

Nina: The roots of self-hatred

- Self-attacking is a common problem in the clients we see.
- In schema therapy we first look for the source of this in a **Punitive Parent** mode – an introject of what messages from the client's parents or other authority figures.
- But as we will see later self-attacking can also be part of an **Overcontroller Coping** mode.
- But in the work with Nina that I will share with you now, self-attacking came from a Child mode: her **Enraged Child**.

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An emergent process

- This is not always easy to detect.
- In Nina's case it only emerged clearly quite late in a therapy in which she had engaged in deep experiential work from the beginning.
- The sessions I am going to share with you show how the **Enraged Child** gradually emerged into view as part of an unfolding imagery process.
- My intention here is to show how it emerged and as part of a complex underlying experiential structure.

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Nina (44)

- Nina was born and raised in a British Colonial environment in Africa.
- Aged 16–18: Sent to boarding school in England.
- Attended university in South Africa where she has lived ever since.
- Qualified as a health professional.
- In a stable marriage with Tom who works in a counselling setting.
- They have three children aged 10–16 when therapy began.

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Goals and everyday functioning

- Nina entered therapy to deal with
 - General unhappiness and low mood (dysthymia – she had had a major depressive episode 16 years ago).
 - What she called "brittleness" – she would feel fragile and vulnerable and cope by speaking sharply to family members. This impacted on her relationship with Tom.
- Ⓢ Throughout she was functioning effectively
 - Ⓢ raising her children
 - Ⓢ working professionally (part time)
 - Ⓢ engaged socially and in the community
 - Ⓢ studying on a part time basis (did well academically over the next five years).

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- Therapy spanned 4 years and 2 months (about 35 sessions each year).
- First 2 years mainly individual sessions
- Last 2 years mainly couples therapy with Tom.

Acknowledgement and confidentiality

- Ⓢ I express my thanks to "Nina" for making this material available to a professional audience.
- Ⓢ Please treat it as confidential – in the same way you would any personal clinical information from your own clients.

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The therapy begins ...

- Nina's father had been emotionally unavailable, and unpredictable with outbursts of anger.
- Her mother, a nurse, had been practical and efficient but cold and invalidating.
- The challenges that therapy would bring had confronted Nina some 20 years earlier, when, aged 24, she was at a Bible College.
- On a prayer retreat she had an image of a huge cess pit under the floor, and felt a pull to go down there.
- This had no doubt pointed to the painful childhood memories that we worked with for most of the first year of the therapy – we would identify her emotions in response to upsetting events, bridge to early memories and rescript them.

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A painful disappointment

- Over three years into the therapy she experienced a painful disappointment.
- She applied for a position for which she seemed well qualified and which would have perfectly suited her career development, but was turned down.
- By that time I was mainly working with Nina and her husband, Tom, as a couple, though they were each having some individual sessions in between.

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An image of old storage jars

- Session 111, which followed her hearing she had not got the job, was an individual session.
- Her distress was intense, she was very tearful, but as I invited her to focus, Nina connected with an important image.
- She sees old fashioned glass storage jars on a shelf in a pharmacy or laboratory. They are dusty as if they have not been touched for some time.
- The jars contain parts of her that she values and feels are special. At one point she says, "These are precious and valuable and I don't want to lose them."

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Smashing the jars

- But now she feels that nobody wants these precious ingredients and it is too painful living with the false hope that someday someone will.
- So she is smashing them violently, scattering the broken pieces and the contents across the room.
- This portrays an intense sense of **invalidation**.
- A month later, in a couple session, we look at how hard it is for her to accept validation from Tom.

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A theme of invalidation

- The next day in an individual session (116), I reflect on how the impact of her mother's invalidation of her had come into focus very sharply for me in the previous couple session.
- During that session Tom had commented on how her mother was "like a battle-ship who just sails on regardless."
- I recalled Nina's earlier seeing her mother covered in barbed quills: if she tried to get close to her mother, the quills stuck into her and she got hurt.

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"Tall daisy syndrome"

- Her experience of invalidation also connected with her experience of what she identified as "tall daisy syndrome" which she had first referred to two years earlier (session 38).
- The message was, "Don't be conceited, don't stand out, or you'll be cut down."

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Note on the audio tracks

- These are real sessions and Nina and others have given permission for me to use them.
- **Please do not record them. This is confidential material.** You will be able to see the transcript on the powerpoint presentation I will upload after the workshop.
- The segments are speeded up as repetitions and pauses have been cut – sometimes a few seconds, sometimes long pauses of over 30 seconds.

