Many of us have been affected by trauma and struggle to manage our health and well-being. The social psychological approach to health highlights how social and cultural forces, as much as individual ones, are central to how we experience and cope with adversity. This book integrates psychology, politics and medicine to offer a new understanding that speaks to the causes and consequences of traumatic experiences. Connecting the personal with the political, Orla T. Muldoon details the evidence that traumatic experiences can, under certain conditions, impact people’s political positions and appetite for social change. This perspective reveals trauma as a socially situated phenomenon linked to power and privilege or disempowerment and disadvantage. The discussion will interest those affected by trauma and those supporting them, as well as students, researchers, practitioners and policy makers in social psychology, health and clinical psychology and political science. This title is available as Open Access on Cambridge Core.

Orla T. Muldoon is Professor of Psychology at the University of Limerick, Ireland, where she has lived on both sides of the border. She is currently editor-in-chief of Political Psychology and holds a prestigious European Research Council Advanced Grant. She has written numerous peer-reviewed publications on trauma, health, and political attitudes, and she makes regular media and policy contributions, including as a columnist with The Irish Times.
This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Olive and Tom Muldoon; the reassuring presence of my husband, Paul Breslin; and my hopes for the future, Tara and Tom Muldoon Breslin.
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Preface

At its core, this book presents a single idea: trauma is a social phenomenon. Our risk of trauma, our responses to trauma and how life unfolds for any of us after a traumatic experience are determined by our social world. Despite this, when we think about trauma, the dominant way of thinking at least in the Western world is that traumatised people are a clinical concern and that modern medicine, psychiatry or clinical psychology might be able to provide a ‘treatment’ for affected people.

This way of looking at trauma minimises the influence of the social and the political. And when people do think about the social and political, typically the impact of traumatic events is thought about at the population level. This perspective de-emphasises the impact of experience for individual people within a population. Entire populations will be constructed as ‘traumatised’ despite clear evidence that within that population there is huge variability in the direct and indirect experience of trauma.

This book is an attempt to integrate these two positions. Trauma is a clear example of when the personal is political. It is part of the reason that I chose the title ‘The Social Psychology of Trauma’ for the book. So, this book highlights the central and, indeed, pivotal role of individual experience of trauma. However, there is also an appreciation that people often experience traumatic events because of their group membership. As such, experiences of trauma, even where they are experienced privately, have wider ripple effects on the social groups to which victims belong.

There is a second reason I chose that name for the book. Some concepts in social psychology are ephemeral. They can be hard to explain and hard to grasp. Take, for example, the concept of social identity: the idea that a person’s sense of who they are is derived from inclusion in a social category or group. This sounds like a very abstract idea until it is translated or applied to a real-world example.
A straightforward illustration of a social identity is available through reference to occupational group membership and national group membership. So, I have a sense of being a ‘psychologist’ and ‘Irish’; indeed, they are two social identities I value, because I am included in these social categories by both myself and others. This use of myself as the example, as it were, is the second reason the book alludes to both the personal and the political.

In each of the chapters that follow I illustrate the ideas by reference to my own efforts when faced with some difficulty or stressful experience in life. And whilst some of these experiences were deeply distressing at the time, my life has not been characterised by trauma. And it is not that I have led a particularly interesting or challenging life. Rather, I am using my own experience of trauma to represent or illustrate my point. My hope is that by illustrating the ideas using my own story, readers will gain a sense of the value of the approach. I am particularly hopeful this will allow readers to apply the approach in the same way to understand their own experiences. In taking this approach, I hope it becomes clear that the causes of and solutions to traumatic experiences are rarely found at the individual level. All too often it is communities and society that need to be fixed rather than those who are traumatised.

