

Episode: *Author Interview: “Illuminating Psychological Torment of Child Abuse”*

Guest: Tania L. Abramson, MFA

Host: Tim Hoff

Transcript by: Cheryl Green

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[bright theme music]

TIM HOFF: Welcome to another episode of the *Author Interview* series from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*. I'm your host, Tim Hoff. This series provides an alternative way to access the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Tania Abramson, a visual and conceptual artist, as well as a lecturer in the Honors Collegium at the University of California, Los Angeles and in the Department of Feminist Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is the co-creator and co-instructor of the UCLA Art and Trauma Class and author of *Shame and the Eternal Abyss*, *Concern*, and *Truth Lies*. She's here to discuss her article, coauthored with Dr Paul Abramson, “*Illuminating Psychological Torment of Child Abuse*,” in the February 2023 issue of the Journal, [Child Abuse and Neglect](#). Tania, thank you so much for being on the podcast. [music fades]

TANIA ABRAMSON: Thanks so much for having me. It's great to be here.

HOFF: What's the main ethics point that you and your coauthor are making in this article?

ABRAMSON: Well, I'd actually like to start by posing a question. Can anyone truly fathom another person's experiences, especially the trauma of a child? So, when it comes to child abuse, we know that this is a global health crisis by way of reports and data and other documentation, yet this trauma is a deeply felt and very subjective experience. And words seem inadequate to convey these harms, especially for young children who may have not developed the language to describe what they have gone through or what they're feeling. So, the ethics point to the article is that it's the power of artworks that address such issues that can aid viewers in identifying with an unknowable experience. And as such, it becomes an ethical imperative for awareness and reflection.

HOFF: And so, what's the most important thing for health professions students and trainees to take from your article?

ABRAMSON: Well, I would say that based on the ubiquity of abuse, that the providers of health care and students and trainees that are in clinical settings are encountering victims of child abuse on a frequent basis, and what I mean by that is either presently occurring abuse or the lingering aftereffects of past abuse. But it's only through identification with suffering that someone can begin to understand and empathize with the fact that the abuse of a child has the power to diminish lives, that it can haunt victims well into their adult years. And while their trauma doesn't define them, that it remains a part of who they are. So, students that have the opportunity to utilize art and look at art alongside their course and clinical work combined with their own experiences, can create an enriched connection with their patients.

HOFF: And finally, if you could add a point to your article that you didn't have the time or space to fully explore, what would that be?

ABRAMSON: Well, I feel like this is a continuation of what I've been talking about, but what I'd like to add is that visual art has this pedagogical component. It has the ability to convey what data cannot. So, in contemplating artworks that are created by those that have experienced childhood traumas or perhaps those that ally with their suffering, then one can begin to grasp the effects on individual lives rather than seeing them as numbers on a spreadsheet or a dot on a graph. And it's this additive process to comprehension that art is capable of, of bringing this unspeakable topic to light and reaching people on a visceral level without needing to be explicit. And that's achieved by using metaphor and allegory. [theme music returns]

HOFF: Tania, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today, and thanks to you and your coauthor for your contribution to the Journal this month.

ABRAMSON: Thank you so much.

HOFF: To read the full article as well as the rest of this month's issue for free, visit our site, [JournalofEthics.org](http://JournalofEthics.org). We'll be back soon with more *Ethics Talk* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.