



Clinical Implications of a Phenomenological Study: Being Regarded as a Threat while Attempting to Do One's Best

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Abstract

Cultural messages promote putting forward one's best effort, and yet any level of success, or the effort itself, can lead to being regarded as a threat. People forming everyday social comparisons may feel threatened by those attempting to do their best, and may react to neutralize the perceived threat. The urge to undermine someone regarded as a threat can result in direct reprisal, social strain, or other repercussions that can range from unpleasantness to life-changing trauma. Given the potential for negative outcomes, the experience of being regarded as a threat while attempting to do one's best merits close examination.

Doing one's best has been endorsed by luminaries across the ages. American transcendentalists advised "Hitch your wagon to a star" (Emerson, 1870/2007, p. 33) and "Advance confidently in the direction of your dreams" (Thoreau, 1939). In the grim era of World War II, Einstein (1940/2005) declared that "We have to do the best we are capable of. This is our sacred human responsibility" (p. 117). A similar message was issued by Donald Trump (2009) in quoting Aristotle: "For what is the best choice, for each individual, is the highest it is possible for him to achieve" (p. 39).

Festinger (1954) described this as "the value placed in our culture on being better and better", and labelled it the "unidirectional drive upward" (p. 124). Maslow (1943) viewed the same impetus as inherent in human nature: "What a man *can* be, he *must* be. This need we may call self-actualization . . . This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" – or as the U.S. Army slogan coined by Earl Carter in 1981 put it, "Be all [that] you can be" (Cooper, 2013).

Lofty and inspiring, the words seem to float to us from some pinnacle of excellence, perhaps that snow-capped peak depicted on a wide array of motivational products – calendars, posters, and coffee mugs whose captions exhort us to Strive/Accomplish/Succeed. But the hyperbole is slanted, ignoring the fact that, when some people excel, others will inevitably suffer by comparison. Viewed in this light, doing one's best carries a hidden irony like the cost of a genie's boon: If one's success results in a perceived loss to someone else, one may come to be regarded as a threat.

Some might gloat and feel empowered when regarded as a threat, but others might find it disturbing or even demoralizing, wondering "If the cost is too high, is the effort worth it?" Depending on the person and the endeavour, abandoning the attempt to do one's best could amount to passive self-destruction, for "doing" and "being" can both be regarded as intrinsic to self-actualization, together forming the *reason d'être* as expressed by Gerard Manley Hopkins in the second quartet of his *Sonnet No. 57* (undated; Gardner, 1948, p. 95):

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells;
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

“For that I came” and doing one’s best could apply to any number of experiences, from nurturing a valued relationship or raising healthy children to succeeding in business. The stakes involved might be as material as a profit margin or as ethereal as enlightenment. They might be intricately bound with self-esteem, hope, or the need for acceptance and approval. In any event, “attempting to do one’s best” implies that the one making the attempt has something invested either in the attempt itself or in the outcome. It can thus be assumed that, to the person involved, it matters.

“Being regarded as a threat” can occur in a range of contexts from parent-child conflict and sibling rivalry to competition for advancement. The threat might be valid in the eyes of the world or only in those of an individual. The threat might manifest either in open competition or in more covert ways such as a threat to a spouse’s gender identity, a friend’s self-esteem, or an existing status. The experience of being regarded as a threat implies awareness of others’ reactions, which might range from grudging respect to social ostracism or even violent retaliation. Implicit in the phrase is a climate of fear, hostility, suspicion, envy, and even paranoia – which connotations are unpleasant to all but the most Machiavellian minds. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that being regarded as a threat while simply attempting to do one’s best could have significant negative impact on both the one making the attempt and on the outcome.

Being regarded as a threat while attempting to do one’s best might mean facing the choice between doing what one loves and being loved. The loss might be minimal or it could be catastrophic. The overall cost to society might be immense, because it is never really possible to know what might have been when opportunities are foregone and initiative is lost. As Viktor Frankl (1946/1962) notes, each human being has a “uniqueness and singleness” that gives meaning to existence through expression in work and love. No-one can create the same as another, just as no-one can replace another in the affections of a lover. If each of us has an irreplaceable contribution to make, then it is worth understanding the forces and interactions that might hinder the chances of fruition.

Background

Being regarded as a threat while attempting to do one’s best has been recorded in fact, fiction, and myth. In nonfiction headlines from the 1994 Olympic Games, Nancy Kerrigan, a front-running figure skater, was clubbed on the leg as she left the practice rink

(Buckley, 1994). The former husband of rival Tonya Harding later pleaded guilty to the attack; apparently Harding feared that she could not succeed against Kerrigan. The ensuing media barrage made it clear that being regarded as a threat while attempting to do one’s best can have violent consequences.