It is unusual for an academic psychologist to write a book littered with references to their own life. Indeed, research psychologists pride themselves on their academic impartiality and scientific objectivity. This makes me vulnerable on a couple of dimensions: vulnerable to scepticism of my academic peers, but also vulnerable because of the personal information that I disclose, not least my own struggles with depression and bereavement. I am hopeful nonetheless that the approach makes the book a little more accessible, and that any odd or surprising admissions will be met with the kindness of those who read the earlier version of these chapters.

Psychology is a discipline heavily grounded in the scientific approach. Empiricism, data and evidence are highly valued. Psychology distinguishes itself from other disciplines such as philosophy and political theory by this reliance on data. Though psychologists traditionally relied on numeric data, in recent years non-numeric, or qualitative, data has been embraced. Qualitative data has been used to characterise the nature of populist rhetoric, to understand the lived experience of traumatised groups and to expose rare phenomena. At the start of each chapter in this book, I use poems as a form of
Preface

qualitative data. Each poem quoted speaks to the issue that the chapter addresses. We know that the poet felt their experience merited writing about. It is also safe to say that the poet assumed or at least hoped their words would be read and their experience would resonate with readers. These authors and their readers understand how the experience of trauma is socially embedded. Excerpts from ‘North’ from Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966–1996 by Seamus Heaney are reproduced with permission of Farrar, Straus and Girous (US) and Faber and Faber Ltd (UK). Similarly ‘Why Brownlee Left’ from Selected Poems 1968–2018 by Paul Muldoon is reproduced with permission of Farrar, Straus and Girous (US) and Faber and Faber Ltd (UK). These poems can be seen as evidence, at least in literature, that the social and political dimensions of trauma are uncontroversial. They offer lyrical evidence that social and political psychological foundations of trauma are major, as well as interest and inspiration.
Acknowledgements

I count myself as having a very fortunate and often charmed existence. I have spent more than thirty years studying and working in universities in Ireland, North and South. I have been able to dedicate my time to reading and thinking and writing and teaching. It has been a busy three decades but equally very privileged ones.

Over the course of the three decades studying psychology, I have written many journal articles. Often these papers outline studies and data we had collected as part of a particular project. On occasion I have also written summary and review papers attempting to condense knowledge or articulate a theoretical position. For many years I have wanted to write this book, or maybe an earlier version of it. Somehow, I never quite got around to it.

There were probably two reasons for this. The first is undoubtedly related to time. Life in the academy is privileged but it is also very busy. Prior attempts fell foul to other priorities: teaching that had to be done, students who needed support, development tasks within the university. In 2020, though, I was honoured to receive a European Research Council (ERC) advanced grant. These are hard-won and competitively awarded research grants for cutting-edge research across all areas of the academy. Ireland is still relatively new to securing these awards, and I was one of the first of two Irish women to receive an advanced award. As well as being incredibly proud and delighted with this achievement, I was given the gift of time – time to write and time to research. It also facilitated this book being open access. I am very grateful I live in an EU country and have access to this source of funds that supports progressive frontier research across the humanities and social sciences. And I would like to acknowledge the ERC and thank the Council for believing in me and investing in my work.

The second reason that I was slow to write this book was my need to think through its contribution. In earlier iterations of this volume, I had thought that it might pertain only to traumatic experiences in
Northern Ireland. As the years progressed and I began to consider the fit of some of my ideas to the experiences of other traumatised populations, this seemed less and less sensible. As my own research interests extended, it was increasingly clear that the book needed to examine the impact of trauma across different contexts and groups. Thinking this contribution through and indeed collating the evidence to illustrate these ideas slowed me down.

