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RIPPLES OF TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE: PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS AMONG SECOND-GENERATION SURVIVORS OF THE HOLOCAUST

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Many researchers assume that the continuing influences of the Holocaust on its survivors are long-term, and hypothesize that its stamp is also present in the lives of the second and third generations of Holocaust survivors (e.g., Shmotkin et al., 2011). This assumption notwithstanding, controlled studies have found that second-generation Holocaust survivors do not report more psychopathology (e.g., Van IJsendoorn et al., 2003).

However, there is evidence that transmission of the Holocaust experience to second- generation survivors does affect their intimate relationships (Wiseman et al., 2002). Compared to control groups, second-generation Holocaust survivors displayed less intimacy towards their partners (Mazor & Tal, 1996); evaluated their partners as being less loving and sexual and more controlling

and invasive; perceived the quality of the marriage as inferior; and presented insecure intimate communication patterns (e.g., Joels, 2002). It was concluded that because the massive losses that first-generation Holocaust survivors experienced made it difficult for some to develop new loving, intimate partner-relationships and were less emotionally available to their children, the second-generation internalized a relationship model characterized by low-level intimacy and difficulty with trust. For example, second-generation Holocaust survivors who grew up in families that were silent about their parents' trauma tended to experience their partners as being more vulnerable and weak, or as controlling and hurtful (Wiseman et al., 2002).

Our study sought to qualitatively examine intergenerational transfer of difficulties in intimacy and explore strength or growth in partner-relationships of the second generation.

Method

Data was gathered from 30 semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Kvale, 1996) with 15 men and 15 women who were born between 1947 and 1965 to parents, both of whom were persecuted by the Nazis. Participants were retrieved from a non-clinical convenience sample, using snowball sampling. Data analysis was based on grounded-theory (Charmaz, 2006). The study was guided by three main research questions: (1) How do second-generation Holocaust survivors describe their relationships and the intimacy they share with their partners? (2) What, if any, is the connection between their experience of intimate relationships and their parents' Holocaust experiences? (3) What points of weakness/strength do they see in their intimate relationships in the shadow of their parents' Holocaust experiences?

Findings

"*I think that this relationship preserves my security*." The Yearning of the Second Generation for Stability and Safety.

Various interviewees indicated that they formed their intimate relationships with the intention of creating a secure and stable space, in order to counter-balance the psychological insecurity and lack of emotional stability they felt associated with their parents' difficulties in containing their Holocaust experiences. For example, one interviewee said:

> *"This experience of being immigrants and – my parents, how their world exploded and everyone there disappeared. So although they never raised it in conversations, I still got the sense that family is not a secure place. And today with my husband, everything is so simple and secure… I think that my partner constitutes some kind of mirror that there is another world, sane, that can be relied upon, secure. I think that this relationship preserves my security."*

Some of the survivor-parents had difficulty conveying their past and regulating their emotions about their Holocaust experiences for their children in a way that would allow their children to experience the family and the world as a secure space. The intimate relationships that some of the interviewees

sought were not based on a specific need, such as financial security, but rather were intent on creating and preserving a sense of existential, emotional security. Another interviewee noted:

> *"My wife healed me …. This is the model of a woman that if you are talking about a corrective experience, she is the absolute antithesis of my mother. Someone healthy, who is able to give, who enjoys everything, who doesn't play guilt games, who takes responsibility."*

The partner relationships of some of the respondents allowed space for predictability, in which the rules of communication were clear, the expression of emotions were permitted and the intimate connection was curative.

"*I am trying to do things differently….*" – The Tendency for Second-Generation Survivors to Reconstruct their Parents' Intimacy Versus their Yearning for Correction.

Various interviewees clearly identified the shadow of the Holocaust in their parents' relationships. For example, some of the interviewees mentioned:

> *"It was clear to my mother that she would marry, as she was 21 years old and alone in the world."*

> *"Their friendship was directly connected with their survival; each needed the family unit in order to survive."*

The survivors' partner-relationships were perceived by their children as a survival strategy in which to have the corrective experience of belonging, given the traumatic, existential solitude that is the lot of persecuted people. The intimacy allowed them to feel hope despite the loss of their previous world.

While some of the interviewees expressed satisfaction with their parents' survival and intimacy patterns, others expressed resentment towards their parents' relationship model and did not want to re-enact it. For example, some interviewees said:

> *"My father was the arbitrator at home. It is very likely that the large measure of freedom that I require now in my marriage is in order not to be like her [mother]. She was not free at all."*

> *"I think that I am not like them in this way. My parents went through many crises in their intimate lives …. They more or less each lived their own lives, they lived alongside one another in the family, with a lot of anger. My mother was very angry with my father and I don't want to be like that. I am trying to do things differently … I don't want my relationship to be like that."*

Many respondents described parent models that seemed to be based on two complementary characteristics: (1) considerable separateness characterized by a strict division of roles, and (2) dependence and separation difficulties. In contrast to their parental model of relationship, often

described as an unpleasant polarity, a significant group of interviewees described their own needs for intimate relationships that were based on partnership and independence.