In an article published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “You Were Too Good for Us”, Perlmutter (2006) asks, “Isn’t academe the one area where it is impossible to be overqualified?” Sadly, he concludes, “The realpolitik answer is no”. Colleagues on a hiring committee may vote against an eminently qualified applicant “using other reasons and rationales, of course, besides ‘I just don’t want somebody that good around here’ ...” (para. 4). Perlmutter adds, “Being outstanding is sometimes too much”. His point is supported by the fate of banker Ralph Geys, who was dismissed by Société Générale for being “too successful” in his professional role, on the pretext that his salary had consequently become too expensive for his services to be affordable (Daily Mail Reporter, 2010).

Bailey White (1995), National Public Radio host and author of regional American fiction, tells the poignant story of Nockerd Sockett, a man from a ne’er-do-well family whose brief taste of success is blighted by his fellow employees. When Nockerd upstages his co-workers at a local diner, he is falsely accused of theft, an experience that costs him not only his job but also his dignity, happiness, and hope. The loss is not only his own. As a result of doing his best, Nockerd had a profound influence on others, as White describes in the scene of Nockerd’s final shift at the diner:

As the night went by, a feeling grew in that room of peace and satisfaction and joy. The conversations of the diners fell to a low murmur, like the flutings of doves, and they leaned over the tables and looked at each other with sweet faces. Something about the air was changed, so that the colours of things seemed to glow with their own light, and the water in the glasses sparkled and twinkled, and there was a smell of lemons and rosemary. (p. 177)

Nockerd, who had the power to make the narrator laugh for the first time in six months, is last seen by her as he loads a heap of frozen turkeys on a truck. He cannot even face her. White leaves the reader wondering how many lives go untouched by the grace of those who, like Nockerd, are barred from doing their best.

Finally, an example from Greek mythology suggests that the experience is both timeless and intrinsic to human nature. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells how Arachne, a mortal maiden whose expert weaving skills rivalled those of the goddess Minerva, ends up as a

lowly spider. Even though Arachne's own hubris is partly to blame, Ovid makes it clear that being too accomplished – being regarded as a threat while attempting to do one's best – can indeed invoke the wrath of the gods.

Researcher's Narrative

My own experience, although less dramatic than the preceding examples, was one that had a powerful and lasting impact on me. Here is my account:

For years I worked for a company owned and operated by a couple who delegated heavily to their staff. They knew me well and respected my abilities, but I was "mommy-tracked" for years before being promoted to manager – which I found very validating. At last I felt fully utilized. Work was interesting, stimulating, rewarding. It felt good to accomplish something and enjoy myself in the process. I received compliments and encouragement from my boss, kudos from clients, and appreciation from the employees who liked my style of supervision, but I was careful not to gloat or lord it over anyone. At the same time, I knew I had to do my best and show my mettle while I had the chance. I had the right to. Everyone does.

Before long it was obvious that I was at the top of the pecking order. Privately, my boss told me I was the best manager she had, which surprised me because one man with a long résumé was supposedly the most valuable. "Bob" was never hostile or Machiavellian, but his wife, who also worked there, was mouth and muscle for them both. Mrs Bob wielded a lot of power and was quite intimidating. Even our boss would cringe and defer to her. As my success became more visible, I wondered how long it would take Mrs Bob to initiate action against me. She always pressured our boss into repositioning employees, and I knew she would not tolerate having Bob upstaged for long.

Soon Mrs Bob started finding something to rant about to create a distraction whenever I received a kind word from anyone. People noticed and commented on it, and I would feel a dart of fear. Not wanting the drama to escalate, I concealed my anxiety, but when my boss began putting off our briefings, I developed an eerie sense of danger and impending loss. I started feeling apprehensive about coming to work. My former exhilaration became mixed with dread. I was constantly aware of Mrs Bob's scrutiny, and felt both conspicuous and vulnerable. Constrained and furtive, I still attempted to do my best. Masking my tension and alarm, I went about business as usual. I listened for rumours, but no-one was talking. People had grown oddly quiet and disengaged, hidden in their cubicles. This continued until the workplace seemed weighted under an oppressive suspense as though a storm was about to break.

One morning Mrs Bob came flapping into my office like a harpy, blaming me for running late with a job that was actually Bob's. She ignored my explanation, pacing like a tiger in my tiny office, vilifying my performance and heaping on scorn. The scenario was so bizarre, I felt myself go numb with shock. Then I felt scared and finally outraged. I tried to remain as calm as I could; verbally evicting Mrs Bob from my office, I went to my boss, who had nevertheless never been able to control Mrs Bob, and, as I feared, was too shaken to take a stand.

After Mrs Bob's rampage, my role changed overnight. My projects were mysteriously reassigned. To avoid further trouble, I convinced my boss to move me to another area, but it was the end of my chance to shine as a manager. From then on, I had zero enthusiasm. I performed my duties, but without any sense of pride or satisfaction. The workplace now felt fundamentally unsafe. Doing my best was perilous, even hubristic – an invitation to disaster. I struggled with self-doubt, feeling that I did not deserve success or else I would surely have been able to protect myself, to engineer a different outcome. Was I stupidly naïve? If not, the situation was fundamentally unfair. I could not have confronted Mrs Bob from my position, and I felt deeply betrayed by the boss who did not stand up for me. Trust became impossible. My utter lack of hope and motivation extended beyond my job such that it seemed to colour my view of the world.