I have not, of course, done this alone. Indeed, the data collection, analysis and thinking that underpin the book is the product of fruitful, thought-provoking, enjoyable collaborations with colleagues near and far. I have been supported and encouraged from the outset of my education by colleagues and friends in Queens University Belfast; most notably, Dr Karen Trew, Dr Clare Cassidy and Dr Jackie Reilly were particularly influential and helpful in developing my thinking around the role of identity in Northern Ireland in my early career. Along with Dr Karen Trew, Dr John Kremer and Professor Carol McGuinness were incredibly supportive mentors and colleagues. Since I moved to the University of Limerick I have been fortunate to have supportive and engaged colleagues in the Department of Psychology who have always offered a stimulating research environment. I am not sure that I would have followed through on many initiatives were it not for the energetic encouragement and enthusiasm of colleagues such as Professor Stephen Gallagher, Dr Aisling O’Donnell, Professor Mike Quayle, Dr Siobhan Howard, Dr Elaine Kinsella, Dr Sarah Jay and Dr Jenny Roth.

I would also like to acknowledge the support and encouragement I got from others at the proposal stage of this writing project. At that stage I was not entirely sure that the book merited either consideration or writing. The encouraging words on this proposal that Dr Aoife-Marie Foran, Dr Grace McMahon, Dr Cillian McHugh, Dr Daragh Bradshaw and Dr Siobhan Griffin offered in the GROWTH lab group at the University of Limerick gave me the necessary push and confidence to move forward. Big thanks too to Margaret Grene, who helped in bringing the volume to completion with her great editorial skillset, and to Edel Collins for so much administrative and background support. I would like to particularly thank Dr Aisling O’Donnell, Dr Sarah Jay, Dr Elaine Kinsella, Professor Mike Quayle, Dr Siobhan Howard and Dr Aoife-Marie Foran for commenting on early versions of this manuscript. And again, thanks to my current PhD students and
postdoctoral researchers in the GROWTH group who reviewed the final version with kindness and care: Dr Aoife-Marie Foran, Dr Siobhan Griffin, Dr Grace McMahon, Dr Magdalena Skrodzka, Anna Lashkay, Alzbeta Lebdova, Dearbla Moroney, Catriona Shelley and Lisa Skilton. As well as making me immeasurably proud, this next generation of psychologists gives me great hope for our discipline.

There are others in the wider world of psychology who have also been influential in my thinking about the intersection between trauma and social identity. I would like to particularly thank Dr Robert Lowe of Manchester Metropolitan University, who has been a great collaborator and cheerleader through many projects. His questioning and thoughtful approach to our research has driven many of the insights outlined in this book. In January 2017, I spent a period of sabbatical at the University of Queensland Australia. I very gratefully acknowledge the support of the University of Limerick, which allowed me to take this leave. This was the first time in my career I managed a six-month period of sabbatical abroad. It was a golden period for me personally and professionally. The Australian dream delivered: wallabies in the back garden, sunshine and a stimulating academic environment to write and think. During that time, I worked with colleagues in the SIGN research group at the University of Queensland. I would like to particularly thank Professor Jolanda Jetten, Professor Alex Haslam, Professor Cath Haslam, Dr Tegan Cruwys, Dr Nik Steffens, Christine McCoy and Dr Zoe Walters for the warm welcome I received on arrival. I would also like to thank Alex, Cath, Tegan and Jolanda for their engagement and encouragement as we wrote and developed the Social Identity Model of Traumatic Identity Change. Like all papers and proposals, it had a few rejections and false starts before the theoretical ideas saw the light of day. There is no doubt in my mind that the support and encouragement from these collaborators was pivotal in developing these ideas that are now so central to all of my own thinking.

Theoretical ideas are of course just that, theoretical. In psychology, as in other sciences, ideas of this nature need to be backed up. Much of the evidence in support of these ideas and indeed the development of the ideas is down to capable and energetic PhD students I have worked with over the years. It is one of the greatest privileges of academic life to supervise a PhD student and their research development. Of course, PhD students have also driven my development. I am lucky to count
Acknowledgements

former students amongst valued friends and colleagues. I would like to particularly acknowledge Dr Katrina McLaughlin, Dr I-Ling Fu, Dr Nichola McCullough, Dr Ciara Downes, Dr Katharina Schmid, Dr Geoff McCombe, Dr Veronica Hakhu, Dr Stephen Walsh, Dr Sarah Jay, Dr Khagendra Acharaya, Dr Catherine Naughton, Dr Clara O’Byrne, Dr Joanne Cantwell, Dr Mary Beth Gallagher, Dr Daragh Bradshaw, Dr Alastair Nightingale, Dr Michelle Kearns, Dr Megan Ryan and Dr Aoife-Marie Foran. Their thoughtful empirical work has influenced my thinking profoundly and their company and support buoyed me up on the greyest of Irish days. I hope this book does justice to their efforts.

