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978-0-521-87947-7 - Echoes of the Trauma: Relational Themes and Emotions in Children of Holocaust Survivors

Hadas Wiseman and Jacques P. Barber

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ECHOES OF THE TRAUMA

This book discusses the echoes of the trauma that are traced in the relational narratives that the sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors tell about their experiences growing up in survivor families. An innovative combination of the Core Conflictual Relationship Theme (CCRT) method with narrative-qualitative analysis revealed common themes and emotional patterns that are played out in the survivors' children's meaningful relationships, especially in those with their parents. The relational world of the second generation is understood in the context of an intergenerational communication style called "knowing-not knowing," in which there is a dialectical tension between knowing and not knowing the parental trauma. In the survivors' children's current parent-adolescent relationships with their own children (survivors' grandchildren), they aspire to correct the child-parent dynamics that they had experienced by trying to openly negotiate conflicts and to maintain close bonds. Clinicians treating descendants of other massive trauma would benefit from the insights offered into these complex intergenerational psychological processes.

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RELATIONAL THEMES AND EMOTIONS IN
CHILDREN OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

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In memory of my beloved parents

Esther and Gdalyah Wiseman

In memory of my father, Leon Barber, and my in-laws, Irena and

John Auerbach, who each survived the Holocaust in his or

her own extraordinary way

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FOREWORD

The Internal Echoes of Holocaust

Dan Bar-On, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

This book makes an important contribution to the growing literature on the aftereffects of the Holocaust on the families of its survivors – mainly the second generation. Its special focus is on the inter-generational relations between the members of these families. To study these relations the authors applied the Core Conflict Relational Theme (CCRT) method to interviews that focused on interpersonal relations within these families. By doing so, the authors avoided unnecessary assumptions about “pathologies” in these families. Their qualitative approach also avoided the tendencies of some recent quantitative studies that claim that there are no such aftereffects within families of survivors, studies that undermine what voices within the second and third generations tell us and the echoes these stories have within us. Wiseman and Barber tell us how the echoes of that horrible period still resonate among hundreds of thousands of its survivors, their children, and their grandchildren.

In a certain sense, the variety of studies and their sometimes contradictory results represent the different assumptions researchers make about the human beings they study, more than the phenomena they study itself. Just as economists make assumptions about the possibility of predicting human behavior based on the expressed wishes of these people to purchase certain products, some clinical psychologists used uncritically psychoanalytic terminology related to “pathologies” of survivors of the Holocaust; this terminology was developed by

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Freud to depict abnormal reactions to normal situations (Bergmann & Jucovy, 1982). The present book suggests that survivors' reactions to the Holocaust were mostly within the normal range of reactions to an extremely abnormal situation. Still, these reactions had echoes in the relationships among the survivors, their children, and their grandchildren, echoes that need our attention and the systematic analysis that is provided in this book.

Some quantitative researchers recently claimed that there are no such aftereffects (van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Sagi-Schwartz, 2003). They remind me of a student I had in the mid-1980s at Ben-Gurion University in one of my workshops, "The Psychosocial Aftereffects of the Holocaust on the Second and Third Generations." This student, during the opening circle of self-presentations said, "I belong to the second generation, but I do not believe there is such a phenomenon, so I came to see what you are talking about." Although some students wanted to jump on her (feeling that she undermined their own feelings as the second generation), I tried to defend her right to feel differently, which probably had its special Israeli roots in being ashamed, in earlier years, of belonging to a Holocaust survivors' family (Bar-On, 1995). We know of major generals in the Israeli army who disclosed their childhood Holocaust roots only after they were out of their active military service. So deep still was the stigmatization of the early years that they had to present themselves as Israeli-born and hide their true origins for many years.

Perhaps also the claims to no aftereffects represent researchers' own personal inclinations that such aftereffects should not be "put on" survivors. They may have reacted to the assumption that relational aftereffects can be seen as some kind of accusation of the survivors, who suffered so much and who were stigmatized enough, and that the survivors should not be burdened with any unnecessary additional stigma. This approach puts the survivors' assumed need of protection above those of their children and grandchildren. In my view, there is also a methodological flaw with quantitative studies that compare

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samples of families of survivors with families of “control groups.” In many cases these control groups are families of Jewish European descent who did not live under Nazi occupation (this is the legal definition of Holocaust survivors). Still, if one looks more closely into the stories of members of these control groups, one will find that although they succeeded in fleeing from the Nazis to Russia or to Israel or the United Kingdom, many of their family members were still murdered in the Holocaust. As a result, they go through processes of mourning, of silencing these losses, but they “have no right to feel effected” in the eyes of the survivors, or in their own eyes, and in my view therefore cannot be counted as a control group in any deeper psychological meaning.