I kept going over the experience in my mind, wondering how I could have avoided it. Hindsight revealed only one option: I might have remained a manager longer, even indefinitely, if I had not looked better than Bob, had never done my best, never posed a threat. I might have been safe, but at what cost? I never would have come to know and own my competency.

The more I thought things over, the more I balked at the idea of holding back so that no-one would feel threatened. Why should I make the sacrifice, underperforming to avoid becoming a target for doing my best? I felt thwarted by the universe. What was the point of having a gift if it was never safe to expose it by using it? How does one ever self-actualize in such a world? I felt aggrieved, insulted, abandoned, and bitter. I was torn between reluctance to reveal myself and rebellion against intimidation. I wondered if it is in fact necessary always to have to choose between getting along with people and getting ahead. And then I just felt jaded and worn.

Later, I made a complete career change. I needed to escape the memory of an opportunity that had ended so miserably; but, even now, when I feel diffident, I wonder how much the experience actually cost me and whether similar experiences have exacted a toll from others as well.

This research investigation represents my attempt to identify the essential nature of the experience of being regarded as a threat while attempting to do one's best based on an analysis of the narratives of their own experience of this phenomenon offered by the subject-participants in this study. Even though their respective narratives vary in respect of specific details such as setting, circumstances, and personal impact, common elements or constituents could be identified and then thematically synthesized to reveal the essence of the experience. The deeper insights gained in the process will potentially be helpful to those who wish to better understand their own experience of the phenomenon and, hopefully, transcend its influence and effects.

Phenomenological Research Design

Being regarded as a threat while attempting to do one's best is a personal, subjective phenomenon. Its experiential features are not readily translatable into operationalized variables, and a laboratory is not a setting where one can expect to discover the essence of what people intuit, feel, or believe. As is pointed out by von Eckartsberg (1986), exploring subjective phenomena requires studying "the meanings of human experiences in situations as they spontaneously occur in the course of daily life" (p. 3). That is possible by employing an existential-phenomenological approach.

Derived from the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, phenomenology aims to understand the fundamental essence of experiences as they are lived, to apprehend what presents itself in direct awareness, and to capture its essential meaning by identifying features that remain constant across individual variations (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989). Phenomenology requires what Husserl (1900/1970a) referred to as "going back to the things themselves" (p. 168), and as such opening oneself to whatever is to be revealed by approaching the phenomena being investigated without being biased by pre-existing assumptions or presuppositions. The word "existential" refers to the focus of the exploration, which could be as broad as the nature of existence itself or as personal as, for example, the experience of feeling really understood (van Kaam, 1969). Existential-phenomenological research furthermore requires a particular attitudinal mind-set on the part of the researcher which Polkinghorne (1989) termed *attunement* (p. 41), an investigative posture based on understanding and applying certain postulates.

Key Postulations in Existential-Phenomenological Research

The postulates or foundational ideas on which the existential-phenomenological world view is based are described in the following sections.

Prereflective structure and meaning.

Husserl held

that experiences have an essential *structure* as they manifest in consciousness (Hein & Austin, 2001), a *prereflective structure* that is inherent in any meaningful experience as it is encountered in the moment. Valle and Mohs (1998) clarify how this felt knowledge exists before cognition "the way a sonata exists or lives in the hands of a performing concert pianist. If the pianist were to think about which note to play next, the style and power of the performance is likely to noticeably suffer" (p. 98).

Prereflective experience is like dancing when no-one is watching, moving as if imbued by the music, with no self-consciousness (Sheets-Johnstone, 1966/1980; Speleitic, 2013). In contrast, reflective experience is most often purposeful and conscious, even self-conscious, and, to continue the analogy of dancing, can be likened to a ballerina en pointe checking her reflection in a mirror. *Reflective* implies separation between the individual and the moment as it is lived, while *prereflective* implies a unity between the experience and the one who experiences it. Valle and Mohs (1998) explain that "prereflective knowing is present as the ground of any meaningful (meaning-full) human experience" (p. 98). Prereflective knowing exists as prereflective structure, which becomes present to conscious awareness as meaning. In this way, prereflective structure *is* meaning.

Interrelationship and co-constitution. Because human consciousness entails being conscious *of* something, human beings are always in an existing interrelationship with whatever they are conscious of. Without consciousness, there would be no way to apprehend the world, and without the world, there would be nothing to apprehend (Valle et al., 1989). Fostering attunement from an existential-phenomenological perspective requires embracing this inherent interrelationship of individuals with their surrounding world, and accepting that the two *co-constitute* one another (Husserl, 1962/1989; Valle et al., 1989). Colaizzi (1973) illustrates this concept with the well known "vase and faces" drawing in which the vase-shaped white image and the dark facial profiles that flank it on either side are completely interdependent, thus co-constituting one another in the sense that, without either white or dark, both of the meaningful figures would be lost. Colaizzi (1973) explains that "we are merely expressing the existential insight that either [person or world] alone is meaningless" (p. 21).