I also want to thank a great bevy of supporters and friends who have helped me understand the value of social groups and connections in my own life. I am a ‘blow in’ to Limerick – this is an Irish way of articulating the fact that you cannot trace your ancestors at this location for generations. However, I have found my tribe here, a group of friends who believe in me even when I don’t. Thanks to Dr Maeve Skelly, Professor Deirdre McGrath and Therese Hennessy, who are always available for sensible professional and personal advice. Some day we will manage that lunch! Thanks too to my ever-reliable running buddies Triona Crosse, Carmela Conroy and Caoimh Ryan. The chats are integral to the joy of these runs. And of course, because it is impossible to make old friends, honourable mention to those who have stuck around for so long and still cheer me on: Mary Redmond, Marcella Ronayne, Lynn Carville and Kirsten Thompson. And, last, a big thanks to my book club buddies. The book club features as an important support group in this volume, not least because it is. There I have found friendship, kindness and encouragement, and we have in our fifteen or so years of existence weathered some difficult personal storms. So, thanks to Dr Carmen Kuhling, Annie Girardin, Professor Sue Franklin, Nuria Burrell, Professor Maura Adshead, Edel Farrell and Kathleen Eull, who inspire and encourage in equal measure. Thanks too to the aspiring, albeit gate-crashing adjunct members Professor Kieran Keohane, Dr Brendan Halpin and Dr David Atkinson.

Last, but of course not least, I want to thank my family for all the help and patience over the years. Sadly, my parents are no longer with me, and so I cannot thank them for their support and belief in me. I am not sure I thanked them enough when they were alive despite their
pivotal influence on my education and career. I am comforted by the fact that they very much enjoyed and took pride in all I did, which perhaps compensates for any lack of gratitude.

To ensure I don’t make the same mistake twice, I want to thank my sisters and brother for their friendship and support too. I am one of five siblings, and my childhood home was a noisy house where there was much discussion and debate on the issues of the day. As we moved into adulthood these debates remained a feature of our family life. Opinions particularly of younger siblings were often not taken terribly seriously. I am the fourth of five and so had to learn early and well how to back up claims with evidence. So, thanks to my siblings John, Deirdre, Fiona and Eavan for teaching me that skill early and well. I look forward to hearing your views on this book.

Thanks also to my two children, Tara and Tom. I am immensely proud of the young adults they have become. As well as offering hope for the future, they keep me informed of developments in their social and political worlds. Like my students, they remind me across a whole range of domains that age and generational perspective shape social and political attitudes profoundly.

This book has been an occasion for me to reflect on many of the more difficult times in my adult life. Through all these times, the one constant for me has been the presence of my long-suffering husband, Paul, whom I met at the tender age of twenty. That is now truly a lifetime ago. At that stage I had little belief in myself and certainly no sense of having academic potential. But Paul always had faith in me. His unwavering loyalty and faith have given me confidence, and I want to thank him wholeheartedly.

*Míle buíochas.*
Abbreviations

APA American Psychiatric Association
BGFA Belfast Good Friday Agreement
COVID-19 coronavirus disease 2019
CVD cardiovascular disease
CVR cardiovascular reactivity
DSM Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association
GDP gross domestic profit
GFA Good Friday Agreement
PTG post-traumatic growth
PTS post-traumatic stress
PTSD post-traumatic stress disorder
WHO World Health Organization
WMHs World Mental Health surveys