Secondary Trauma Effects of the Armenian Genocide On Subsequent Generations: Perceived Impact, Ethnic Identity, and Attachment Style

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Abstract

Secondary Trauma Effects of the Armenian Genocide

On Subsequent Generations:
Perceived Impact, Ethnic Identity, and Attachment Style

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This study tested hypotheses concerning the impact of the Armenian Genocide on adult outcomes in a sample of individuals (N=30) identified as Armenian-American, who had at least one relative survivor of the Armenian Genocide. Perceived impact of the Genocide on Armenian culture, Armenian ethnic identity and romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance were examined as predictors of secondary trauma symptoms. Ethnic identity and attachment were also evaluated as potential moderators of the effect of perceived impact of the Genocide on secondary trauma symptoms.

Contrary to hypotheses, secondary trauma symptoms were not significantly predicted by perceived impact of the Genocide in the current sample. This means that perceiving the Genocide as impactful to the culture does not necessarily translate into impact on personal adaptation. However, Armenian ethnic identity both directly predicted trauma symptoms, and moderated the effect of perceived impact on secondary trauma symptoms. Therefore, individuals who perceived the Genocide as impactful to the culture were more likely to report trauma symptoms based on a relative's experience of the Genocide if they were also highly identified with Armenian culture.

In contrast, romantic attachment did not serve as a moderator of the effect of perceived impact on secondary trauma symptoms. However, both attachment-related avoidance and attachment-related anxiety independently and directly predicted secondary trauma symptoms. Therefore, individuals with higher ratings on insecure romantic attachment dimensions were more likely to display secondary trauma symptoms following a relative's experience of the Armenian Genocide, regardless of how they perceived the Genocide to have impacted Armenian culture. Furthermore, results showed that attachment-related anxiety was positively and significantly related to Armenian ethnic identification.

The role of romantic attachment and ethnic identity are examined in the context of Armenian culture and the ways in which subsequent generations are impacted by the trauma of the Armenian Genocide. Findings from this study support the notion that identification with the cultural group can be associated with secondary trauma symptoms following Genocide, specifically for Armenian Americans. Results extend previous findings of attachment insecurity as involved in a higher susceptibility to trauma symptoms, to secondary symptoms following the experience of trauma by a relative.

Dedication

To my family. Thanks for all your love.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

Page

Introduction

The Turkish Armenian Genocide affected two million people (Dadrian, 2003) and was the first Genocide of the 20th century. The literature in the field of psychology is not expansive on this topic. Unfortunately, Genocide has continued to be part of international, modern society and research on the devastating effects for individuals, as well as entire cultures, and remains important for social scientists and clinicians to understand as well as to validate in these populations (van der Kolk, 1987). There are Genocides and mass traumas affecting entire tribes, communities and cultures and it is important to recognize the tragedy that follows these communities even after the actual violence has stopped. The tragedy can affect how an entire culture identifies itself, as in the case for the Armenian community (Boyajian & Grigorian, 1982, Dagirmanjian, 1996).

The experience of the Turkish Armenian Genocide, which occurred from 1915-1922, has left specific marks on the Armenian culture. Thousands of men, women and children were killed by the order of Turkish Ottoman Interior Minister Talaat Pasha (Van Gorder, 2006). Men were forced out of their homes and murdered, women and children were led on death marches through the desert, and entire Armenian villages were burned and destroyed. It is believed that as many as two million Armenians were murdered during the massacre (Van Gorder, 2006, Kloian, 1988).

Before the Genocide began, Armenians were targeted and killed in smaller massacres from 1894-1896, killing 150,000 people (Dadrian, 2003). The Armenians were indigenous to the land from which they were being extinguished and had lived there, in what is now present day Turkey, for thousands of years (Dadrian, 2003). Those

who were able to escape sought refuge in many countries including the United States. Most of the Armenian individuals who traveled to America in the early 1900's were survivors of the Turkish Genocide, which suggests that many Armenian-Americans are the descendants of Genocide survivors, and are therefore potentially touched by the Genocide through their ancestors. (Dagirmanjian, 1996). Authors Boyajian & Grigorian, (1986) have studied and interacted with the children of Genocide survivors for over 20 years in a professional realm and describe an "implicit sadness" in their observations of the Armenian-American population. Traits similar to those found in the actual survivors who experienced the traumatic event seem to be left as a residue on the following generations. Boyajian. & Grigorian (1986) observed a sense of "matter of fact sobriety towards life" in the sons and daughters of the survivors, as though they too had experienced a human atrocity.