This perspective contrasts sharply with the Cartesian view, which regards the inner personal subjective world and the outer objective world as split, if not mutually exclusive (Fuller, 1990). Phenomenology, however, posits that human beings do not merely receive but also create at the nexus of their inner and outer worlds. Existential-phenomenological research therefore adopts a stance between the subjective and the objective, between the inner world and the outer,

between the personal and the external worlds, and investigates experience within its milieu, given that, as Polkinghorne (1989) states, "experience, as it is directly given, occurs at the meeting of the person and the world" (p. 42). Furthermore, given that people are also constantly interacting with one another, they are constantly co-creating or co-constituting a common surrounding world (Husserl, 1936/1970b, 1952/1989).

Bracketing. Within the existential-phenomenological research framework, *bracketing* is a critical aspect of attunement, insofar as it implies a rigorous process of bringing pre-existing assumptions or presuppositions into awareness so that they can be held successfully, with that awareness, in a suspended recognition. This implies holding any initial thesis or expectations regarding the experience being researched in abeyance and remaining neutral towards them (Zaner, 1970). This is often difficult, because presuppositions form the basis of thought and, as such, tend to be taken for granted and to go unnoticed (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, pp. xiii–xv). Such presuppositions comprise the *natural attitude*, which is replaced via the process of bracketing with the more unbiased *transcendental attitude* appropriate to existential-phenomenological research (Valle et al., 1989). The process is ongoing and vital. It maintains the equivalent of scientific objectivity by attenuating the influence of researcher bias on the explication of the research findings. From the initial approach, through the analysis of the data, to the formulation of the findings, the researcher must continue bracketing, simultaneously monitoring and questioning his or her subjective responses to the subject-participants' own descriptions of their internal and external worlds.

Explication. In existential-phenomenological inquiry, narratives from individual subject-participants provide the data, and the process of *explication* replaces the traditional experiment as the means of inquiry. The narrative accounts are the experiences of specific individuals containing the particulars which Husserl (1952/1989) termed "small change" (*Kleingeld*). It is through those accounts that we ascertain the essential meaning of the phenomenon under investigation, identifying the universal features that are constant regardless of context, circumstance, or situation; in other words, we seek for and ultimately find the pre-reflective structure of the phenomenon.

Steps and Procedures

Shaped by the approaches of recognized practitioners of phenomenological research (as cited), the investigation reported here unfolded in the following four steps.

Step One: Naming the phenomenon. Existential-phenomenological research requires identifying, and hence naming, the focal phenomenon in terms that are

readily understood (von Eckartsberg, 1986). The named phenomenon is analogous to the hypothesis used in traditional scientific research. For this study, it is the lived experience of being regarded as a threat while attempting to do one's best.

Step Two: Gathering data. Adult volunteers were recruited via posted flyers and by word of mouth. Respondents were screened telephonically and, upon acceptance, given a copy of the Consent Form, which was reviewed with them orally in order to ensure their understanding of the rights, benefits and risks entailed. For this study, seven participant-subjects (participants) were used. The sample offered considerable variation in respect of the range of experiences of the phenomenon offered, which Polkinghorne (1989) asserts is more relevant than diversity of representation per se. The participants were requested to respond in writing to the following instruction: "Recall a situation in which you were regarded as a threat while attempting to do your best. Reflect on the experience to recall how you felt, reviewing it in your mind. Describe the experience in your own words, focusing on *how you felt*. Try to describe your feelings just as they were. Do not stop until you feel you have described your feelings as fully as possible".

Optimal narratives provided full and detailed accounts that included emotional responses. Either directly or indirectly, they answered the following questions (adapted from Colaizzi, 1978): (1) What about the experience do you associate with *attempting to do your best*? (2) What about the experience let you know that you were *being regarded as a threat*? (3) What were you experiencing (a) before *being regarded as a threat*? (b) During? (c) Afterwards? After review of the narratives, four participants were interviewed for clarification and additional detail in relation to the above questions. All seven of the narratives were used.

Step 3: Explication. The process of explication is the phenomenological equivalent of data analysis. First, each narrative was read through with carefully focused attention and empathy in order to obtain a clear sense of the whole (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1971; Wertz, 1984). Then the researcher read each account again, noting shifts of meaning that identified *moments of experience* (van Kaam, 1969) or what Giorgi (1975) refers to as *meaning units*. These units of meaning are specific to the narrative in which they are delineated and not assumed to be universal.

