

RESEARCH & FINDINGS

The Transcending Trauma Project (TTP) brings an interdisciplinary perspective to the study of three generations of Holocaust survivor families.

Research Overview

Post World War II, the field of Trauma Studies focused almost exclusively on the negative sequelae of traumatic experiences. The Transcending Trauma Project (TTP) team found this to be untrue in our clinical practices and in our life experiences with survivors of the Holocaust. The team decided to address the absence of a fuller understanding of trauma's impact – especially extreme trauma – by conducting an expanded qualitative interview-based research project with survivors of the Nazi Holocaust during World War II and their family members. The goal for the TTP was to gather evidence for a psychological conceptualization of how individuals and families cope differently with extreme trauma and how they rebuild their lives.

In 1991 TTP was launched under the auspices of the Council for Relationships, affiliated with Thomas Jefferson University, and located in Philadelphia, PA. Based on grounded theory methodology TTP sought to gain an understanding of how Holocaust survivors coped with and managed to rebuild their lives after the devastating suffering, deprivation, and losses experienced during the Nazi Genocide. To expand the focus beyond the individual survivor and to apply systemic analysis to the study of coping and adaptation after extreme trauma, TTP not only analyzed the individual survivor as a single unit but also analyzed the individual survivor within his or her family unit. Interviews gathered data not only about the war years but also about the respondent's life before and after the war.

Interviewers utilized a semi-structured interview format to guide the exploration of survivors' thoughts, feelings, visceral experiences, and memories, which promoted a high degree of introspection and contextualization from the interviewees. "To ignore such criteria is to risk trivializing the survivor's experiences as well as to present only a superficial picture" (Suedfeld, 1996, p. 118). Including the study of children and grandchildren of survivors offered researchers significant perspectives on how survivors coped, adapted, and rebuilt their lives after the war as described through the experience of their children. TTP's goal was to acquire as full a psychosocial picture as possible of survivors and their significant relationships.

The sample included 307 subjects comprised of 97 Holocaust survivors, 109 of their children, and 56 of their grandchildren. Also interviewed were 45 spouses of survivors and their children. The impact of the interviewing process, focused on the internal experience of the participants did, in fact, result in the exploration of self and life experience not previously examined by many of the interviewees. This was especially true for the children of survivors who were asked for the first time in their lives to talk about their life histories – and were asked to explore the effect of their parents on their adult functioning and especially the effect of the Holocaust on their lives through the influence of their

parents. The children of survivors were asked what they knew of their parents' war experiences and inevitably they shared with the interviewers their survivor parents' poignant stories. The interviewer also asked about the impact of the stories on the child. For some children of survivors this was an evocative experience because they had never thought about the impact nor discussed it with others.

Transformative Narratives

Overall, in the TTP sample, the adult children reported that it was important to know what happened to their parents. For these children there were questions about good and evil in the world and expressions of sadness for their parents' suffering. The TTP interview process revealed a fascinating insight into the impact of these stories of trauma on the children. The adult children reported that not only were they hearing what a parent went through, but they were also hearing who the parent was. When the story clearly showcased a particular and compelling attribute of the survivor parent the child responded by wanting to adopt that attribute into his or her own identity... These traits were aspects of the parents that the children wanted to emulate because of what they heard as their parent's strength and endurance when suffering.

We have described this process as the transmission of transformative narratives that in their way positively affected the child's development as a form of emulation and identification. Sometimes this process of discovery for the adult child was illuminated through the interview. In retrospect, the child then acknowledged the meaningful and important role the poignant story played in his or her identity. Based upon this observation within Holocaust survivor families, it becomes very important to explore within the families that have endured trauma throughout their society the impact and value of communication between the generations and on each generation. Research that focuses on communication issues provides insight into the importance of how the telling of the trauma and the knowing across generations can contribute to a constructive process of coping with the trauma history.

Qualitative Analyses

To investigate a process of qualitative analysis that would provide information about coping and adaptation in survivor families based on characteristics of each of the families, the research team developed a system for dividing all the family units. Based on specific criteria, researchers placed the TTP families into four groups; positive families (n=22), mixed families (n=44), negative families (n=26), and mediating families (n=8) (where the healthier parent mediated the impact on the children of the more distressed parent).

The factors utilized to assign families into one of the four groups were: 1. Presence or absence of an emotionally distressed parent and description of how this parent functioned in the family, 2. Description of the non-distressed parent, 3. Quality of parents' marital relationship, 4. Description of parent-child dynamics and parenting behaviors, 5. Self-report of the impact on the adult child affecting basic functioning and quality of adult relationships, 6. Parental pattern of targeting the child, 7. Child engagement in caregiving behaviors with parents, and 8. Experience of empathy in child for parents' war

experiences. These factors provided a clear rationale for placing each family within the appropriate group based on family of origin relationships. Family of origin relationships were discerned in the original interview analyses through a five factor paradigm created by the TTP team called the Quality of Family Dynamics Paradigm (QFDP).

Qualitative Family Dynamics Paradigm

The QFDP used a five-factor analysis based on a continuum where factors identifying positive families were rated on the more positive end of the continuum and factors identifying negative families were rated on the more negative end of the continuum. The five factors – closeness-distance, empathy-self-centeredness, validation-criticism, positive emotions-negative emotions, open communication-closed communication emerged as descriptive of major differences among the families in the research sample. Presented below is the chart of the QFDP.

