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International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma

Edited by

Yael Danieli

*Group Project for Holocaust Survivors and Their Children
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To the children yet unborn
with the hope that we leave them a better world in which to grow

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Foreword

Psychological professions have been slow to recognize the powerful psychic consequences of extreme suffering. They have been even slower to recognize the reverberations of that suffering in subsequent generations. While that professional neglect has hardly ceased, the contributors to this volume have done much to overcome it.

Working with survivors of Hiroshima and of Auschwitz, and also with American veterans of Vietnam, I could observe much that suggested that their overwhelming experiences could be transmitted in some way to the children of those interviewed. But I was unable to pursue that demanding question. I can appreciate, as will readers of this volume, the extraordinary achievement of pulling together such intergenerational studies from virtually every part of the world.

In doing so, Yael Danieli and the contributing authors have provided us with a record as valuable as it is disturbing of ongoing twentieth-century pain. There is a paradox here. By confronting the human consequences of genocidal projects that threaten the continuity of human life, we contribute precisely to that continuity. In that sense, the essays themselves are quiet expressions of protest against the inhumanity they describe.

All survivors undergo a struggle with what I call formulation—with giving form or meaning to an otherwise incomprehensible experience and, above all, to their survival. There is powerful evidence in this book that the offspring of survivors must do the same, except that in their case the meaning sought has to do with their own relationship to an event that took place before they were born. Their parents' experiences loom as both dreadful and mysterious, almost unknowable.

Recent studies emphasize the difficulties that even those directly exposed to extreme trauma have in taking in that experience and re-creating it in some form. How much greater is the problem of death-related knowledge for the next generation. But probing just that difficulty can teach us a great deal about the ways in which the mind explores or resists currents that are both powerful and amorphous. There can be no form of insight more precious to us—not just to those who study the mind but to everyone—in our struggles to navigate the very threatening world of the end of the second millennium.

ROBERT JAY LIFTON

Preface

This book is the culmination of a long journey, a complex and deeply rewarding one. It began for me over 25 years ago in the initial session with SL, a frail-looking, agitated young man who intermittently interrupted his seemingly uncontrollable, incoherent rambling with a refrain-like phrase, “My mother gave me gray milk,” that quickly became a leitmotif of his therapy. Although I was not always aware of it, it also formed an indelible metaphor portending the development of my thinking and understanding in the following decades on the what and how of transmission of the effects of the Nazi Holocaust in particular and of trauma in general.

SL’s father was “from Auschwitz,” the sole survivor of a family that had included a wife and two sons who perished in the ovens. SL was named after his murdered half-brothers. His father met SL’s 17-year-younger “beautiful” mother upon arriving in the United States. He is “very old.” SL believed that, although American-born, his mother must have absorbed ashes from his father and passed them to him through her milk.

For many years, as I heard myriad survivors and their children share their legacies and attempt to break what I later studied as the “conspiracy of silence” (Danieli, 1982), I relived, with them, that alarming combined sense of acute pain, flooding helplessness, and outrage, particularly when conceiving their pain as “Hitler’s posthumous victory.”

Increasingly, clinicians and researchers have begun to examine the intergenerational consequences of exposure to a variety of traumata. Empirical research in this field is gathering momentum, and its social and public health significance is thus only now becoming more widely acknowledged. Given a lifetime posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) rate of 7.8% in the general population of the United States (Kessler *et al.*, 1995) it is a relatively common psychiatric disorder; even if only a minority is or will be involved in parenting, the number of children upon whom intergenerational effects will have an impact is enormous. In other groups and societies, where the rates of trauma exposure are much higher, an ever greater proportion of the population is affected, with consequent intergenerational implications.

Events such as the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the Cold War symbolized by it, followed by the phenomenon of large groupings of people fragmented into smaller ones, usually on ethnic grounds, made imperative a worldwide dialogue, that is only in its beginning stages, about the issues raised in this book. More international networking among clinicians and researchers is leading to more exploration in this more open climate.

An earlier book, *International Responses to Traumatic Stress* (Danieli *et al.*, 1996), grew out of the appalling realization of the global scope of trauma and victimization and the necessity of international endeavors on behalf of the victims. The focus of that study was on the international agencies and programs and nongovernmental organizations working in this field.

That book was for the present—to “provide a home” for all those who from different viewpoints are interested in helping victims. The present book is intended to provide a home for the future. It establishes that effects of current actions may go beyond a lifetime, and that intervention and prevention measures thus have not only lifelong but also intergenerational means and consequences.

The authors of the chapters in this volume were recruited from around the world and from many different disciplines. They responded to the suggested guidelines rather differently, reflecting, in part, various stages of anguish in confronting their subjects, as well as different ways of knowing and means of access. Many belong to the populations they write about, which makes harder their struggle to create enough distance for writing, yet adds authenticity to the words they give voice to. Some are passionate, some poetic. Some used conclusions drawn from data as testimony for advocacy.

This is a profoundly disturbing book. It cannot be read from a cool, scientific or clinical distance because the topics covered challenge not only scientific neutrality but also the limits of our humanity. The extent of the suffering it chronicles cannot be denied. It pulls the reader toward advocacy, a role with which many clinicians and researchers feel uncomfortable, and from which they tend to shy away.

But the purpose of the book goes beyond documentation, description, and making available international scholarship. It is also intended to be used in practical ways to relieve and to prevent the suffering, and contribute to *informed advocacy*. It emphasizes to policymakers that the consequences of decisions that are frequently made with largely short-term considerations in mind cannot only be lifelong but also multigenerational.

The book confirms the universal existence of intergenerational transmission of trauma and its effects, and it validates the concern shared by many experts about the effects of the phenomenon. In the past, multigenerational transmission has been treated as a secondary phenomenon, perhaps because it is not as obviously dramatic as the horrific images of traumatized people. The mind recoils when viewing such images; and it does not take in that children not yet born could inherit a legacy and memories not of their own but that, nevertheless, will shape their lives. It is bad enough to see images of children victimized today; that the same images may shape the lives of generations to come, sometimes unconsciously, often by design, is even harder to comprehend, and accept.

I, and the readers of this book, owe a great debt of gratitude to the authors. Their scholarship and humanity offer hope for the future that justice will finally be done. A day of reckoning can help reassert order over chaos and anarchy and begin to give a sense of closure. Justice can restore a people's faith but not their innocence. Taking the painful risk of bearing witness does not mean that the world will listen, learn, change, and become a better place for our generation and generations to come.

It is fitting that this book is published in the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The powerful accounts contained in the following pages should compel us to rededicate ourselves to converting the principles so clearly stated in that Declaration into living reality.

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