Next, the researcher formed *condensed expressions of meaning* (Colaizzi, 1978), rewording each meaning-unit into a concise phrase using concrete, everyday language (Colaizzi, 1973; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1989). Insofar as this implied a revision of form but not of content (Colaizzi, 1978), it was a precarious step, requiring constant vigilance in order

to ensure that the reformulations remained close to the original descriptions, revealing inferences and implications without changing meaning. During this step, the researcher held the context of each meaning-unit in mind in order to reduce the potential for any inadvertent distortion or omission (Giorgi, 2006). Changing first-person statements to the third-person helped to safeguard against unconscious projection. Any meaning-unit also had the potential to yield more than one condensed meaning (Colaizzi, 1978). Each condensed meaning represented some specific aspect of the experience. As the analysis of each narrative progressed, truly redundant portions were seen to have interchangeable meanings, and irrelevant material was labelled accordingly. Throughout the process of analysis, the researcher tracked the ongoing process of bracketing by keeping notes.

The meaning units were then clustered and labelled under *headings* that emerged from the descriptions (van Kaam, 1969). These were compared against the original narratives in order to preclude the possibility of misinterpretation. The headings were more abstract and impersonal than the original material in the participants' accounts. This is to be expected (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003), for, in this critical step, as units are clustered and labelled, there is a shift from the situational meaning or situated structure to the *essential general structure* (van Kaam, 1969). In a process analogous to alchemical refinement, in due course the original descriptions with their contexts and circumstances were left behind. As the particulars fell away, the general essence was revealed.

At this point, *imaginative testing* then compared each of the cluster headings and their components against imagined instances. Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) illustrate this process using the example of a cup. They cite considering shape, colour, handle and porousness to determine which features are essential to "cupness". They cite nonporousness as an essential feature of cupness on the basis that, if nonporousness is removed, then "the very possibility of a cup collapses" (p. 246). In this step, each heading, representing a feature, is tested by imagining it as removed from the phenomenon; if, even without the feature concerned, the phenomenon remains recognizable, then the heading/feature is not essential, even if commonly found, such as a handle on a cup.

The aim of imaginative testing is to separate the universal-general-essential elements of the experience from those pertaining only to specific instances. This is the final condensation, the point of elimination for extraneous material. It involves more, however, than unplugging and testing parts of a whole like so many electrical fuses, because the process also considers the interrelationship among the components. The resulting understanding of the essential features is then a truly

synthesized description that respects both the inter-relationships of the elements and the holistic nature of human experience.

Step Four: Description. The researcher elucidated the essential elements of the experience in order to develop a description of its fundamental structure.

Findings

Following the procedure described above, 10 essential constituents of the experience of being regarded as a threat while attempting to do one's best emerged from the analysis. These 10 constituents are:

1. Believing at first in the effort to do one's best;
2. Believing at first in candour and co-operation;
3. Being identified as a threat; that is, as dangerous and bad;
4. Suffering sanctions for being a threat;
5. Suffering relationship strain, rupture, or loss of social harmony;
6. Perceiving that one cannot undo being regarded as a threat;
7. Feeling distressing affect due to being regarded as a threat, including shock, self-doubt, fear, anger, frustration, discouragement, loss, powerlessness, and loss of trust;
8. Feeling the urge to undo others' perception of one as a threat;
9. Feeling relief when one is no longer being regarded as a threat;
10. Feeling the need to make sense of the experience.

Describing the Experience

Following are reflections on and elaborations of each of the 10 constituents above based on the researcher's attempts to further explicate the meanings expressed in the participants' descriptive accounts.

Constituent No. 1. Attempting to do one's best implies believing at first in the effort to do one's best. It means making an emotional investment in what is perceived to be a meaningful endeavour, and giving it one's time, energy, attention, diligence, effort, and/or commitment. People put themselves out for something that holds meaning for them, whether it is a pet project, the proverbial chance of a lifetime, an ongoing effort in a consistent role (such as being a good wife), or a specific way of being (such as being the smartest in the class). They believe in themselves and in what they are doing. Whether cherishing a dream, striving for a goal, or pursuing excellence in a self-defining role, people attempt to do their best with efforts that give life meaning and fulfilment. Initially, they feel enthusiastic, hopeful, and well-placed (i.e., qualified, deserving, safe and justifiably empowered).

Constituent No. 2. Initially, those attempting to do their best are open to co-operating, collaborating, and sharing power, expecting safety and support. Candid and unguarded, they trust. Even if experience alerts them to the potential for envy or rivalry, their outlook is sanguine. They feel capable of managing events as they endeavour to do their best in the here and now.

Constituent No. 3. Those attempting to do their best receive the message that they are identified as a threat and are accused of attempting to intimidate others, seize power, usurp authority, invade someone else's domain, or make others look bad. The message itself constitutes an attack, even if delivered in the guise of supplication. It indicates that those doing their best have done something bad or harmful to another/other person(s), and that they will be held responsible. The message may be delivered explicitly, covertly, or indirectly, and conveys hostility, rejection and shame.

Constituent No. 4. Sanctions are directed at those regarded as a threat; they are held responsible for being the threat they ostensibly pose. Reprisal is hurtful and humiliating. Aggression against them varies in form, intensity and duration from a single snide remark to outright bullying and intimidation to being denied credit, appreciation or reward. They are targeted and rejected, disenfranchised and dispossessed. Their efforts to do their best are undermined by the effects of the hostility they encounter and/or by sabotage that may be as blatant as false allegations or as subtle as having their behaviour and motives misconstrued.