The ambivalence of researchers in this domain can be understood, as we study a complex phenomenon many years after the original occurrences, effected by several simultaneous processes: what happened to the protagonist before, during, and after the Holocaust, specifically the process of immigration, which was the fate of most survivors and which has its own psychological toll; the dynamics of the family; and the personality of the protagonist.

The analysis in this book, however, goes beyond the ambivalence of the researchers of previous clinical or quantitative methods. Wiseman and Barber allow us to listen to voices of children of survivors, who are by now parents themselves, along with the voices of their own adolescent children. Unlike the earlier studies that depicted the second generation as dependent and in the shadow of their survivor parents, here we listen to them also as mature adults trying to navigate their way between their aging (and sometimes deceased) parents and their own adolescent children. Such a navigation is difficult, as they are very attentive to the needs of their own ailing parents while they try not to repeat the mistakes their parents have made with them (mainly of excessive emotional control), but also not to go too far in the opposite direction (of emotional neglect). This study also tells us about a different period within the Israeli-Jewish culture. By the 1990s – the

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time of this study – the original silencing by the Israeli society of the stories of the survivors was finally broken. That silencing was based on the somewhat cruel bias of the absorbing Israeli society of the 1950s and 1960s, which maintained that the survivors “did not fight for their lives” according to local standards and therefore were not “good enough” (Bar-On, 2006).

However, within the families of the survivors, the echoes of the original social silencing is still present, as many survivors had their own subjective needs to not tell their children about what they went through “to save” them from that past. This phenomenon suggests their lack of psychological thinking; they did not understand that silencing is one of the most effective ways of transmission of trauma. In many of these families the grandchildren were the ones who opened windows in the “double wall,” which I formulated as an image of the inability of survivors and their descendents to talk openly on the burden of the past (Bar-On, 1995).

Grandchildren have new ways to ask their grandparents questions, to let them tell what they went through. This is probably true in general (I can testify now as a grandfather myself), but in the shadow of the Holocaust this sometimes played a special and important liberating role: the grandchild is the one who travels to Poland, visiting the sites where his or her grandparents survived, while other family members do not. In this book, we hear how the grandchildren can more openly express their feelings, sometimes in contradiction to those of their own parents, something that members of the second generation could not afford in relation to their parents.

Wiseman and Barber give us a positive perspective for the future, which they call “the music of knowing and not knowing.” The echoes of the past create a special kind of music, and when one learns to listen to this music, it resonates as a combination of what one knows and does not know. This could be important general advice about life stories told and untold concerning earlier traumatic life events. In light of the Holocaust, it has some special additional value. I would

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like to add here that I have experienced lately that some survivors have new and warm recollections of their family life prior to the Holocaust (Litvak-Hirsch & Bar-On, 2006). These recollections may have been hidden under the enormous burden of the tragic fate of family members during the Holocaust. Now that they again have a big family, during festivities and gatherings they can recall the good old times and tell their descendents about them. Unfortunately, their own children have no such recollections, as they were usually born into the Holocaust, and, therefore, in terms of relational patterns, I am afraid that the second generation will remain with the psychological price of that period, hopefully thereby this price will be saved from their own descendents. This could become their own consolation.

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PREFACE

Sixty years after the end of World War II and the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, the study of the long-term psychological effects associated with the Holocaust remains of interest to both social scientists and clinicians. The focus for the last three decades or so has been on the intergenerational transmission of the Holocaust trauma to the children of the survivors, often referred to as the “second generation.” Psychological trauma, especially massive traumas such as genocide, may have long-term effects, not only on the victimized generation but also on the next generations that did not endure the traumatic events directly. The question of whether the trauma of the Holocaust has been transmitted to the second generation has been the topic of much clinical and empirical research, as reflected in the large numbers of articles and books. Our book, however, addresses the more specific issue of what psychological sequelae, if any, have been transmitted from survivors to their children. We answer this question by exploring scientifically the relational world of the second generation as it unfolds in the narratives they tell about their experiences growing up in families of Holocaust survivors. Much of the material integrated in this book is based primarily on a research project that we conducted in Israel to study the transmission of the relational themes, as well as the main psychological issues and sensitivities that may play out within those families.

In developing this research project on offspring of Holocaust survivors we were inspired by the position of the late Hillel Klein (1980),

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an analyst whose work and writings were influential in the understanding of the survivors and their children.