Research evaluating the experiences of Genocide on Armenian populations has shown that these effects can be seen for years after the event and can also affect multiple generations (Kalayjian, Moore, Aberson & Kim, 2010). Debilitating traumatic events such as traumas of poverty, war, interpersonal and community violence, substance abuse and psychological illness may not have been directly experienced by an individual but are directly affecting that individual because of the intergenerational transmission of trauma (Rowland-Klein & Dunlop, 1997) There is some research on Armenian-American families and cultural identity, but these areas are also limited and more information would be useful for clinicians to better understand this population and offer more relevant treatment and support. Younger generations of Armenian-Americans are willing to seek psychological counseling (Yaralian, Der-Karabetian & Martinez, 2009) and it would be

beneficial to the field of psychology to meet this group in a culturally aware and informed manner. By better understanding the effects of the Turkish Armenian Genocide and the role it plays in Armenian ethnic identity and family functioning, clinicians would be better equipped to recognize the context in which individuals of this population develop and strive to adapt..

Examining the roles played by ethnic identity and relationships in Armenian culture in the process of adaptation to the Genocide may help to identify ways in which this event has maintained a strong presence in the community, as well as identify the multiple coping mechanisms utilized for generations after this traumatic event (Kalayjian, Shahinian, Gergerian & Saraydarian, 1996). Groups of Armenians continue to fight for the recognition of the Genocide, as the denial of the Genocide has made this a difficult event to overcome for this population (Danieli, 1998).

The theory of attachment has been useful for researchers and clinicians to understand relationships and psychological well-being. Previous research has identified the effects that trauma experiences can have on patterns of attachment (Main and Hesse, 1990) and I have found attachment research on Holocaust survivors and their families to be particularly relevant to this study (Sagi-Schwartz et al., 2003). However, there is no attachment literature, currently, related to survivors of the Turkish Armenian Genocide or their families. In order to better understand the psychological effects of this event on the relationships and well-being of this population, as well as to study the potential intergenerational transmission of traumatic features, this research is important.

In this study, I will be retrospectively exploring the effects that the Turkish Armenian Genocide has had on the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of

the survivors. Specifically, I will be examining the transmission of trauma into future generations and the ways in which it may have affected their personal relationships and attachment styles. I will also be exploring the role that cultural identity may potentially play to continue to keep the experience of the Genocide present in the lives of individuals in future generations, as well to potentially act as a mechanism of support and resiliency.

Background

The Traumatic Experience of the Turkish Armenian Genocide

The New York Times reported the mass murder of Christians, mainly Armenians, in Turkey, for the first time on November 12, 1914 (Kloian, 1988, p. 2). In the beginning of the next year, the Turkish Minister of the Interior, Talaat Bay, announced that there was only room in Turkey for people of Turkish ancestry, and the violence continued, according to the same newspaper. On April 28th, 1915, the United States Ambassador to Turkey, Henry Morgenthau, appealed to the Turkish government to cease the violence against the Armenians to no avail (Kloian, 1988, p. 10). Weeks later, Russia reported that 6,000 Armenians had been killed by Turkish forces in the town of Van (Kloian, 1988, p. 14). The atrocities against the Armenian population continued as the New York Times reported in August, 1915 that in the town of Bitlis, Turkey, all Armenian males were killed before 9,000 women and children were shot and dumped in the Tigris River (Kloian, 1988, p. 23). For many of the eventual survivors, their traumatic experiences began by witnessing the brutal deaths of people in their community including family members. Later twenty of the Armenian Democratic Party leaders were publicly hanged (Kloian, 1988, p. 23).

The events were covered steadily by world newspapers and in September, Ambassador Morgenthau attempts to unite concerned U.S. citizens in raising money in order to save 550,000 Armenians by paying a ransom to the Turkish government (Kloian, 1988, p. 30). The Rockefeller Foundation eventually donated $30,000 to the cause (Kloian, 1988, p.31). However, the Turkish leaders continued to ignore the attempts of the international community and responded with the announcement that for the Armenians to escape death they must convert to Islam (Kloian, 1988, p. 31).