Constituent No. 5. As an immediate accompaniment to being regarded as a threat, and possibly as a consequence of ensuing conflict, some disruption of social harmony occurs. Personal or professional ties may be strained or ruptured; rapport may be lost.

Constituents Nos. 6 and 8. Those regarded as a threat while attempting to do their best take measures to undo the threatening impression, both to restore social harmony and to improve the chance of success in their original endeavour. Efforts to diffuse tensions include conciliation, diplomacy, and refuting allegations of being a threat. Appeasement efforts include making concessions, relinquishing power, accepting unjustified criticism or blame, or manoeuvring carefully to avoid triggering others. Self-effacement may include hiding or withdrawing. Assertive efforts include compromise, mediation, limit setting, and rational argument. Self-assertiveness, however, is construed as menacing, and self-defence is perceived as aggression. There is no recourse that does not tend to exacerbate the situation. Compromises are rejected and powerlessness extends to having no way to address conflict, deflect hostility, or effect resolution. Because influencing the reactions of others is sometimes beyond one's control, being regarded as a threat while attempting to do one's best

equates in effect to being told that "You are bad and dangerous for being who you are – and there is nothing you can do about it". The situation is hopeless.

Constituent No. 7. Being regarded as a threat while attempting to do one's best elicits feelings of shock, self-doubt, fear, anger, frustration, discouragement, loss, powerlessness, and loss of trust. Shock may range from surprise to being stunned. Even those who have strategized to avoid being regarded as a threat find their preparations inadequate, which in turn casts aspersion on one's judgment. Being caught off guard evokes uncertainty, hesitation, and self-doubt, which undermines self-confidence, as do shame and rejection, typical reactions that often follow the accusation of being a threat and the hostility that ensues. Loss of self-assurance and self-trust may range from uncertainty about one's competence to serious doubts regarding one's intrinsic worth.

Meeting with unexpected hostility evokes fear, which may range from an amorphous sense of uneasiness and dread to utter panic complete with a fight-or-flight response. Robbed of a sense of safety, those being regarded as a threat feel suspicious and insecure, concerned that the situation may worsen even when they maintain hope for a positive outcome. Danger lurks as long as one is regarded as a threat, for threats must be neutralized. A feeling of jeopardy related to the original pursuit may trigger fear of failure as well.

The anger that surfaces may manifest as righteous indignation or moral outrage, or it may make its presence known only by the effort to suppress it. Anger may be directed outwardly at either detractors or others who could help but do not, or it may be turned inward. Anger often blends with aggravation and frustration, not only with the original endeavour, but also with the situation of being regarded as a threat.

Distressing affect may slow or immobilize those who find themselves regarded as a threat, even if their efforts are not openly thwarted. Disappointment dims optimism. Fear can be paralyzing. Satisfaction and joy are diminished, and the hostility of those who regard them as a threat taints any satisfaction. They become disheartened, dejected, and discouraged. Realizing that something that has been sought and hoped for will not be forthcoming, they experience loss.

Powerlessness results from the accusation of being a threat, which implies misuse of authority or power. The ostensible logic is that, if power is unsafe or undeserved, then it must be taken away. This justifies denunciation and usurpation. Those regarded as a threat are pushed aside, silenced, and shut down. They are robbed of safety, agency, and territory, which effectively alters the milieu where it was comfortable to perform and safe to succeed. Feeling out of place

further undermines self-confidence and exacerbates fear.

Being regarded as a threat while attempting to do one's best results in loss of trust, whether in individuals, society, or the possibility that events will work out for the best. Trust gives way to wariness, suspicion, scepticism, and even cynicism and paranoia. Whether loss of trust occurs as a single epiphany or by slow erosion, it is felt as a serious loss. Despite good intentions, an endeavour that should have been joyful, satisfying and successful culminates in futility, frustration and pain. The good that was anticipated is not merely lost but changed and distorted in the process like an evil dream. This perverted twist is yet another kind of betrayal that undermines trust. Unlike loss of innocence through maturation, this type of loss is embittering, and calls up mourning and regret. Those who have been regarded as a threat while attempting to do their best often struggle to restore their equilibrium, to leave the pain behind and carry on. They contend with uncertainty about the future, holding less trust than they had before in themselves, in others, and in life, at least for a while.

Constituent No. 9. Relief occurs when one is no longer being regarded as a threat. It may range from a light-hearted sense of release to a sense of delivery from torment. Relief includes the need to vent, to work through residual emotions, and to speculate about what happened and why.

Constituent No. 10. Those who have experienced being regarded as a threat while attempting to do their best tend to wonder how they might have contributed to the experience. Feelings of rejection and questioning of self-worth can persist.