"Enough, enough, how much can one take?" – The Yearning for Release From the Holocaust After Tears of Dealing With It.

Many actions of second-generation Holocaust survivors are intended to correct the painful vacuum-like experience their parents brought with them from Europe. For example, this is how one interviewee described the reasons that led him to explore the Holocaust intensively as an adult:

> *"My childhood was one in which I had a feeling all the time as though there was something, some kind of black cloud that no-one talked about. I felt it, I knew that it was there, no talking, no talking, no talking. We went all around this …. It left me with the need to investigate this. It wasn't by chance that I took this direction of interest in the Holocaust and it was important for me to travel to Poland, to make these journeys to Poland and to see the things. That is, it left me all the time with something that as a child I had a need to decipher."*

The compulsion of the second generation of survivors to process and reframe their childhood experiences constituted an overarching theme throughout the respondents' lives in this study. Partner-relationships in this group were framed not only as a normative life goal, an antithesis to the ethos of their parents' suffering, but also as one of many means of giving significance to a childhood in the shadow of the Holocaust. It appears that the commitment and intensity that characterized the survivors' efforts to correct their childhood experiences was associated with significant costs in their adulthood. Some interviewees expressed saturation regarding further engagement with the Holocaust. For example, one interviewee reported the following:

> *"… Enough, enough, how much can one take? So one day a few months ago I got a letter from "Amcha"* (an organization for survivors and their families, ES)*, so I got up at home and I think that Zvika was there and I say enough, enough, I don't want to be a second-generation Holocaust survivor any more, enough, I have paid, I have done, I have contributed and that's it, and I tore up the letter and threw it in the garbage and I said that I don't want any more letters from them, I don't want anything, I am no longer a second-generation survivor, I don't want this, I don't want to talk about my parents, I don't want to."*

Interviewees expressed two dialectical movements throughout their lives, vacillating between the following polar viewpoints: 1. A strong connection to the story of the Holocaust stemming from their parents' over-involvement to exclusion and compartmentalization of their parents' experience during childhood, and 2. A connection to, and engagement with, the subject of the Holocaust in their adulthood to a later satiation and yearning for release from the emotional burden.

Discussion and Conclusion

The partner-relationships and ways of life revealed by the sample in this study indicate that they were impacted by their parents' model in a complex way. *Processing*, the mental effort to cope with and resolve internal conflicts, had been employed by our respondents in an attempt to clarify and interpret intolerable familial and collective trauma that were deemed incomprehensible by their survivor parents. Whether because of the magnitude of the loss, or whether due to the power of the events experienced, many survivors failed to achieve some clarity about the traumatic events, let alone detach/free or leave themselves psychologically from their harrowing pasts. Accordingly, the necessary processing tasks were left to their children. Partner relationships of second-generation survivors became an essential opportunity in which childhood family experiences were understood and could lead to disengagement from the enmeshment with their parents. Our respondents attempted to come to terms with their parents' emotional legacies both inside and outside of their marital nests, but satiation and fatigue motivated some to distance themselves from the identity of "the second-generation survivor."

Many respondents displayed what has been termed as the "paradoxical relevance" of the children of Holocaust survivors (Chaitin, 2007). On the one hand, for many, the Holocaust has had daily significant relevance, and on the other hand, many are unable to explain what this relevance actually is. Participants in this study perceived the Holocaust as highly relevant to them, but many also feared being overwhelmed by it. As a result, numerous respondents showed how deeply affected they were by their parents' traumatic Holocaust experiences alongside feelings of distance from their parents' suffering in Europe. Second-generation Holocaust survivors interviewed in this study continued to move between these two polar stances throughout their lives. It is concluded, therefore, that the memory of the Holocaust moves back and forth in their awareness, between being a forefront focus that attracts pain and distress and being an avoided distant part of their consciousness.

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FEATURED TRAUMA

2 THOUGHTS ON "RIPPLES OF TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE: PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS AMONG SECOND-GENERATION SURVIVORS OF THE HOLOCAUST"

Jacques Barth

AUGUST 16, 2014 AT 10:57 AM

Great article ! Please publish more on this topic

Ruth Rosenman

SEPTEMBER 14, 2014 AT 5:09 PM

My husband born in 1932 was during the 2º war with cristian families hidden in Belgium.
I was born in 1938 in Cernowitz – Rumenia and was not allowed to r to go out of our home because jews were not allowed, during the war. So I had no friends, other children do establish relationship.
My daughter was born in 1976 and is in psychological and psiquatric treatment. She got married in
2003 and divorces in 2012. I help to grow up my grand child who is 5 years old.
Now I am a widow and very concerned with the future of my daughter.