The New York Times reported that young Armenian women, found in villages by the Turkish soldiers, were divided based upon perceived attractiveness and were either given to commanders and soldiers or auctioned for sale (Kloian, 1988, p. 42). On October 7, 1915 the British Ambassador to Turkey announced that as many as 800,000 Armenians had been killed in the Genocide since May. He declared the combined events the most "hideous" crime in history (Kloian, 1988, p. 61). Days later, Pope Benedict XV begged the Sultan of Turkey to spare the Armenian people. On the same day, while visiting the United States, the Consul General, Djelal Munif Bay denied the atrocities to a New York Times reporter (Kloian, 1988, p. 71). On November 1st, the Turkish government blocked the United States' attempts to aid Armenians stranded in Turkey (Kloian, 1988, p. 106). The number of victims was then one million and without food the survivors began to starve. Turkey announced that Armenians were not allowed to leave the country and United States feared extermination to be the plan, according to the New York Times (Kloian, 1988, p. 106).

In the mountains of Samsun, Armenian men, women and children took a final stand against Turkish soldiers, using knives, rocks and sticks to beat off the invaders

before eventually perishing (Kloian, 1988, p. 110). By 1916, many Armenians were dispersed across the dessert, forced by Turkish soldiers to walk to their deaths (Kloian, 1988, p. 128). The New York Times reported many were wandering in the wilds of Syria, starving to death. On August 19, 1916 the New York Times printed an eye-witness report of Armenians starving in Northern Arabia, some even begging to be buried alive because of the physical misery. The report went on to describe the killing and ingesting of some of the Armenian children by the adults (Kloian, 1988, p. 152).

Experiences of child survivors of the Genocide. Many Armenians who came to the U.S. after surviving the Turkish-Armenian Genocide were children and adolescents during the Genocide. In 1993, Miller and Miller interviewed 103 Turkish Armenian Genocide survivors, collecting an oral history of their experiences of deportation marches, life in refugee orphanages and experiences immigrating to the United States during the Diaspora. Participants also shared their emotional and psychological reactions to the Genocide experience and coping strategies, utilized over their lifetime.

The 103 participants resided in Pasadena, the San Francisco Bay Area and the Greater Los Angeles area during the time of the interviews. The authors interviewed 62 women and 41 men. The participants had all been children during the Genocide with a median age of 11 years. One survivor had been 27 years old during the Genocide. The authors report that the interview process was emotional and that the participants often cried when recalling the death of a close family member. It was not unusual to have a current family member in the room to support the survivor in retelling these memories.

After the deportation began many children found that they were alone and needed to fend for themselves (Miller & Miller, 1993, p. 113). The majority of the Armenian

men were killed at the beginning of the deportations, leaving the women and their children vulnerable to the Turkish soldiers (Miller & Miller, 1993, p94). The participants shared that in order to survive they often had to steal food, be very clever and often take risks. One participant recalled stealing grapes being stored on a donkey. The owner began beating the boy but he reported that he continued to eat the grapes while being abused due to the intensity of his hunger (Miller & Miller, 1993, p. 114). Not only did children have to fear being harmed and separated from their families; they also had to deal with witnessing many atrocities happening to those close to them or part of the Armenian community.

Two of the participants reported observing mothers becoming too weak to carry or feed their infants, and recalled seeing at least 12 mothers leaving infants under a tree at once before carrying on with the march (Miller & Miller, 1993, p. 98). One of the participants reported that "this scene is still in front of my eyes" (Miller & Miller, 1993, p. 100). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-IV-TR, recurrent recollections of images of the traumatic event are a diagnostic criterion for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (APA, 2000). Another participant reported that a 12-year-old girl from her village was chosen by the Turkish soldiers for her good looks, removed from her mother and brutally raped. The participant recalled that the girl was returned to her family, but died days later from the severe abuse (Miller & Miller, 1993, p. 103). Many of the survivor participants recounted that young Armenian girls would drown themselves in the Euphrates River in order to avoid abduction and rape (Miller & Miller, 1993, p. 104).