An Example of the Explication Steps as Performed on the Data

The following example illustrates how the explication was performed. For the sake of clarity, the description of the experience is in *italics* while the condensed rewording is in regular font. A list of the headings follows. Note how the experience described applies to placement under several headings:

I hadn't been there long before my roommates started acting funny whenever I came into the room. Like they would stop talking and just look at one another. It was funny, like they were hiding something, and it made me feel odd, like they were talking about me, but I couldn't ask them about it because of the way they were acting. Still, the rent was low with all three of us, and I was glad I had a place before the quarter started.

Before long, she noticed her roommates behaving in a furtive, secretive way when she was around. This made her feel uneasy and unsafe (implies rejection). It aroused her suspicions, but she did not feel confident addressing the situation. Despite this, she felt good about the low rent and being settled.

Headings:

1. Encountering hostility or rejection
2. A covert or ominous quality to others' behaviour
3. Feelings of being unsafe, suspicious, not confident, not empowered

The following samples from the seven participants' respective descriptions show how slightly different feelings were grouped into more general categories while others were left to stand alone. Certain of the grouped feelings were close enough to be regarded as synonymous, while others were put together on the basis of their having a shared denotation and having had similar connotations in the narratives. To illustrate this, what follows are two representative clusters of grouped and ungrouped feelings respectively:

1. Shocked, Surprised
Taken aback
Disbelieving, Feeling of unreality
Astounded, Astonished, Amazed, Stunned
2. Powerless, Helpless
Overwhelmed
Listless
Loss of territory, Loss of agency

These clusterings facilitated comparison with the source text when it was advisable to confirm that meaning was not being lost. They also served to highlight which emotions were situation-specific rather than universal. For instance, feeling listless is related to feeling powerless, but, while powerlessness ultimately emerged as a universal (see Constituent No. 7), feeling listless did not. The clusterings also facilitated the grouping of headings for imaginative testing in step three, as well as the finalizing of the description in step four.

Implications for Clinical Work

Because being regarded as a threat while attempting to do one's best can occur in even the most mundane circumstances, the extent of the damage that it can do might easily be overlooked. However, a review of the fundamental constituent elements that emerged from this study reveals the potential for lasting detrimental effects. The distressing affect in Constituent No. 7 points to the potential for problems of clinical concern such as disappointment (extending to grief and despair), anger (directed outward or inward), loss (implying

bereavement and grief), fear, self-doubt, and loss of trust. Taken together, the listed emotions suggest that there may be trauma that clients may not realize or think to mention.

Judith Herman (1992) summarizes primary trauma symptoms as intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation. These same elements are found here in Constituent No. 7 (i.e., helplessness or powerlessness; loss of control) and are implied by Constituents No. 6 and No. 8 (feeling the urge to undo others' perception of one as a threat; perceiving that one cannot undo it). Intense fear is implied by Constituents No. 3, No. 4, and No. 5 collectively, for being identified as dangerous and bad (No. 3) implies posing a threat to the social group or social order, and sanctions that include relationship rupture, strain, or loss (No. 4) tacitly carry the "threat of annihilation" (Baumeister & Tice, 1990).

Herman (1992) further notes that "traumatic events, by definition, thwart initiative and overwhelm individual competence. No matter how brave and resourceful the victim may have been, her actions were insufficient to ward off disaster. In the aftermath ... feelings of guilt and inferiority are practically universal. ... Traumatized people ... lose their trust in themselves, in other people ..." (pp. 53 & 56). This captures the essence of Constituents No. 6, No. 7, and No. 8, and especially the sense of helplessness and loss of agency that feed into self-doubt.

The preceding comparison suggests that trauma may result from seemingly non-traumatic encounters – so how might clinicians best allow for trauma to come to light? For traumatized clients, telling their stories is essential to recovery (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, van der Hart, & Burbridge, 1995). For some of the participants in this study, it was therapeutic as well, providing a welcome release. For some, it brought a shift in perspective – for only in retrospect did they see how fully they had given themselves to their efforts and how much the outcome had cost them. This reaffirms the importance of honouring the client as an historian of both feelings and facts.

In this era of requisite brief therapies, we must find a way to resist moving prematurely into the stock of evidence-based techniques designed to target specific symptoms, lest in focusing on specifics we miss the larger issue. Indirectly perhaps, and yet persuasively, Constituent No. 7 reaffirms the usefulness of such classic questions as "When did you start to feel this way?" and "What does it mean to you?"

The findings of the present study also reaffirm that interconnectedness and co-creation shape our inner and external worlds. Constituent No. 1 is individual effort, interrelated with collective effort (Constituent

No. 2), shaped by Constituents No. 3, No. 4, and No. 5, and affected by Constituents No. 7, No. 8, No. 9, and No. 10. While co-constitution in itself is neither good nor bad, individuals can be seen to have been altered by this experience in damaging ways such as through loss of trust.

