

The Transcending Trauma Project

Part II

A SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE OF COPING AND ADAPTATION: THE INTEXTRICAL CONNECTION BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY

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As discussed in the last issue of ISTSS Stresspoints Clinician's Corner column, in 1993, the Transcending Trauma Project (TTP) was launched under the auspices of the Council for Relationships, affiliated with Jefferson University, and located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA. It was based on grounded theory methodology 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 Genocide of the Nazi Holocaust designed to exterminate the Jewish population of Europe. 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 both before and after the war. Qualitative methodology based on grounded theory guided the exploration of survivors' thoughts, feelings, visceral experiences and memories, which promoted a high degree of introspection and contextualization when answering the interview questions. The decision to include the children and grandchildren of survivors in the qualitative narrative inquiry provided significant perspectives on how survivors coped, adapted and rebuilt their lives after the war described through the experience of their children. Our goal in the development of the Transcending Trauma Project was to acquire as full a psychosocial picture as possible of survivors and their significant relationships.

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. The Quality of Family Dynamics Paradigm, shown here

Quality of Family Dynamics Paradigm QFDP

Closeness ↔ Distance

Empathy ↔ Self Centeredness

Validation ↔ Criticism

Positive Emotions ↔ Negative Emotions

Open Communication ↔ Closed Communication

accounted for major differences among the Holocaust survivor families in terms of the impact on the second generation which was revealed when coding families into positive, mixed, negative and mediating families. Adult children from positive families, who experienced mostly positive family dynamics reported greater psychological, emotional and relational health. Adult children from negative families, who experienced mostly negative family dynamics reported compromised psychological, emotional and relational health. These factors are discussed in the mental health research literature and they have been found to contribute to the development of secure and insecure attachment, affect regulation and dysregulation, self-awareness and other awareness, in addition to security and insecurity. In summary, these factors influence the development of resilience or vulnerability, adaptation or maladaptation.

As discussed in the prior article in Stresspoints the ongoing research of the Transcending Trauma Project involves the analysis of the original interviews and the tracking of direct quotes that indicate the intergenerational transmission of communication style, worldview, self-esteem, identity, emotional functioning and interpersonal functioning.

AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF COPING AND ADAPTATION

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. What

processes enable certain individuals to be psychologically healthy and achieve successful lives, while other individuals are not psychologically healthy and therefore encounter a lifetime of challenge and struggle? How are these processes related to each other? The Transcending Trauma Project proposed an Integrated Model of Coping and Adaptation. All the domains within this model are relevant to human development and therefore have relevance to one's capacity for coping, adaptation and resilience.

Similar to the general trauma literature, TTP's findings are in concert with the observation that the impact of trauma beyond direct life and death experiences is not necessarily determined by the "objective" assessment of the trauma, and is often determined by the subjective attribution by the survivor of the extremity of the experience. As described above, the intergenerational impact of Holocaust survivor traumatic experiences was quite diverse in terms of its impact on the survivor and quite diverse in terms of its impact on the capacity to parent. As an overarching summary, the divergence in parenting depended on the parents' capacity to function on the continuum of the "balance between self and other". Many survivors, in spite of their specific post traumatic effects after the war, were able to engage in positive parenting for the "sake of the child" and many survivors were not able to get beyond the devastating impact on their personal functioning, i.e. the impact on self, and they were therefore unable to be aware of the impact on their children. This of course, does not speak to the possibility of traumatic impact reflecting genetic predisposition which is beyond the scope of this investigation. What we are able to observe as revealed in our current investigation of intergenerational transmission is how survivors differed in their capacity to be self-aware vs. self-protective, to access their primary feelings vs. needing to block painful feelings, to be realistic in their attributions vs. operating from anxiety and fear, and to being focused on the needs of others vs. focused on the needs of self. A child's experience of these extremes in human functioning, which directly impact parenting, contributes to his/her psychosocial development including communication style, worldviews, self-esteem, identity, emotional functioning and relational functioning.

