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100 Years of Trauma: the Armenian Genocide and Intergenerational Cultural Trauma

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ABSTRACT

The events of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, during which more than 1.5 million Armenians were massacred by the Ottoman Turkish Empire, has left a deep, painful scar on this small but prominent culture. Those who lived through the Armenian Genocide survived death marches, rapes, drownings, physical mutilation, and other such heinous crimes. As they have passed, it is being recognized that subsequent generations continue to fight for justice, manifesting their ancestral pain, sadness, and mourning for the loss of their family members. As sociocultural trauma has a multigenerational impact within families and communities and affects the feeling of membership and belonging within that community, understanding how previous traumas shape future generations of that group is important for clinicians. This article reviews the scarce research on intergenerational trauma in the Armenian community within the United States after the Armenian Genocide, using the constructivist self-development theory to provide clinical implications and suggestions.

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April 24, 2015 marked a century since the beginning of the Armenian Genocide of 1915. Between 1915 and 1920, the Young Turks government of the Ottoman Empire orchestrated a planned, systematic massacre of 1.5 million Armenians (Dagirmanjian, 2005). The Armenian Genocide created massive trauma for immediate survivors, devastating their ability to live a normal emotional life and encumbering them with sadness (Kalayjian & Weisberg, 2002). When the surviving Armenians dispersed to various countries, psychology was in its infancy; thus, few immediate survivors were able to process the trauma (Vollhadt & Bilewicz, 2013). Trauma can affect all members of a group with a strong collective identity, even if not all group members directly experienced the traumatic events (Kira, 2001). Therefore, subsequent generations of Armenians after the genocide have indicated experiencing intergenerational trauma (Kira, 2001). The Turkish government's consistent denial that the genocide occurred has further stimulated

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Armenians' emotional reactions to the suffering their ancestors endured (Cooper & Akcam, 2005).

This tragic event has influenced the psyche of the Armenian people, and as a result, the theme of survival is a major aspect of today's Armenian culture (Pezeshkian, 2011). Outside domination and oppression of Armenians by other forces, including Azerbaijan and the Soviet Union, continued throughout the 20th century, having a large impact on many first- and second-generation Armenians in America (Dagirmanjian, 2005). In 2002, it was reported that there were approximately 1 million Armenians living in the United States, 90% of whom were offspring of genocide survivors (Kalayjian & Weisberg, 2002). Thus, there is an increasing need to understand the effects of intergenerational cultural trauma among Armenians.

Armenian immigration to the United States occurred in three major waves. War and sociopolitical conflict have been the main reasons for departure from their countries of origin (Dagirmanjian, 2005). Bakalian (1993) explained that the first wave took place from 1890 to 1924, and mainly consisted of survivors of the Armenian Genocide and the smaller massacres that took place before it. After the Armenian Genocide, many refugees fled to other Middle Eastern or European countries. Immigrants from this population made up the second wave of immigration, following World War II. However, not all immigrants in this wave were survivors of the Armenian Genocide (Bakalian, 1993). The third wave occurred from 1988 to 1990, following the earthquake in Soviet Armenia and the Soviet–Azerbaijan conflict, when Armenians were massacred by the Muslim majority in Baku (Bakalian, 1993).

Unlike the early literature on Holocaust survivors, there was no incentive to collect the Armenian people's personal data in the years following the genocide, because the Turkish government had denied the occurrence of the event (Kupelian, Kalayjian, & Kassabian, 1998). Additionally, the psychological consequences of genocide have tended to be understudied, due to methodological and practical challenges, including limited abilities to conduct experimental research or survey studies, especially as the number of survivors from the Armenian Genocide has decreased (Vollhardt & Bilewicz, 2013). Although there are a number of empirically based models of recovery for individual violence and victimization, recovery from massive group violence, especially for those of this small a culture, has not been well understood (Pearlman, 2013).

Since the 1980s, when research regarding the generational transmission of trauma from the Armenian Genocide began, only a handful of articles have been published, as opposed to the several hundred published on the transmission of the effects of the Holocaust (Kalayjian & Weisberg, 2002). Thus, the psychological well-being of this cultural group throughout generations has been underresearched, resulting in minimal knowledge about how such

intergenerational trauma is manifested psychologically. In this article, the empirically supported trauma treatment model of the constructivist self-development theory (CSDT) is used to review the scarce existing literature on the intergenerational cultural perspectives and manifestations of past cultural group trauma, combined with the themes of survival and preservation of the Armenian heritage in the United States. The CSDT emphasizes that trauma responses occur in sociocultural contexts and serve as the foundation of an individual's self-development, including traumatic bereavement of events that were experienced personally, or through knowledge of trauma to loved ones (Pearlman, 2013). Additionally, clinical implications and suggestions are discussed.