Another survivor described that his father had been killed at the beginning of the deportations by Turkish officials; therefore, he was the man of the family and felt the pressure to take on this responsibility even though he was eight years old at the time (Miller & Miller, 1993, p. 115). He reported he took care of his mother and younger sisters as best he could, as they were forced to move from town to town and cross the Euphrates River. He recalls seeing many dead bodies along the river and that Turkish soldiers would order him and other Armenian boys to "throw the bodies back in the river" (Miller & Miller, 1993, p. 115). Later, when his younger brother was too weak to carry on, the party was forced to leave him on the side of the road. The survivor remembers "he yelled and screamed after us" (Miller & Miller, 1993, p. 115). It is of note that this incredibly painful experience bears a connection to another criterion for a diagnosis of PTSD; namely, that the individual is confronted with an event threatening death or serious injury to the self or others (APA, 2000).

Almost all of the participants from this study had to deal with a dramatic separation from or loss of one or both parents as children during the Genocide. Fathers were often killed immediately, and mothers and siblings became weak or the family would become separated (Miller & Miller, 1993). One participant recalled that when she was begging for food and surviving alone she would fantasize she was in a cradle and that her mother was rocking her gently (Miller & Miller, 1993, p. 106.) This recollection underscores the important of pre-existing family relationships as a source of resilience and coping for many survivors. Another participant reported that his mother left him with a Turkish family which was taking in Armenian boys. Though he did not want to be separated from her, she told him this was the best for him. He stayed with the family and

she continued on the forced march; he later learned the entire party was killed (Miller & Miller, 1993, p. 107). Many of the participants remembered the difficult choices parents had to make sometimes between children. One man reported that as a child he often wondered what was wrong with him that his mother would choose his brother to keep over him, but as an adult saying "What could we do?" (Miller & Miller, 1993, p 109). One of the participants remembered he had been separated from his mother and sister but ran away to go and find them. When he found his younger sister she told him their mother had died wrapping her body around the little girl to protect her from wild dogs. He recalled they sat and cried, "Who cared for us? Who was concerned for us? We were all alone" (Miller & Miller, 1993, p. 111). The authors observed that the participants often cried in the interviews when discussing the moments they were separated from their parents. Van der Kolk argues that when there is a disruption in a child's attachment to their primary caregiver due to separation many symptoms can develop (1987). The authors of the study concluded that though the children had survived "the aloneness and abandonment that survivors experienced during childhood marked them for life" (Miller & Miller, 1993, p 107). These records reflect the continuing effects of the Turkish Armenian Genocide on the survivors, specifically the separation from their primary caregivers and witnessing multiple traumatic events.

Long-term effects of the Genocide. Researchers have explored the effect that traumatic experiences of childhood can have once adulthood is reached. Cloitre et al., (2009) examined complex symptoms in a group of 582 adult women (between the ages of 26 and 46) who had experienced abuse in childhood. Complex trauma symptoms not only include PTSD symptoms according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-IV-TR,

but also include other affective and interpersonal symptoms such as avoidance, aggression, dissociative features and anxious arousal. Findings revealed that childhood trauma was significantly associated with complex trauma symptoms in adulthood, even after controlling for race/ethnicity and income level. Furthermore, some of the women had additionally reported adult trauma, sexual assault and physical assault. When participants had experienced more than one type of trauma, their symptom complexity increased so that for every additional trauma, symptom complexity went up by 17%.

Specifically with regard to the Genocide, its long-term impact on the survivor population was explored when the participants had reached their eighties and nineties (Kalayjian, Moore, Aberson & Kim, 2010). All 16 participants were all born before 1917 and had witnessed the Turkish-Armenian Genocide. Forty-three percent of the survivors had migrated to the U.S. from 1912-1955. The rest migrated to the U.S. after 1966. The participants were interviewed by the author over a decade from 1995 to 2005. During the interview, the Mini Mental Status Exam (MMSE) was also administered, as well as the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) and the Life Purpose Questionnaire (LPQ). The MMSE was given to assess cognitive functioning in the participants. The BSI was used to measure symptoms and psychological patterns, specifically the presence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The LPQ was administered to measure the individual participant's sense of life meaning.

Results indicated that the more countries a participant had moved to after the Genocide, the higher their BSI scores and psychological symptoms. Conversely, the longer each individual had been living in their home, the lower their BSI scores were. These results suggest the positive impact of comfort and predictability on this generation

of survivors. The fact that psychological symptoms correlated with multiple moves from country to country may speak to a broader population of people forced to leave their home, and therefore potentially more vulnerable to psychological symptoms.