Quality of Family Dynamics Paradigm QFDP

- Closeness ↔ Distance
- Empathy ↔ Self-Centeredness
- Validation ↔ Criticism
- Positive Emotions ↔ Negative Emotions
- Open Communication ↔ Closed Communication

These factors are discussed in the mental health literature and are factors in family dynamics that contribute to the development of secure and insecure attachment, affect regulation and dysregulation, and positive or negative self-esteem in children and are foundational to adult development. The TTP research team advocated, from its analyses, that these qualities influence the development of resilience and/or maladaptation in the functioning of individuals by influencing the positive and negative development of belief systems, family structure organization, and communication within families.

The Mediating Parent

A unique finding of the research is the observation that in the mediating family category there was one parent who was either angry or depressed while the non-distressed survivor parent was described in exclusively positive terms. When compared to the negative and mixed family groups, the marriages in the mediating group were less distressed. From this data the team concluded that the healthier parent succeeded in mediating the negative impact of the emotionally distressed parent, reducing marital conflict, and at the same time preventing harmful targeting of the child by the distressed parent. These family dynamics led to children who were able to sustain healthy adult relationships in their nuclear families thus replicating the positive relationship between the child and the mediating parent.

Beyond the Qualitative Family Dynamics Paradigm

The Qualitative Family Dynamics Paradigm was found to be the prevalent mediating variable in the intergenerational transmission of trauma and resilience pointing to the quality of parenting that was directly affected by the severity of the traumatic impact experienced by survivor parents. Anecdotally

there seemed to be a connection between the family of origin experience of the survivors and the parenting of their own children after the war. There was, however, no corroborating evidence from other interviewees in the family for this finding.

Many survivors, about 25% of the TTP sample, despite the specific post traumatic effects they experienced postwar, were able to engage in positive parenting for the “sake of the child”. Many survivors, about 25% of the TTP sample, were not able to get beyond the devastating impact on their personal functioning, i.e., the impact on self, and thus were not aware of the impact on their children. In the mixed family group, about 50% of the TTP sample, there was a mixture of self-oriented and child-oriented parenting behaviors. The descriptions of maladaptive and adaptive post trauma functioning in Holocaust survivors reveal clearly the “balance between self and other” described above and reveal the potential or lack of potential to engage in positive parenting – specifically to respond to their children’s needs vs. their own.

Ongoing Research

Beginning in 2018, TTP embarked upon the examination of intergenerational transmission of trauma and resilience by doing a content analysis of the original interviews for three families. The team chose an example of a positive family, a mixed family, and a negative family to track within the original interviews quotes from each generation to exemplify the process of intergenerational transmission. The team developed a template of content areas for this examination and the research plan involved a comparison of 1G, 2G, and 3G quotes for each content area listed below.

- Communication style in the family
- Communication about war experiences
- Description of parents’ marriage (from synopsis)
- Worldview – belief systems and related feelings
- Working through the reality of the Holocaust – struggling against reality or identifying with victimhood vs. coming to terms with reality – accepting it happened and needing to move on with some meaning and purpose – Impacts on 2Gs and 3Gs
- Self-esteem and identity
- Emotional functioning
- Interpersonal functioning

From these analyses the TTP team understands that the impact of attachment as seen through the Qualitative Family Dynamics Paradigm contributes to the development of communication style, worldview, acceptance of reality, self-esteem, identity, emotional functioning, and interpersonal functioning. This understanding acknowledges that our capacity to cope, comprehend our lives, make choices, problem solve, work towards goals, and experience happiness, success, and fulfillment is based on the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and internal experiences that are formed by our internal development influenced by the experiential realities of our family connections or disconnections.

Trauma Studies and TTP – Resilience through Family Intervention

Presenting the findings of the Transcending Trauma Project at this time in the development of the fields of traumatic stress, Holocaust studies, developmental psychopathology, and systems theory, is a great advantage. The integration of TTP findings with the knowledge base of these fields helps to advance our understanding of the processes by which factors interact to yield the emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and experiential outcomes that contribute to the development of human individuality, family functioning, and coping with trauma. Attempting to conceptualize the reality of this complexity and developing a coherent understanding of human differences is where the field of psychology and its related disciplines are positioned today. Traumatic stress research has historically documented the negative sequelae of extreme trauma only to discover significant variability among survivors. The study of individual differences reveals a continuum of experience spanning from positive adaptation to negative adaptation with most individuals falling somewhere in between. The literature on resilience emerged in the attempt to explain why some people survive well and others don't, and how the phenomenon of post traumatic growth works differently depending on the survivor. This research has generated lists of risk factors, protective factors, resilience traits, and post traumatic growth characteristics. The next challenge is to observe and describe the human processes by which these traits, characteristics, and qualities develop within individuals and families and operate in response to real events. What processes enable certain individuals to be psychologically healthy and achieve successful lives, while others are not and therefore encounter a lifetime of challenge and struggle? How are these processes related to each other?

Our engagement in the study of post-Holocaust impacts involved looking at these processes and how the devastating experiences of the war affected survivor parents who then affected the development of their children. Other traumas, for example natural disasters, poverty, persecution, racial discrimination, immigration, crime, military service, divorce, child abuse, domestic violence, etc. similarly affect the victims and ultimately parent-child relationships. With the renewed focus on inequities in American society that lead to racial and social injustice and the acknowledgement of the devastating impact of historical trauma – an integrated model of coping and adaptation after trauma would offer a powerful tool for an intensive examination of racism and its impact on generations of parents and children who have been confronted with the external realities of racism.

From the inception of the Transcending Trauma Project in 1991, it has always been a mission of the project to promote, through its findings, a greater understanding of trauma's impact on groups, families, and individuals. TTP seeks to encourage greater awareness of how to promote healthy adaptation and growth so that the trauma, whatever it may be, can be left in the past without impinging on the future. Simply said, the work of TTP and the current status of trauma studies needs to go beyond contributing to trauma treatment models and more broadly contribute to a proactive effort to build resilience through family intervention.

References

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