Historical overview

Located between Eastern Europe and the Middle East, the center of many competing empires throughout history, Armenians were dominated more often than not by historical empires including the Greek, Roman, Persian, Byzantine, Arabic, and Ottoman empires (Cooper & Akcam, 2005). Douglas (1992) explained the experience of the Armenian people:

On every page, in every book there is tragedy and disaster that have become their unfortunate lot since the beginning of time. They are raised in violence and nurtured in fear. Rarely have they seen periods of tranquility. They have been conquered, persecuted, oppressed, massacred, and exiled. They have seen their children slaughtered, their properties confiscated, and their churches burned. They have tried to worship their God but have been prevented to do so most of the time. They have tried to create a homeland but have been prevented to live there in peace. They have written books but the books were burned before they were read. They have composed music but rarely did they have the occasion to sing happily. (p. 3)

The most historically and psychologically significant event in Armenian history and the development of the Armenian collective identity was the Armenian Genocide of 1915 (Dagirmanjian, 2005). As the Armenians were one of the only Christian cultures in the Muslim Ottoman Empire, they were treated as second-class citizens, but as a religious and national minority, they began demanding greater autonomy (Cooper & Akcam, 2005). In some areas, Armenians were banned from speaking their native language except when praying, risking the penalty of having their tongues cut out if they did not obey (Kalayjian & Weisberg, 2002). They were also barred from giving legal testimony or bearing weapons to defend themselves from gun-bearing Muslim neighbors (Hovannisian, 1985). Before such dominance, Armenians were successful, often educated as physicians, attorneys, and architects; however, the Ottoman Empire found this increasing power threatening (Kalayjian & Weisberg, 2002).

The Turks targeted the Armenian intelligentsia first, and executed them. Then, they destroyed churches, schools, and educational centers, and collected any weapons that Armenians could use to defend themselves (Kalayjian & Weisberg, 2002). The end result was rape, death marches through the desert, starvation, disease, loss of historic homelands, an innumerable number of young Armenian orphans, and the slaughter of more than 1 million Armenians—one fourth of the Armenian population (Dagirmanjian, 2005). Eyewitness accounts from European and U.S. diplomats, politicians, military officials, and missionaries described church burnings, mass drownings, physical beatings, rapes, and graphic physical mutilation, including cutting and removing unborn fetuses from women's abdomens (Cooper & Akcam, 2005). The surviving Armenians scattered throughout the world to whatever countries would accept refugees, mainly the United States, Russia, and several countries in Europe (Cooper & Akcam, 2005).

As Armenians dispersed to various countries worldwide, the genocide influenced feelings of unity among diverse Armenian groups (Dagirmanjian, 2005). Turkey's denial of responsibility, worldwide inattention to the genocide, and Armenians' general knowledge of the atrocities that occurred greatly encouraged the diaspora to come together to seek justice and recognition (Mirak, 1997). This unity acknowledges the harm done to victims and helps them heal because moral statements about the perpetrators' actions can be made, and, to some extent, can stabilize the harm, suffering, and loss by victims (Staub, 2006).

It has been suggested that younger generations of Turks view the Armenian Genocide as a reminder of the tendency of the Christian West to demean Turks as a barbaric culture, as well as a reminder of when the Ottoman Empire collapsed and lost most of its territory (Cooper & Akcam, 2005). This reminder possibly spurs their denial. Social psychological perspectives indicate that motivated denial of such atrocities could serve as a way to restore moral self-image (Vollhardt & Bilewicz, 2013).

An international lawyer, Rafael Lemkin, coined the term *genocide* in 1943. The word is derived from the Greek word *genos*, meaning tribe, race, or group, and the Latin word *caedere*, meaning to kill (Dekmejian, 2007). During the Genocide Convention, undertaken by the United Nations on December 9, 1948, genocide was defined as the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, in whole or in part, with intent to cause serious physical or mental harm (Cooper & Akcam, 2005; Dekmejian, 2007; Vollhardt & Bilewicz, 2013). The United Nations further elaborated that conspiracy, public incitement, attempt, and complicity to commit genocide were all punishable acts in addition to the actual act of genocide. This definition is significant because it means that not all members of a group must be eradicated for genocide to have occurred, nor must a

country actually commit genocide to be responsible for a crime against humanity; the intent or attempt is equally as guilty an act. In 2003, the International Center for Transitional Justice declared that the killing of Armenians during the 1915 massacres did appropriately fit this legal definition of the term genocide (Cooper & Akcam, 2005), and the Armenian Genocide is now commonly acknowledged as the first genocide of the 20th century (Karenian et al., 2010).