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 – in other words, the capacity to prioritize their child’s needs over their own.

Contained in the following charts are descriptions of the maladaptive coping of many Holocaust survivors caused by the traumatic impact of the war and the adaptive coping that many Holocaust survivors were able to incorporate into post war life due to the various factors that contributed to their pre-war and post-war coping. As mentioned above, pre-war psychosocial and qualitative family factors must have contributed to post war coping, but there was no way to access consistent reports from survivors about the qualitative relationships with their parents, which has left the analysis process to speculation as opposed to clear findings about the connection between pre-war and post-war parenting relationship.

Post Traumatic Maladaptation Observed in Holocaust Survivors

physiological vulnerability – physical injuries
fearful, overly cautious, protective – need for control or giving up control
emotional reactivity – emotions that come on suddenly and are not modulated by thought
shattered beliefs about the world
explanatory style – negative attributions
change in faith
focus on responsibilities in order to cope and avoid painful memories
unresolved mourning
vulnerability to anxiety, anger and depression
relationship conflict in spite of believing in importance of family
need the child to be the source of the parent’s wellbeing

Post Trauma Adaptation Observed in Holocaust Survivors

establishing connection in significant relationships – family is primary
being aware of feelings and able to modulate their expression based on other’s needs
affirms oneself through the wellbeing of the family
memories are available and neither obsessive nor blocked
explanatory style – realistic attributions
partial reconstruction of belief systems
opportunity to utilize potential, talent and skills
capacity to be aware of impact on child – not wanting to burden the child

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. It was not too long ago that the field of traumatic stress studies acknowledged the importance of pre-trauma experience in determining the adaptation of the individual. The investigation of pre-trauma experience illuminated the effects of risk factors and protective factors that contribute to negative adaptation and positive adaptation. Simultaneous to advances in this area of research, the field of 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 work has generated lists of risk factors, protective factors, resilience traits and PTG 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 other individuals are not psychologically healthy and therefore encounter a lifetime of challenge and struggle? How are these processes related to each other? There is a vast literature from which to explore these questions. The Transcending Trauma Project proposed an Integrated Model of Coping and Adaptation. All the domains within this model influence human development and therefore have relevance to one's capacity for coping, adaptation and resilience.

In order to conceptualize intergenerational transmission, it is important to understand the domains presented in this model for both the survivor generation and the child generation. The first chart presents the factors determining the post traumatic responses of the survivor parent. The second chart presents the factors determining the developmental responses of the child. Keeping these domains in mind as we understand trauma's impact on families is challenging, but it is the

only way to truly understand the intergenerational impact of trauma's aftermath. For clinicians, we cannot understand the client in front of us – the survivor or the child - without an intergenerational historical perspective that sheds light on psychosocial development. While these models of psychological development highlight the processes that contribute to the development of the “self” the ultimate implication is for the quality of adult relationships which are the result of “self” and contribute to the development of “self” in the next generation.

While these models are not specific to particular life experiences or events, all the factors in the model are affected by life experiences and events. Therefore, our engagement in the study of post Holocaust effects involved looking at these processes and how the devastating experiences of the war affected survivor parents who then affected the development of their children. It would be a similar process to examine the impact of other traumas and how they are coped with by the victims and in turn how the victims affect their offspring. For example: natural disasters, poverty, persecution, immigration, crime, military service, divorce, child abuse, domestic violence etc. affect the processes described on the developmental chart and influence transmission by means of influencing 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 – the 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 1993, 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 and thereby 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 treatment models, there needs to be a proactive effort to build resilience through family intervention.