Research has shown that we can no longer speak of the transmission of psychopathology from one generation to the next, but rather of the transmission of common motifs, mythologies, issues, sensitivities within families and between the generations. (p. 553)

Klein's position resonated with our clinical impressions as psychotherapists working with children of Holocaust survivors, suggesting that common themes and sensitivities are evident in these high-functioning and accomplished adults. Consequently, instead of the focus on psychopathology, which characterized the early studies, the focus we chose was the interpersonal themes and patterns manifested by children of Holocaust survivors. This new focus led us to search for the best conceptual framework and methodology to shed light on such complex dynamics.

On the very hot summer day that we met in Israel to discuss our potential research collaboration, the idea of applying the Core Conflictual Research Theme (CCRT) method (Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1990) to the study of the second generation was born. Thinking over vivid examples of the narratives told to us by second-generation patients, clinical case studies we had read, stories in books written about the experience of the second generation, and movies, we were excited by the possibility that the CCRT method would help us uncover the interpersonal themes and sensitivities experienced by the second generation. It seemed to us that applying the CCRT method, an established method in psychotherapy research, to study relational narratives that we would collect from children of Holocaust survivors could provide a unique way to stay close to interviewees' personal experiences and be highly relevant to clinical practice. Our collaboration brought together expertise in qualitative-narrative methodology (Hadas Wiseman) and in the CCRT method (Jacques Barber). To

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trace the “Echoes of Trauma” we integrated the innovative method of the CCRT with the qualitative-narrative analysis of themes, emotions, and intergenerational communication patterns that emerged in the relational narratives told by children of Holocaust survivors.

Another aspect of our research that we would like to underscore is that the majority of the narratives presented and analyzed in Chapters 3 to 10 (Parts One and Two) were collected from a random, nonclinical sample of children of Holocaust survivors from a national database. Instead of relying on a convenience sample, which has been common in studies on the second generation, we sampled our Israeli-born participants from lists provided by the Israel Population Registry. The sample consisted of fifty-six participants (thirty men and twenty-six women) across an age range of 30 to 49 years (at the time of data collection in 1996–1997). The mothers of these men and women were all survivors of Nazi concentration camps, and two-thirds of the fathers were either survivors of concentration camps or had been in Europe during the war. (See Appendix for demographic details.) In addition, we include a preliminary exploration of change and continuity in the child–parent dynamics that transpire between survivors’ children and their own children (the survivors’ grandchildren). This exploration of past and current parent–adolescent relationships was derived from narratives collected recently from a school-based sample of second-generation parents and their adolescent children. (See Appendix for demographic details.)

We hope our book gives voice to the subjective experiences of men and women raised by parents who had survived the Holocaust by portraying the common themes and sensitivities in their relational world. We also believe that the book pays tribute to the remarkable resilience of the survivors and their descendents in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Finally, we hope that what we have learned from these adult children of survivors can be generalized to descendents of other populations of victims of trauma who have also experienced violent and enduring atrocities.

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This book is the fruit of a special collaboration between our research teams at the University of Haifa and at the University of Pennsylvania Center for Psychotherapy Research.

We wish especially to acknowledge our former and current graduate students and research assistants for their invaluable help and input at various stages of the Second-Generation Project. Among these, we are especially grateful to Idit Yam and Alon Raz for their outstanding role in coordinating the major study during 1995–1998 in Israel and to Carol Foltz at the University of Pennsylvania. Special thanks go also to Alon Goldberg for his help and diligence in coordinating the study during 2002–2005 on parenting adolescents. Sharon Snir, Einat Metzl, Nurit Gur, and Dafna Hadar contributed greatly to the narrative analysis of the relational stories and of the specific emotions. Brian Sharpless carefully edited Chapters 8 and 12.

Our major study titled “Central Relationship Patterns in Second Generation Holocaust Survivors” was supported by the United States–Israel Binational Science Foundation (BSF Grant 94–00199 to Hadas Wiseman and Jacques P. Barber). The more recent study titled “The Experience of Parenting Adolescents among Second Generation Holocaust Survivors” was funded by an Israel Foundation Trustees Grant (2002–2004) to Hadas Wiseman. We also appreciate greatly the support we received from the Faculty of Education of University of Haifa and from the Department of Psychiatry of the University of Pennsylvania.

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Finally, *Echoes of the Trauma* could not have been voiced without our many interviewees, who are presented under pseudonyms. We hope that in this book we have depicted their interpersonal world in a way that resonates with their experiences. Last but not least, we would like to express our love to our families – Itzik, Adi, and Uri and Smadar, Natalie, and Adam – for their ongoing encouragement and patience, each in their own unique way, throughout the process of this collaborative project and the writing of this book.

Hadas Wiseman, Haifa, Israel

Jacques P. Barber, Philadelphia, United States

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