Embitterment

Societal, psychological, and clinical perspectives
Preface

The history of the present book on embitterment began a decade ago. It received an important impulse within the scientific conference on “Embitterment and Mental Disorders” in April 2009, organized by the editors, Prof. Linden and Prof. Maercker. The intention is to enable a better understanding of embittered persons by discussing different aspects of this complex psychological construct. Persistent embitterment is a rather insufficiently defined mental condition and is not yet registered as a disorder in the 10th revision of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Health related Problems (ICD-10). Nevertheless, persistent embitterment can result in severe impairment, suffering for the individual and his or her environment, inability to work and protracted litigation, sometimes involving German Pension Insurance as well.

Besides the payment of retirement pensions, the responsibility of German Pension Insurance is to prevent illness- or disability-related reduction of earning capacity. The reasons for pensions due to earning incapacity are manifold. In the social medical assessment of a person’s capacity to work, fixed medical diagnostic categories are not the most important items. In fact, the central task is to assess the functional capability derived from the individual psychophysical condition. With regard to the legally defined task of German Pension Insurance, the question is always whether an insured person is still able to fulfill occupational requirements.

According to the principle of “rehabilitation rather than pension”, insured persons at risk of losing their earning capacity because of health disorders are eligible for rehabilitation services covered by German Pension Insurance. These services are provided by specialized rehabilitation treatment centers. The treatment focuses on improving the functional status of a person within a multi-professional and multimodal approach, with special regard to participation in working life. German Pension Insurance not only finances rehabilitation services, but also carries out highly differentiated quality assessment. Furthermore it has a leading role in rehabilitation research and in designing programs and guidelines with the aim of continuous improvement of services.

Especially after German reunification, embitterment as a severe condition of persistent mental illness seemed to increase and became visible. Many people
lost their jobs, had to move, were forced to work far away from their families or were confronted with an enormous amount of adaptation. If the individual ability to cope with this kind of social impact is overstrained, embitterment can be one possible reaction. Embitterment itself can lead to withdrawal from society, including work. Experience with the treatment of patients suffering from persistent embitterment has shown that they are difficult to treat, they are unable to work for long periods and often claim pensions due to earning incapacity.

Given this background, it was ground-breaking work to start research on embitterment, which had been a neglected field internationally. German Federal Pension Insurance provided generous research funding for several years which allowed the study of this problem in its own rehabilitation treatment centre Seehof in Teltow/Berlin. The results are of great importance: Posttraumatic Embitterment Disorders (PTED) have been described and classified, instruments for the assessment of such disorders have been developed and – most importantly – treatment strategies have been evaluated. These allow us to treat these patients with greater optimism today than a decade ago. We are very pleased that this work has meanwhile been recognized internationally.

We were therefore very glad to host an international symposium on embitterment, which provided the basis for this book. Going beyond Posttraumatic Embitterment as such, the subject is discussed here in a broader context. As a major public institution German Pension Insurance carries considerable social responsibility. Therefore, we see with great interest the various societal implications of the research on embitterment, be they in respect to the reconciliation between parts of a society, the organization of work conditions, lifespan development of individuals or even the problem of murder suicide.

We hope that this book will find many readers, help toward a better understanding of embitterment and – most important – stimulate further research on this subject.

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