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Rescripting a memory of her mother's invalidation

- Over the next few minutes she recalls other memories of her mother cutting her down, humiliating her.
- In one, Nina had a very sore stomach and went to a part of the house away from everybody where she thought she was all alone and no-one could hear her.
- She starts to sob loudly but her mother hears her and arrives telling her to be quiet and scolding her sharply.
- I begin to rescript this and help her talk to her mother:

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Connecting with the anger

Segment 000-2 27sec 

- **Nina:** My tummy's really sore ... and I just want to be able to express it. I just want to be able to cry out loud if I want to. And I don't mean to embarrass you, I thought I was all alone. I thought nobody could hear me.
- **Dave:** And what I really need from you as my mother is ...
- **Nina:** And what I really from you as my mother is just some understanding, compassion that I'm feeling in this pain.
- **Dave:** What's happening now?
- **Nina:** [Pause cut] I'm just feeling so angry with everybody and everything.

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Anger and helplessness

- Nina has found her anger, but it is embedded in a deep helplessness.
- She is squashing her anger down and for the next few minutes I work with her to allow her experience of anger into her body and express it.
- The anger is also very diffuse – directed at “everybody and everything.”
- This suggests there is a deep reservoir of stored anger in response to the regular and repeated scolding and invalidation that was her daily experience.
- I prompt her to further express what she needs ...

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The self-directed anger appears



Segment 000-2 20sec

- **Dave:** I want you to stop being frightened of my feelings.
- **Nina:** I want you to stop being frightened of my feelings and frightened of me.
- **Dave:** And I'm angry that you can't do that.
- **Nina:** I'm angry that you can't do that. It just makes me angry at myself and I don't like that. I get so angry with myself.
- **Dave:** What are you angry with yourself about?
- **Nina:** For failing.

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Deepening her experience of the anger/rage

- At first, it is not really clear what she is angry with herself about, though she does identify the theme of failure.
- This of course has been triggered in the present by not being offered the job.
- But for now she is caught in an intense somatic conflict between an emerging rage and her habitual suppression of it.
- For the next few minutes I guide her to focus on her bodily experience of this conflict.
- As she connects with this more and more, images start to appear...

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The Enraged Child appears

Segment 0 41sec 

- **Nina:** It's got really chaotic
- **Dave:** Tell me what's happening.
- **Nina:** It's just very chaotic images ...
- **Dave:** It's fine, maybe just let them flow by. Just breathe gently and watch them. You don't have to hold on to them.
- **Nina:** The angry child's just smashing and ranting and raving.
- **Dave:** Just watch. Just watch. Just watch her rant and rave and smash. ...This is good. It's good for her... Good for you.
- **Nina:** There's just a big stick, just smashing ...

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The Enraged Child is still directed outwards

- In response to my asking her, Nina thinks the child is about 5.
- At this stage, the **Enraged Child** is still directed outwards.
- Her smashing is directed at objects in the world.
- But then there's a shift ...

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The enraged child turns on Nina

Segment 0-1 19sec

- **Nina:** And then it get's confused.
- Nina is in deep distress and sobs for 40 seconds before saying
- **Nina:** ... and it turns and smashes me, and I don't cope with that ... me and my jars.
- The storage jars that had appeared five sessions earlier represented something precious to her.
- They seemed to be an image of her authentic self, something very central, at her core, that needed to be carefully safeguarded.

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Storage jars: Images of her true self

- These resources of the **Authentic Child** had not been acknowledged or recognized by her parents.
- She had stored these parts of herself away in response to repeated experiences of invalidation
 - from her father's emotional distance, gruffness and unpredictability,
 - and her mother's practical but cold attention
- This **Authentic Child** – What Winnicott calls the **True Self** had effectively been dissociated.

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Destroying her own potential

- Within the therapy process, the appearance of the storage jars is a breakthrough.
- It means that Nina is now becoming aware of the dissociated **True Self / Authentic Child**.
- But at this stage in the therapy the situation looks catastrophic.
- Another part of herself, an **Enraged Child**, is turning on them and smashing them.
- The anguish resulting from this conflict is intense as you will see from the next excerpt.

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Starting to validate the experience of the Enraged Child

▪ I say to Nina:

We need to speak to the 5 year old and we need to say 'We can see you're very angry. And you are angry because bad things are happening to you. And it's good that you're angry but it's not good to smash Nina's jars; they're very precious. And we want to hear about your anger and what you're angry about. We need to know about the unfair things that have happened to you; the way people don't listen to you.'

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Nina feels the pain of her own self-attacking

▪ Nina responds desperately:

She keeps smashing me and I don't ... Don't do that! But it's me! It's me!

- I had been speaking to the **Enraged Child**, validating her experience, but Nina is now experiencing the intense pain of the rage directed at herself.
- She is now fully aware that the storage jars are not just jars, but symbolize herself.
- What is being attacked is indeed at the core of the her sense of self.