Given their status as a dominated minority, Armenians have been subject to historical oppression, and have developed excessive individuality to prevent assimilation into the ruling cultures. This has been embodied by the immense pride Armenians hold toward two major aspects of their culture (Dagirmanjian, 2005, p. 438). The first aspect is the Armenian Apostolic Church, which was founded after Armenia adopted Christianity in the year 301 (the first nation to do so). The second aspect is the Armenian alphabet, created in the year 405. The Armenian people were able to retain their church and language throughout centuries of oppression, making these cultural elements the most highly revered aspects of Armenians' unique identity.

Intergenerational trauma

According to CSDT, victimization, whether direct or indirect, can disrupt various aspects of the development of the self, such as self-capacities, ego resources, psychological needs, cognitive schemas, and brain development (Pearlman, 2013). CSDT emphasizes five domains for oneself or others: safety, trust, esteem, intimacy, and control. These facets of identity development are closely related to the areas of struggle many Armenian Genocide survivors and subsequent generations experience. Thus, compared to other possible frameworks, CSDT is most appropriate for understanding how direct and indirect (i.e., intergenerational transmission) trauma can affect one's development, such as tolerance, self-worth, and trust of others. As traumas can transmit cross-generationally, either through family accounts or collectively as a culture, genocide could disturb a culture's collective identity, interdependence, and survival strategies (Vollhardt & Bilewicz, 2013). Survivors and their kin carry the impact of the genocide in their daily life, as their basic needs for security, feelings for control over their own life, positive connections to other people and communities, and understanding one's own worldview, have become deeply disturbed (Staub, 2006). Intergenerational trauma can impede the ability to develop a benign worldview about others and the self, affecting the schemas and appraisals believed throughout life (Kira, 2001). For example, due to the constant oppression and dominance from other cultures, with minimal help from outside forces, many Armenians developed a strong sense of mistrust toward non-Armenians, often limiting their social surroundings and support systems,

and developing biased opinions of certain cultures, especially the generations of Turks after the genocide (Dagirmanjian, 2005).

The main mechanisms of the transmission of trauma to the subsequent generations after the Armenian Genocide have occurred through family and societal influences, including via narrative accounts, collective identification, enmeshment, empathy, parenting, and acculturation (Karenian et al., 2010). Traumas can have similar effects on individuals within communities of strong collective identity, even if those individuals did not directly suffer the trauma (Kira, 2001). Children of Armenian Genocide survivors have reportedly experienced nightmares involving images of the acts committed by the Turks based on the narratives they heard during their upbringing (Kalayjian & Weisberg, 2002).

Following the Armenian Genocide, children became very meaningful to families, as they became the hope for a prosperous future (Dagirmanjian, 2005). This placed a great sense of responsibility on children from a young age, leading to an intensity of emotion and an inherent sadness that their roles in life were, in part, determined by the genocide of their people (Dagirmanjian, 2005). Many Armenian families mourned members lost to the genocide from generation to generation, reporting feelings of burden, sadness, helplessness, and intense psychic pain caused by having to carry emotional memories of the genocide for the victimized generations (Kalayjian & Weisberg, 2002). Collective cross-generational trauma transmission among the Armenian people can predispose individuals to respond poorly to common stressors (Kira, 2001). For example, immediate survivors of the Armenian Genocide have exhibited a connection between survivorship and their relationship to food and starvation, which has often manifested in expressions of extreme disapproval toward their children in cases involving uneaten or wasted food in the home (Kalayjian & Weisberg, 2002).

