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Defining Psychological Birth Trauma: Beyond the PTSD in the DSM

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Childbirth is often depicted as a positive experience [1]. However, it is complex and can lead to positive and negative psychological responses [2]. A spectrum of mental health conditions can affect women before, during, and after birth. These include depression, phobias, adjustment disorders, panic disorders, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and psychosis [3]. Perinatal-PTSD has emerged as a global health concern [4] drawing the attention of researchers across the Scandinavian countries, the United Kingdom (U.K.), the United States (U.S.), and Australia.

Traumatic birth has been described as actual or threatened serious injury to the mother or infant during the process of labour and birth [5]. Real or perceived trauma experiences have the potential to disrupt women's transition into motherhood [1,4], their mental health and wellbeing [6], their relationships with their infants [7], and their relationships with their partners [8].

Nearly one-third of women describe their birth experience as traumatic [2]; However, the prevalence of Psychological Birth Trauma varies widely from 0-43% [9,10,11]. Much of this variance has been attributed to the inconsistent terminology, study variations in measurement tools and methodology [4], and lack of conceptual clarity [12]; This has led to the limited or partial understanding of Psychological Birth Trauma presented in the literature.

In this presentation, I review the dominant perspectives in which Psychological Birth Trauma has been defined within the academic literature, specifically in relation to the clinical diagnosis of PTSD. I compare two ways of describing Birth Trauma from reductionist and holistic perspectives and highlight some of the advantages and disadvantages of each. Lastly, I suggest a pluralist perspective (a systems approach) is a well-suited frame of reference in interpreting women's experience of Psychological Birth Trauma.

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Biography

Julia Imanoff, MN'16, a Perinatal Nurse Specialist is a UCalgary Eyes High Doctoral Scholar, an Educator, and an Innovator. She completed a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Waterloo, a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from Ryerson University, and a Master of Nursing from the University of Calgary. She believes in bringing people together to create a positive impact. This mission drives her academic, professional, and entrepreneurial pursuits. Her research interests involve promoting healthy developmental environments for fetal/infant development focusing on parental mental health and birth modalities. Her doctoral research, for example, explores women's experiences of Psychological Birth Trauma and the subsequent impact on family relationships. She has passionately shared her knowledge with others as a Nursing Instructor in Research, Perinatal, and Community Nursing. Among her many roles, she has been recognized for her excellence in Citizenship, Clinical Practice, Teaching, and Leadership.

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