treat individuals who have been traumatized, we must understand their particular attachment style, unique early life experiences, and characteristic *coping style* for dealing with or warding off attachment-based pain. To focus only on the *event* – the specifics of ‘what happened’ – would be to lose sight of those aspects most important for an individual’s recovery.

This is illustrated beautifully by a case study Liotti published a few years ago, on a woman suffering from unexplained episodes of depersonalization and somatic symptoms (Liotti 2013a). In this remarkable case study, depicting the intense opposing fears of attachment and of the loss of attachment, Liotti describes in detail his thinking and actions in therapy to – initially – minimize the activation of the attachment system and invoke the cooperative system and then – when the time is right – to carefully activate the attachment system. The paper illustrates not only Giovanni’s humility and humanity, but also his great wisdom and skill in understanding and applying the role of motivational systems in psychotherapy. This skill can also be seen in a 2013 chapter (Liotti 2013b), in which he helps to explain – better than anyone else, I believe – the challenges and difficulties of treating persons diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (BPD). He proposes that BPD might arise from a trajectory from DA through a middle childhood controlling punitive strategy (involving the social ranking system), and that – in therapy – such individuals might need to resort to hostility when the intimacy of therapy stimulates powerful unresolved needs to be held and soothed, and thus the chaotic and overwhelming feelings and

implicit memories associated with DA.

Dissociation, disorganized attachment and psychosis

My interest in linking attachment with dissociation and psychosis began with Giovanni's great review chapter on attachment and dissociation for the monumental dissociation handbook (Dell and O'Neil 2009). This chapter, simply called 'Attachment and Dissociation', contains many quotes I have used since for teaching and writing. Here are two gems that have informed my thinking about the genesis of delusions (described in detail in the next section). With regard to the attachment system in general, Liotti (2009) notes:

'The attachment system coordinates not only specific feelings and goal-directed behaviors, but also memories – both conscious (explicit) and unconscious (implicit) – and thoughts about the self and attachment figures' (p. 53).

And, about disorganized attachment (DA) in particular, he claims:

'Every time a life stressor activates the attachment system (and therefore the intrinsically dissociative IWM [Internal Working Model]), a painful experience of disorientation, disorganization and fear, linked to implicit memories of past frightening attachment interaction and to usually unconscious expectations of their repetition, may follow' (p. 59).

This linking of DA to memory was very inspiring and important for me. Possibly equally as important to my understanding of delusions was Giovanni's description of the *drama triangle*, and its implications for self and other representations forged under the duress of disorganized attachment. The *drama triangle* comes from an analysis of plays in which the main characters are argued fill the roles of 'victim', 'perpetrator' or 'rescuer'. Liotti posits that the infant, in its interpretation of the confusing and frightening situations in which it finds itself (which may shift rapidly), can apply *all three* roles to the caretaker and to itself. Not only might the infant view itself as a perpetrator or persecutor, responsible for its parent's fear ('a powerful, evil self meeting a fragile... attachment figure', p. 57), it could also view itself as the *rescuer* of its parent:

Since the frightened parent may be comforted by the tender feelings evoked by contact with the child, the implicit memories of DA may also convey the possibility of construing the self as the powerful rescuer of a fragile attachment figure (i.e., the little child perceives the self as able to comfort a frightened adult) (p. 57).

At the end of this chapter, Liotti put forward a striking hypothesis tightly linking dissociation and attachment. He argued that, if one could analyze deeply enough the 'interpersonal context' in which dissociative symptoms first appeared in an adult individual's life, one could assume the activation of the attachment system – evidenced by 'actual or expected separations from attachment figures, by losses, and/or by the making of new affectional bonds implying attachment' (p. 62). His proposal that dissociative symptoms arise from the attachment system directly inspired my thinking about delusions and hallucinations.