Miller and Miller (1993) collected a large number of oral histories from survivors of the Armenian Genocide, and analyzed the psychological impact and effect on both direct survivors and subsequent generations in their book, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide*. They found six major responses to genocide: (a) avoidance and repression, (b) outrage and anger, (c) revenge and restitution, (d) reconciliation and forgiveness, (e) resignation and despair, and (f) explanation and rationalization. Surprisingly, direct survivors were much more likely to exhibit avoidance and repression or reconciliation and forgiveness than subsequent generations. This might be because survivors who remained in Turkey were encouraged to stay quiet about their experiences, and asked to speak in matter-of-fact and succinct terms (Miller & Miller, 1993). This could also be explained through CSDT as postgenocide identity disruption, in which an immediate survivor might embrace a victim identity (Pearlman, 2013). Additionally, immediate survivors of the Armenian Genocide have reported being more resilient, altruistic,

grateful for life, and more engaged in meaning-making and coping than subsequent generations (Vollhardt & Bilewicz, 2013). Miller and Miller (1993) also found that reconciliation and forgiveness was the least common response among second- and third-generation Armenian Genocide survivors, which could likely be attributed to the continual denial of the genocide by the Turkish government. The CSDT framework would suggest that such resentment affects the development of one's cognitive schemas.

Whereas survivor syndrome, in which survivors feel guilty to be alive, has been commonly found with Holocaust survivors and subsequent generations, it has not been the norm among Armenians, although it certainly does exist for some (Karenian et al., 2010). Instead of feeling guilty for being alive or for what their ancestors endured, subsequent generations of Armenians have manifested their experience of intergenerational trauma as pain and sadness regarding injustice, discrimination, prejudice, and lack of respect and dignity to their culture for the appalling acts that were committed against their ancestors. Healing can be promoted by applying the respect, information, connection, and hope (RICH) recovery framework that is based on the CSDT theory of self-development. One of the main reactions to Armenian Genocide denial is feeling as though one's personhood is being attacked (Kalayjian & Weisberg, 2002). Thus, RICH aims to reconcile such feelings by increasing respect (e.g., validating the feelings of injustice of violence and its damage), disseminating information (e.g., discussing facts about what happened as well as the potential effects of genocide, including psychological trauma), connecting both inter- and intrapersonally (e.g., acknowledging within oneself what happened, or connecting with the experience and the greater community), and increasing hope for a greater future by developing a life worth living, and creating meaning (Pearlman, 2013).

Throughout the available literature, consistent suggestions for community and cultural healing included receiving acknowledgment of the crimes committed, as this eases the trauma for direct survivors, and reduces subsequent generations' desire for revenge and vengeance (Cooper & Akcam, 2005). A societal process of reconciliation requires changes in structures, policies, and practices that can promote change in the attitudes of the population, as well as help maintain the new status quo (Staub, 2006). Without reconciliation, the victimized group might choose to react violently, instead of peacefully approaching current conflicts in their daily life (Vollhardt & Bilewicz, 2013). Denial prevents healing of the wounds inflicted by genocide, and constitutes an attack on the collective identity and national cultural continuity of the victimized people (Smith, Markusen, & Lifton, 1995). The CSDT framework is most appropriate for this population because it promotes collective recovery and resilience using platforms such as education, community forums, large-scale ceremonies and rituals, and the media (Pearlman, 2013).

Today's Armenians, in the United States as well as worldwide, engage in collective recovery by holding annual protests at Turkish embassies, engaging in marches for justice, and utilizing powerful voices. Celebrities, such as the members of the Armenian-American rock band, System of a Down, or famous Armenian families like the Kardashians raise community awareness of the denial of the Armenian Genocide. Most recently, Pope Francis became the first head of the Roman Catholic Church to publicly refer to the killings of 1.5 million Armenians from 1915 to 1920 as genocide, urging government officials to recognize the injustice instead of fearing Turkey's threat to cut off military aid and cooperation.

Although it has been 100 years since the Armenian Genocide of 1915, postgenocide Armenian families continue to live in fear of the outside world, internalizing intergenerational trauma (Kalayjian & Weisberg, 2002). They feel weakened and vulnerable, creating the worldview that other people, especially those from cultural groups outside of their own, are dangerous (Staub, 2006). CSDT would suggest that the generation of Armenian Genocide survivors has influenced this cognitive schema, as they had to be cautious of outside powerful forces (Pearlman, 2013). The survivors likely passed on this mindset to their kin through narratives and parenting practices (Karenian et al., 2010).

Clinical implications and suggestions for treatment

The surge of emotions described in the previous pages can be overwhelming to a non-Armenian therapist, who might find it difficult to comprehend Armenians' unwillingness to feel forgiveness toward the Turkish people and government. Given the continued lack of recognition by the U.S. government, these feelings of shame and pain could be buried deep within the individual, making it hard to uncover in a short number of sessions. Due to the lack of official recognition of the genocide, Armenians also have difficulty trusting non-Armenian mental health clinicians with their family stories and pain (Dagirmanjian, 2005).