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Reaching out to the Enraged Child



Segment 0-3a 1m16sec

- **Nina:** I'm really sore from the smashing.
- **Dave:** [Pause cut] What's the little girl doing now?
- **Nina:** [Pause cut] She still just wants to smash me ...
- **Dave:** Now we need to spend some time talking to her to find out what she's so angry about and why she wants to smash you. But she can't smash you because you are bigger than her and you are stronger than her and she's just a little girl. And you know sometimes little girls have a big tantrum and they feel better if there's a strong adult just to contain them and prevent them from getting out of control.
- [long pause cut] What's happening now?

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- **Nina:** [Long pause cut] I see myself saying to her: I still love you when you're angry. It's okay to be angry... I'm not going to push you aside when you're angry. ...
- **Dave:** It's not good for you to hate yourself.
- **Nina:** It's not good for you to hate yourself.
- **Dave:** You're not hateful.
- **Nina:** You're not ... not hateful.
- **Dave:** You're a beautiful little girl with a lot of potential.
- **Nina:** You're a beautiful little girl with lots of potential.
- **Dave:** And I'm really sad that nobody can see it right now.
- **Nina:** And I'm really sad that nobody can see it ... or that you are scared of it ... that you had to suppress it.

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Focusing on the pain in her heart

- Now we are working directly with Nina's painful experiences of invalidation by her parents.
- It has come into focus as a sense of her true self, her **Authentic Child**, that has not been recognized, seen or encouraged to emerge and grow.
- Her statement that she had become scared of this part of her and felt she had to suppress it is at the heart of her anguish.
- And now, as I invite her to focus again on her body, she feels the pain in her heart ...

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Self-hatred is the source of Nina's pain



Segment 1-1 1m31sec

- **Nina:** I'm feeling some pain here – in the heart ...and it's like, ever since this rejection, it's like this child's just been laying into my heart with a stick.
- **Dave:** The child learned to hate herself.
- **Nina:** She's so angry.
- **Dave:** She's right to be angry ...but it's not good for her to hate herself. ... So you just need to breathe gently into your heart and ... help her let go of all that hate for herself. She needs to know that she is loved and good and beautiful and that what her mother and father are doing to her aren't because there's something wrong with her.

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Nina sees how she turned her rage on to herself

- **Nina:** It's so hard to let that go. ... It's just so hard to stop doing that.
- **Dave:** But we're going to help her let that go. [pause cut] Breathe into your heart, ... let go of the hate. [pause cut] You don't have to hate yourself anymore. [pause cut] It's not because you are bad that they're doing these things to you that hurt you so much.
- **Nina:** It's like if I don't hate myself then I've got to hate my Mom and Dad and then I've got to turn it onto them ...

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- **Dave:** Then I give you permission to do that; [pause cut]. You're five years old and they've hurt you and you're angry [pause cut]... And you're right to be angry because they've hurt you and scared you and humiliated you, ... pushed you down, haven't seen you when you need to be seen.

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Turning the rage back towards her parents

- In this segment, the underlying structure of the self-hatred has become clear.
- Her **Enraged Child**, enraged by her parents' treatment of her, would naturally direct her fury at them.
- But she is afraid to, so she turns the rage on herself.
- This seems to provide a solution: the rage seems to be neutralized and the **Authentic Child** who is in so much pain is largely shut down (dissociated).

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Fear of the impact of her rage towards her parents

Segment 1-2.1m06sec

- **Dave:** So the anger does belong to them, not to you. [Long pause cut] What's happening now?
- **Nina:** Mm. Now this little girl comes in with a stick, I turn around and face it towards my Mom and Dad. It was quite scary to think that it could destroy them but then I realise that they're also big, and she's only five...
- **Dave:** But she might have been scared that she could destroy them and then she wouldn't have a home.
- **Nina:** Mm. So I couldn't do that when I was five. So I had to do it to me.

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- **Dave:** Right. And could she destroy them?
- **Nina:** No. ... No.
- **Dave:** That's really important to take that in and for her to know that however much rage and fury she's got ... she wouldn't be able to destroy them; they'd still be their solid dysfunctional selves.
- **Nina:** Ya ... And they wouldn't ultimately reject me either, I mean it wouldn't be any more rejecting than it has been and it wouldn't make it worse for me.

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Testing the belief that she could have destroyed them

- In the process we are following here, Nina is seeing the **Enraged Child** with the stick and describing the imagery rescripting as it unfolds.
- Despite the intensity of her emotional distress her **Healthy Adult** is not swamped: she has a clear mindful attention that is separate from the pain in the **Vulnerable Child**.
- So her **Healthy Adult** can take in what I am saying about the predicament of the **Enraged Child**.
- This allows her to re-evaluate the situation and see that five year old Nina could not actually have destroyed her parents.