Disorganized attachment and the genesis of schizophrenia

Sometime after becoming acquainted with *Attachment and Dissociation*, I contracted with Wiley to produce an edited book on dissociation and psychosis. One goal of the book was to

bring together experts on dissociation and experts on psychosis who shared similar research or clinical areas; so, for example, we asked childhood trauma specialists from the psychosis field to write a chapter with childhood trauma specialists from the dissociation field. I knew Andrew Gumley from Glasgow and his important work on understanding and treating psychotic disorders from an attachment perspective; Giovanni agreed to join Andrew and they produced a stunning chapter for the 2008 book called ‘An attachment perspective on schizophrenia: The role of disorganized attachment, dissociation and mentalization’. This chapter was revised for the 2nd edition of our book, which will be published in early 2019. It was completed just a few short months before Giovanni died.

For me, the groundbreaking aspects of this chapter were two-fold. First of all, Giovanni and Andrew proposed that disorganized attachment experiences were common in individuals who went on to develop schizophrenia, but that their trajectory through childhood took a different path; instead of developing controlling strategies of *caregiving* or *hostility*, these persons – they theorized – switched to an *avoidant* style of attachment in an attempt to *deactivate* the attachment system (which explained some of the negative symptoms). Secondly, they argued that the inevitable *collapse* of these attempts to inhibit the activation of the attachment system could underpin the emergence of psychotic (positive) symptoms.

Dismissing/avoidant strategies in adults are not always the outcome of avoidant patterns of early attachment. Longitudinal studies suggest that a high percentage of children who have been disorganized in their early attachments may resort to dismissing strategies... This is because, in order to protect themselves from the repetition of fear without solution, they attempt to deactivate their attachment needs. Such patterns may be related to the development of psychosis... A strong activation of the attachment system (e.g. because of real or imagined separations from caregivers, or because of traumatic events) can cause a collapse of controlling strategies and an unleashing of the formerly defensively inhibited attachment needs. The surfacing of dissociative experiences linked to the IWM of disorganized attachment is the consequence of such a collapse... Such an explanation holds for dissociative symptoms both in the dissociative and the borderline disorders (Liotti 2004) and may hold also for psychotic symptoms. (Gumley and Liotti in press).

In the 2nd edition of our book, this chapter precedes a chapter I authored, along with the infant memory researcher, Rosario Montirosso, called ‘Childhood experiences and delusions: Trauma, memory and the Double Bind’. We make two core arguments, inspired by Giovanni’s ideas: 1) that the powerful emotions typically preceding the development of delusions, and in particular the confusing, intense emotional state sometimes called *Wahnstimmung* (Jaspers 1963/1913) or ‘delusional mood’, may be attachment-based implicit memories stemming from early experiences of disorganized attachment and 2) that specific delusions of paranoia or grandiosity may derive from the *victim*, *perpetrator* or *rescuer* dissociated self and other identifications forged out of DA experiences. While such ideas cannot easily be tested, they are consistent not only with the phenomenology of delusions but also with expectations of how infants would likely feel in such disturbed early attachment experiences.

A hypothesis that could, however, be tested, is Giovanni’s argument that dissociative symptoms arise from the activation of the attachment system. In several publications, I have argued for the conceptualization of auditory voice hallucinations, or *voice hearing*, as dissociative in nature (Longden, Moskowitz, Perona-Garcelán and Dorahy in press; Moskowitz and Corstens 2007; Moskowitz, Mosquera and Longden 2017). Indeed, there are strong clinical and empirical arguments to suggest that it is more accurate and useful to see voice hearing as dissociative

instead of as psychotic. A fascinating study would be to ask voice hearers to describe, in detail, the situational circumstances in which they first began to hear voices. I suspect that the vast majority who could recall these circumstances would describe a situation or situations that would have likely triggered their attachment system. Moreover, I predict that many of the voices heard by such individuals would take on attachment roles in the individual's lives and be reliably triggered when the individual found themselves in situations that activated their attachment system. Such findings would support my interpretation of voice hearing as dissociatively-based.

Epitaph

In remembering Giovanni, we should remember not only his brilliant ideas that have greatly stimulated us, but also his attitude – meeting the world and all the people in it with care, respect, humility and tremendous curiosity. He is greatly missed.

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