A holistic view of an Armenian individual, including their presenting concerns and how they might be influenced by cultural values (e.g., survival, family pride), could help inform a clinician's goals so the clinician can introduce interventions that are congruent with the Armenian client's worldview. This knowledge could be instrumental in helping the clinician to help clients relieve distress and find meaning and purpose (Pezeshkian, 2011). CSDT calls for greater cultural competence, a valuable component for the treatment of this little known yet strong cultural population.

Dagirmanjian (2005) suggested using narrative therapy with Armenians, as it allows them to create their own perception and preferred view of themselves. Through various conversations, different facets of ethnicity are

incorporated into sessions, and the therapist can begin to understand the values of the Armenian culture (Dagirmanjian, 2005). Dagirmanjian (2005) emphasized the importance of praising and utilizing the closeness of the Armenian family, rather than trying to avoid it, or judging the relationships to be too enmeshed or fused. Although these types of relationships have been considered unhealthy from a Western systems approach, Armenian families have viewed them as strengths (Dagirmanjian, 2005). Contrary to Western views of family psychology, individuation is not the goal of therapy when working with Armenians (Dagirmanjian, 2005). Additionally, when working with a family whose ancestors were direct survivors of the Genocide, it could be helpful to create a genogram to better conceptualize the generational patterns that might have started postgenocide (Dagirmanjian, 2005).

Unfortunately, the literature on working with this group is insufficient, and more research is needed for a better understanding of how to work with this population, especially with regard to intergenerational trauma. Although such empirical research does not exist yet for this specific population, recognizing an Armenian's cultural pride and understanding how and why such attitudes developed can help a clinician engage in effective therapeutic practices. By increasing the multicultural understanding of Armenian culture, clinicians can better serve these communities by recognizing which Western treatment modalities work best for them in a culturally competent manner. Additionally, clinicians might experience vicarious trauma where secondary trauma reactions to the clients' traumatic experiences could occur (Trippany, Kress, & Wilcoxon, 2004). Thus, gaining support and supervision while engaging in trauma therapy could be helpful in alleviating the emotional reactions evoked through vicarious trauma

Discussion

Recovery from the negative psychological effects of genocide is key for individuals within a culture to live fully, engage in reconciliation, and prevent future violence (Pearlman, 2013). Several factors could have led to the inability to process the trauma felt by immediate survivors of the Armenian Genocide. First, survivors might have not known the language of the host countries where they found refuge. Second, they most likely did not feel safe disclosing any information or experiences suffered, fearing for their livelihood. Third, although understanding the psychological aftermath of genocide could help resolve and prevent current political violence as well as add to existing knowledge about genocide (Vollhardt & Bilewicz, 2013), this realization is delayed for the direct survivors of the Armenian Genocide, as only a few are alive today. Finally, as Armenians value their privacy and self-reliance, speaking of the atrocities to outsiders during a time of turmoil would not have been appealing.

The components of the CSDT, and CSDT's treatment model, RICH, discussed throughout this review, emphasize how intergenerational trauma, especially collective cultural trauma, could disrupt self-development. The areas of self-development most affected for subsequent generations after the Armenian Genocide seem to be cognitive schemas, psychological needs, and self-capacities.

Armenians are often considered hardworking, robust, and clever people, with a passion for creativity, a will to live and survive, and profound respect for ancestral traditions (Douglas, 1992). With every disaster that has befallen Armenian people in the past 3,000 years, they have demonstrated inner yearning for a new birth, starting from the beginning as many times as necessary, without losing their pride and momentum (Douglas, 1992). Saroyan (1936) declared:

I should like to see any power of the world destroy this race, this small tribe of unimportant people, whose history is ended, whose wars have all been fought and lost, whose structures have crumbled, whose literature is unread, whose music is unheard, whose prayers are no longer uttered. ... Send them from their homes into the desert. Let them have neither bread nor water. Burn their houses and their churches. See if they will not live again ... Go ahead, see if you can do anything about it. (p. 437)

Despite the tragedies that Armenians have encountered throughout history, they have a phenomenal ability to persistently recuperate, allowing for efforts to “transform tragedy into happiness, despair into hope, defeat into inspiration, ordeal into challenge” (Douglas, 1992, p. 8). Despite the burden of carrying emotional tragedy from previous generations, Armenians of today work fiercely to strengthen the culture, strive to survive, and fight to achieve recognition for the Armenian Genocide.

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