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The importance of Nina's mindful attention

- Nina's capacity for mindful attention, was an important factor in allowing the process to unfold so smoothly.
- Without it, her **Healthy Adult** would keep getting swamped by the **Child** and she would not be able to sustain her mature and balanced perspective.
- When this capacity is missing or not well developed, the therapist needs to help the client build her capacity for mindfulness to enable her to sustain the kind of balance of attention that we see Nina displaying here.

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Getting the message to the dissociated 5 year old

- At this stage, Nina understands from her **Healthy Adult**, that a five year old does not have the capacity to destroy her parents, however enraged she becomes.
- But the problem with dissociation is that information in the **Healthy Adult** does not automatically get passed on to the **Child** parts of the self.
- So that it was I address next asking her whether the five year old understands yet.

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Segment 1-3 0m55sec



- **Dave:** And can the five-year-old see that?
- **Nina:** No she's had to be careful that ...
- **Dave:** Um-hm. So you need to tell her.
- **Nina:** You know, no matter how angry you get with Mom and Dad, they're not going to kick you out, they're not going to reject you.
- **Dave:** And they're not going to disappear, they're not going to vaporise, they're not going to be smashed.
- **Nina:** They're not going to disappear, you're not going to destroy them; they're still going to be there and they're still going to give you a home. They're still going to love you in the way that they can.

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- **Dave:** Does she believe you?
- **Nina:** [Pause cut] I think she needs some practice in getting angry with them. ... smashing, beating them up with a stick.
- **Dave:** [Pause cut] So we need to wind up now because we've gone over time a bit. I want you to be very clear what the five year old needs to know. She needs to know that she's good and loved, she's angry for a good reason and that however rageful she is she could never destroy her parents. And it might take some time to get that message across to her, but it's quite a simple message.
- **For another 5 minutes I wind down the session and consolidate the insights Nina has gained.**

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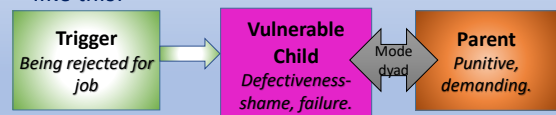
Getting information to dissociated parts

- What I was doing in the last part you listened to is an important step in the rescripting process which often needs to be carefully attended to.
- The **Healthy Adult** (or the therapist) may say and do all sorts of valuable things in the reparenting process.
- But don't forget to ask, "What is the child making of this? How is she responding?"

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Mode analysis and the structure of experience

- Of course, we would expect someone to be disappointed by a rejection of the kind Nina had experienced
- This would trigger defectiveness-shame or failure schemas in many people.
- So on the surface the mode structure looks like this:



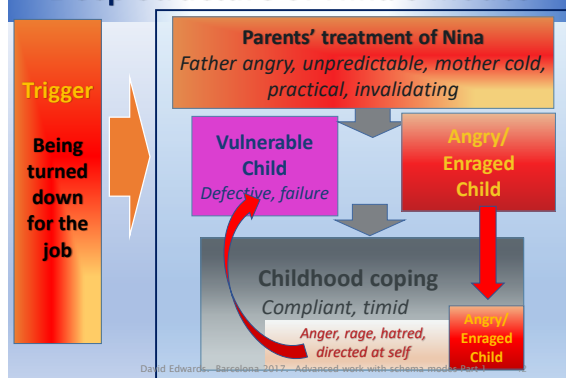
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Finding the deep structure of Nina's experience

- But there is more to the underlying mode structure of Nina's experience.
- Nina's experienced rejection of her basic worth, value and uniqueness.
- The image of the storage jars, with their precious contents, points to a very primary form of invalidation, an experience of there being no place for a true self (or **Authentic Child**).
- Although she has internalized her father's unpredictable irascibility and her mother's cold, disdainful and instrumental attitude (**Punitive Parent mode**), these are not the source of the self-attacking.

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Deep structure of Nina's modes



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Separating out the Parent from the Angry Child

- But Nina's self-hatred is from her own **Child**.
- Long ago, she made the coping decision to turn her rage back on herself, rather than risk wiping out her parents.
- And now, decades later, we could uncover the process through the imagery and dialogue work.

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Separating out the Parent from the Angry Child

- Some 18 months later in an email exchange I mentioned the storage jars image.
- She responded:

One indication that things have shifted for the better, I think, is that I have been aware in recent years of a subliminal image of a fist smashing into my face when I'm feeling down – I guess a sign of self-hatred. However, since therapy, I have been able to consciously modify the angry fist into loving arms.

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