The author reported that in her interviews, she observed in the participants a fear of retaliation from the Turkish government and citizens if they shared their Genocide experience due to Article 301 of Turkish Law. This law stated that those who speak about their own ethnicity, Genocide or human violations of the Turkish government are considered an enemy (Kalayjian et al., 2010). The results of this study show that the 60% of participants who were able to finally share their story with their families had lower PTSD scores than those who had not shared their experience with anyone until this study.

Denial of a tragedy. After Armenians survived the Turkish-Armenian Genocide they then faced unwillingness from their attackers to accept accountability. Though much of the world had witnessed and expressed horror at these events, with the Russian government even vowing to hold the Turks responsible via a trial, the denial of accountability began in 1918 when heir to the Ottoman crown, Abdul Medjid Effendi, blamed past ministers for any atrocities and announced the current Turkish State not responsible (Kloian, 1988, p. 287). According to German and Turkish Statistics -- published in the New York Times on December 6, 1918-- 1,396,350 Armenians were deported from their homeland, while 1,056,550 were killed (Kloian, 1988, p. 287). Even today, the current Turkish government denies full responsibility for the events occurring from 1915 to 1923 and the U.S. Government has not officially declared the event a Genocide (Kupelian et al., 1998). The denial continues to be a second victimization in the eyes of the Armenian people. As Turkey has continued to increase its power by

becoming a NATO member and building a strong military, Armenians fear that the Genocide will be seen as an event which can be debated, instead of a horrific event accepted by the international community (Dadrian, 2003).

In 1996, researchers (Kalayjian, Shahinian, Gergerian & Saraydarian) found the experience of the Turkish Denial to be an issue of great importance for the survivors and their families. The invalidation of the Armenian survivor's suffering can be compared to the pain and confusion which would be felt in a case of PTSD (Danieli, 1998). Sullivan (1953) argued that validating an experience is necessary to find resolution and healing from trauma. Feelings of anger and frustration at the denial can be found in survivor, second and third generation Armenians (Boyajian & Grigorian, 1982). Not only is the denial of the current Turkish government viewed as hurtful; also, the tolerance for the denial by other countries is disturbing to this population. The denial and the feelings of anger, and even vengeance, which it perpetuates (Boyajian & Grigorian, 1982) are a unique aspect to this form of mass trauma.

Miller and Miller (1993) interviewed 103 Turkish Armenian Genocide survivors about their lives after the Genocide experience and their responses to the tragedy. As children, the survivors had previously lived with their intact families for the first 5 years of their lives, leading the authors to believe that they had had a chance to reach important developmental stages before the trauma of the Genocide occurred (Miller & Miller, 1993, p161). Survivors expressed many different reactions and coping mechanisms to their Genocide experiences, ranging from anger to forgiveness.

One way of dealing with the intense feelings pertaining to the Genocide experience was avoidance and repression (Miller & Miller, 1993, p163) often described

by the survivors as “forgetting” or “blocking the memories,” which constitute as criterion for PTSD diagnosis (APA, 2000). Outrage and anger were also felt by many of the survivors, often towards “Turks” (Miller & Miller, 1993, p164). Survivors reported feeling anxious hearing the word “Turk,” while others admit their “hearts burn with anger” at the thought of the Genocide. Some survivors described a need for revenge and restitution (Miller & Miller, 1993, p165). Those who reported these feelings showed the authors deeds to land their families had previously owned, which they wanted to be returned to them.

Survivors also recalled the assassinations of Turkish leaders such as Soghomon Tehlirian, stating they brought them “inspiration.” Others considered the deaths rightful punishment for the death of millions of Armenians. The results did not show that any of the survivors were able to reconcile the violence and horror that occurred during the Genocide (Miller & Miller, 1993, p. 169). Many of the Armenian survivors had forgiven the Turks due to their religious obligation as Christians. When asked about reconciliation, survivors often described images that still haunted them and admitted that they could completely let these go. One participant recalled being forced to leave her baby sister on a mountain and asked, “What sin or fault did that poor baby have?” (Miller & Miller, 1993, p169). Some of the participants felt resignation and despair concerning the Genocide experience (Miller & Miller, 1993, p 172). These participants reported being overwhelmed with sadness or “houzom” in Armenian. Some of the participants felt that they were as helpless today as they were during the events of the Genocide (Miller & Miller, 1993, p 173). One participant stated, “You know, it’s useless again. The Turks will never admit to it. It’s impossible. It’s futile for the Armenians to gain