
Reviewed by Edwin L. Hersch, author of *From Philosophy to Psychotherapy: A Phenomenological Model for Psychology, Psychiatry, and Psychoanalysis*.

In *Toward a Psychology of Uncertainty* Doris Brothers develops three key premises. These are:

1) Regarding relationality: “Experiences of existential uncertainty emerge from, and are emotionally transformed within, relational systems.” (p. x).

2) Regarding trauma: “By destroying the certainties that pattern psychological life, trauma plunges a relational system into chaos and exposes its victims to experiences of unbearable uncertainty.” and … “trauma represents exile from a world of hope.” (p. x).

3) Regarding treatment: There is a “mutual need of both patient and therapist to transform experiences of intolerable uncertainty.” (p. xi).

I will proceed in a chapter by chapter manner to look at how she deals primarily with these themes.

In Chapter one, “The Laboratory and the Labyrinth,” Doris Brothers talks about various philosophical approaches to psychoanalysis or psychotherapy in ways which challenge the classical Freudian, but also Cartesian, [and I’d add ‘Modernist’] view which sees the consulting room as a sort of “laboratory” where values of neutrality and objectivity allow us to examine, and sometimes manipulate, variables while largely divorced from their life-context. She calls this view “positivist” and sees its goal as achieving general or universal truths about human psychology. In that approach one correct answer is sought and theories battle out which is “the right way” to proceed to get “the right answer.” In other words, the promise of a certain, clear and unambiguous answer is postulated and sought. Brothers contends that unlike this laboratory metaphor that of the “labyrinth” is likely more appropriate to our purposes. A labyrinth is described as “a complicated, irregular network of passages or paths” (p. 16) and is distinguished from a “maze” in that the former allows for more than one correct solution, while the latter does not. In drawing on a variety of philosophical and psychoanalytic sources she argues that our lives are filled with uncertainties, ambiguities, and on-going incomplete dynamic processes and systems. Thus, we need a psychology of uncertainty to deal with these. She also draws upon relational psychoanalytic theories as well as “relational systems theory” (e.g., quoting Thelen and Smith, 2000) to situate her own work as clearly within the view that sees all psychological phenomena...
as essentially occurring within, and as best understood as within, relational
[interpersonal] systems and contexts. Finally, and of major interest to phenomenological psychologists, throughout this work Brothers emphasizes experience as the important ‘stuff’ of psychoanalysis/psychotherapy.

In chapter two, which bears the heading “Making the Unbearable Bearable” Doris Brothers outlines a view of psychoanalysis based on tolerating, rather than trying to eliminate, uncertainty. She talks of psychological “regulation” (p. 20), “expectancies” (p. 21) (or attempts to predict what will happen next), and attempts to organize or “order” our experience into relationally-situated, complex but relatively stable, coherent wholes or processes. She argues that a number of “regulatory processes” that operate within relational systems function to transform experiences of uncertainty . . . by affecting “expectations as to the orderliness of the relational exchange” [with others]. (p. 23).

These processes, she argues, basically allow us to deal with and tolerate the uncertainties of life under usual, non-traumatic conditions. Words, feelings, concepts, categories, roles, fantasies, and stories may all help in these regulatory ways, and she introduces the term “systemically emergent certainties (SEC’s)” to describe some basic themes with which we organize or structure even our sense(s) of selfhood [and worldhood I would add] as these arise in our relational contexts. This sets the stage for the role of trauma as the great de-stabilizer in Doris Brothers’ psychological theory.

It is in chapter three that she focuses on the notion of trauma as the destroyer of certainties (or alternatively as the destruction of certainties as the stuff of trauma), the destroyer of a hopeful, familiar (or home-like) relational context in which we might otherwise thrive. She says that: “trauma . . . results when the certainties that emerge from and stabilize our relational worlds are destroyed by some experience that powerfully reveals their falsity.” (p. 46). She likens our shattered sense of certainty to being thrown “into exile” and this is accompanied by affects of terror, dread, and “disintegration anxiety” (quoting Heinz Kohut here), as well as “excruciating shame.”

Doris Brothers’ notion of trauma here is a little different than what many of us have traditionally associated with that term. Referring to some of her earlier work she emphasizes that “trauma does not reside in a specific event such as a natural catastrophe or a malevolent act by a human, but rather in the meanings [italics mine] of that event for a given individual” (p. 49). But now she goes beyond this in terms of stressing the importance of the relational context as well. What makes something traumatic then, e.g., in a case of PTSD, is not only found in the destabilized meanings/certainties (“SEC’s”) of the individual’s life but also in their “consequent fears concerning the availability of self-sustaining relationships.” (p. 52). It is this latter aspect that clarifies why she argues that “trauma is [always]