TRANSCENDING TRAUMA MODEL © 2010

**SURVIVOR - FOUNDATION OF PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
BEFORE THE TRAUMA
From Birth to Adulthood**

PRE – TRAUMA PRE-WAR

<p>DOMAIN 1 BIOLOGY – GENETIC PREDISPOSITION – TEMPERAMENT - POTENTIAL – INTELLIGENCES</p>
<p>DOMAIN 2 SURVIVOR - FOUNDATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL SELF – INTERPERSONAL NEUROBIOLOGY Early Nurture - Attachment to caregiver Compensatory attention – Affection from other adults</p>
<p>DOMAIN 3 SURVIVOR - FOUNDATION OF THE RELATIONAL SELF INDICATIVE OF ATTACHMENT RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS QUALITY OF FAMILY DYNAMICS PARADIGM – FAMILY OF ORIGIN Closeness - Distance Empathy - Self-centeredness Validation - Criticism Open communication - Closed communication Expressive of positive emotions - Expressive of negative emotions</p>
<p>DOMAIN 4 SURVIVOR FAMILY OF ORIGIN INTERACTIONAL PROCESSES RELATED TO POSITIVE ADAPTATION AND MALADAPTATION *** Walsh, F. (2007). BELIEF SYSTEMS ORGANIZATIONAL PATTERNS COMMUNICATION AND PROBLEM SOLVING</p>
<p>DOMAIN 5 QUALITY OF SURVIVOR’S PARENTS’ MARRIAGE Good , Moderately Distressed, Highly Distressed, Divorced</p>
<p>DOMAIN 6 POSITIVE AND ADVERSE LIFE EVENTS RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS ABUSE AND NEGLECT VS POSITIVE FAMILY DYNAMICS</p>
<p>DOMAIN 7 SURVIVOR – IDENTITY FORMATION PERSONALITY & SKILLS-----COGNITIVE SCHEMA----AFFECTIVE FUNCTIONING Character Traits MeaningSystems Range of emotional experiencing Style Beliefs & Faith Affect regulation Skills & Education Roles in family and in society Self-reflection/self-awareness</p>
<p>DOMAIN 8 SURVIVOR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN - RACIAL, ETHNIC & CULTURAL BACKGROUND - GENDER & SES</p>
<p>THE IMPACT OF THE TRAUMA ON THE SURVIVOR</p>
<p>DOMAIN 9 SEVERITY AND SPECIFICS OF THE TRAUMA</p>



INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION



CHILD OF TRAUMA SURVIVOR - FOUNDATION OF PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

From Birth to Adulthood

SEVERITY AND SPECIFICS OF THE TRAUMA IMPACT OF THE TRAUMA ON THE SURVIVOR PARENT(S)		
DOMAIN 1 BIOLOGY – GENETIC PREDISPOSITION – TEMPERAMENT - POTENTIAL – INTELLIGENCES		
DOMAIN 2 CHILD - FOUNDATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL SELF – INTERPERSONAL NEUROBIOLOGY Early Nurture - Attachment to caregiver Compensatory attention – Affection from other adults		
DOMAIN 3 CHILD - FOUNDATION OF THE RELATIONAL SELF INDICATIVE OF ATTACHMENT RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS QUALITY OF FAMILY DYNAMICS PARADIGM – FAMILY OF ORIGIN Closeness - Distance Empathy - Self-centeredness Validation - Criticism Open communication - Closed communication Expressive of positive emotions - Expressive of negative emotions		
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DOMAIN 5 QUALITY OF PARENTS’ MARRIAGE Good, Moderately Distressed, Highly Distressed, Divorced		
DOMAIN 6 POSITIVE AND ADVERSE LIFE EVENTS RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS ABUSE AND NEGLECT VS POSITIVE FAMILY DYNAMICS		
DOMAIN 7 CHILD – IDENTITY FORMATION		
PERSONALITY & SKILLS-----	COGNITIVE SCHEMA----	AFFECTIVE FUNCTIONING
Character Traits	MeaningSystems	Range of emotional experiencing
Style	Beliefs & Faith	Affect regulation
Skills & Education	Roles in family and in society	Self-reflection/self-awareness

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