Restoring trust takes time; it is a gradual process of rupture and repair like the initial learning to trust that usually begins in infancy. Clinicians should thus be sensitive to potential re-enactment of the traumatic event, and mindful that in therapy either the client or the clinician can be regarded by the other as a threat: clinicians because of the inherent power differential in the therapeutic dyad, and clients because they may express feelings of resentment toward the therapist, leaving the therapist feeling both inadequate and guilty (McWilliams, 1999). This could in turn trigger the therapist's regarding clients as a threat when they are being candid and disclosing; that is, when they are attempting to do their best. When recognized, this occurrence offers an opportunity to explore the re-enactment. Working collaboratively can empower the client by accessing insights from both parties and helping to rebuild trust.

Repeating the experience can be useful in therapy, but is best avoided in life. Feeling the need to make sense of the experience (Constituent No. 10) may include working out how to avoid it as well as exploring aspects of one's self and others' motivations. The threat perception itself may be engendered by either automatic (Mussweiler, Ruter, & Epstude, 2004) or preconscious social comparison (Stapel & Blanton, 2004). Such preconscious judging (prejudice) may be based on such features as age, race, and gender. Appearing non-threatening can be impossible when one is seen as a stereotype (Fiske, 1998). For some, this dynamic may explain why it is not possible to undo being regarded as a threat (Constituent No. 6).

Clinicians and their clients might also review basic strategies to help avoid triggering the perception of threat (Exline & Lobel, 1999; Horvat & Lewis, 2003), but clients may possibly already have tried them (see Constituent No. 8) by disguising gratification (Rabbie & Horwitz, 1969), downplaying accomplishments (Foster, 1972; Lindholm, 2008; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Schoeck, 1969), or avoiding public recognition and praise (Exline, Single, Lobel, & Geyer, 2004; Henagan, 2010). Outstanding achievers might point out how their performance benefits the larger group (Blanton, Crocker, & Miller, 2000; Festinger, 1954; Gardner, Gabriel, & Hochschild, 2002; Schmitt, Branscombe, Silvia, Garcia, & Spears, 2006). Prudent delegating and information sharing can help insofar as they support others' belief in a just world and sense of control (Bègue, 2005; Buunk, Collins, Taylor, Van Yperen, & Dakof, 1990; Cohen, 1986). Ultimately,

however, any efforts may prove ineffective (Navaro, 2007). Because some people are threatened by the mere prospect of another's efforts, any attempt to do one's best can be a trigger (Vecchio, 2005). Displays of warmth and sensitivity (Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004) can be misconstrued.

At times it may thus be best to cut one's losses. The perception that one cannot undo being regarded as a threat could be helpful when making choices about life-altering changes such as job resignation or divorce, even if only by serving as a reminder that perseverance is not always the best choice. Safety comes first (Herman, 1992), which may require leaving an abusive partner, renegotiating relationships with unenlightened or over-involved parents, or changing jobs to find an emotionally healthier workplace.

The greatest losses may occur, however, when those regarded as a threat are too defeated to make further efforts to do their best (Ishiyama and Chabassol, 1984; Sherman, 1983). An individual's "uniqueness and singleness" may never find expression if it is unsafe to be recognized. To lead an authentic life, to self-actualize, means having to emerge and, as Hopkins would say, to *do* what we are meant to *be*, crying "*What I do is me: for that I came*". As clinicians and as individuals, we can choose to support one another's efforts, to resist impulses to regard another as a threat, and instead to create safety for those who simply attempt to do their best. In this way, what we create at

the interstice of self and world, at the border of interconnectedness, allows for the best in human potential to come to fruition.

Suggestions for Further Research

Identifying the constituent elements of an experience does not necessarily even begin to answer some of the more deeply troubling questions such as "Why do people have to act that way?" or "How do I move on?" Further inquiry could address questions outside the scope of this study but of crucial relevance to many individuals. For example, not all perceptions of threat have the same instinctive basis, some stemming from stereotyping, prejudice, and pathological thinking. Understanding different triggers would contribute to prevention and remediation. Another approach would be to identify traits and behaviours common among those who come to be regarded as a threat.

Longitudinal studies could explore how effects of the experience persist or change over time, such as the influence on motivation. Some participants wondered if they had to continually reduce their efforts in order to avoid a recurrence of the experience, or suspected themselves of self-sabotage. Some feared that stress had taken a toll on their health. Not all had confidence in the prospect of full recovery. Future research could gather advice from those who have managed to make a satisfactory transition, recovered their equilibrium, and moved on.

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Dr Norma Cole (PsyD) transitioned into the field of clinical psychology from private practice as a certified clinical hypnotherapist, in which capacity she often addressed stress and chronic pain management, habit change, and personal growth. She also served on a suicide prevention and crisis hotline in her local community.

Currently a contract psychologist with the State of California, Dr Cole has worked with a client base of varied ages and diverse socio-economic backgrounds. While acknowledging cultural influences, she recognizes the inherent uniqueness of each individual, and accordingly conceptualizes a thorough picture of each client's strengths and needs as a basis for treatment, drawing on evidence-based practices to guide her in utilizing a wide range of intervention modalities to create customized integrative therapeutic treatment approaches.

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