

Transmission of traumatic experiences in the families of war survivors from Bosnia and Herzegovina

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This paper explores the process of transmitting war experiences from parents to children in the contemporary Bosnian context. It is informed by studies in psychoanalysis and cultural anthropology. Using in-depth interviews with families, family trees and children's drawings, I try to understand why and how parents communicate their traumatic memories to their children, and how children respond to their parents' recollection of the recent past. In brief, I argue that parents avoid the topic of the war and this avoidance derives from the ambiguity of their experiences in war. Second, their reluctance to talk about a certain part of their life results in fragmentation of history and consequently in a fragmented sense of selfhood and belonging in their children. Fragmentation is also reflected in the fact that the war narratives are gender dependent which means that women's stories of the war differ from those of their husbands. In most cases, men have difficulties in sharing their war experience with their children for three main reasons. First, they are not able to arrive at a clear-cut narrative on their own participation in the warfare. Second, they seem to lack the language to describe an experience which is felt to be unique and sometimes surreal. Finally, their narrative does not always overlap with the official state-recognized version of history.

Key words: war trauma, trauma transmission, paternal function, Bosnia and Herzegovina

1. Introduction

The concept of intergenerational trauma transmission has first appeared as a separate subject after the Second World War.¹ It denotes the process of passing one's traumatic experiences to the next generation through narrative, behavior and silence. The research in the aftermath of the

two world wars, the war in Vietnam, the riots in Sri Lanka, and other instances of mass violence, has contributed to a better understanding of trauma transmission. Yet, the topic has remained under-researched because in contrast to other war-related issues it requires a long and in-depth work with the whole family touching upon the most intimate aspects of the parent-child interaction. Apart from this general problem, the post-war post-Yugoslav milieu has been primarily examined from political, historical or ethnographic perspective, somehow failing to take into account the in-depth and independent of ethnic or religious background psycho-social phenomena. This paper is trying to fill in the above mentioned gap while considering the specific cultural context of Western Balkans.

¹ The idea of transmitting some traumatic knowledge of the past persists in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as the idea of transmitting reminiscences of a past ruled by "the pleasure principle" but replaced by the present which is subjected to "the reality principle" (Freud, 1920). The loss of a world governed by immediate gratification is felt as particularly traumatic in the context of a highly demanding reality which requires gratification deferral. However, the idea of the collective dimension of trauma starts to interest social scientists after the First World War and expands with the onset of the Second World War.

2. Target group, setting and main concepts

The respondents group comprises of 30 families of war survivors from Bosnia and Herzegovina of various ethnic and religious background. All survivors have experienced war violence (torture, rape, forced conscription and displacement, imprisonment, mock executions or witnessing these) while their children were born after the war and do not have first-hand experience in war. Children's idea of their parents' past has been first constructed on the basis of what has been shared or kept secret in their immediate family environment, the information from TV, internet and film, and last but not least their school and peer group. At home, children are more often exposed not to their parents' stories about the war, but to their behavior, body language, disabilities, and anxiety-loaded silence with regards to war-related situations. Children therefore re-construct their parents' war experience with the help of their own imagination and dependent on their already internalized knowledge about wars, enemies, heroic death, or battlefields. Sharing war experiences most often takes place either in the context of the regular meetings of the veterans when children are present or while the family is travelling to places that trigger war memories in parents. Children in these situations have the feeling of encountering a lived history since a narrative in first person links to a visual object which is still having the traces of what is being talked about.

For clarity reasons, I am going to briefly denote the main concepts I will be using throughout this paper. I understand trauma as a rupture in experience which represents one's inability to deal with the uncanny. It occurs at the moment when one's most intense anxieties meet reality or in other words, when what has been imagined as threatening finds realization in the actual world. Transmission of trauma represents the process of passing one's traumatic experiences to the peer group (horizontal transmission) or to the next generation (vertical transmission), with the latter being the topic of this paper. Survivors are defined as victims of torture, rape, forced conscription and displacement, imprisonment, and mock executions or witnessing these during the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s where bearing witness is understood as equally traumatic to being the actual victim due to the process of psychological identification of the witness with the victim. I also use the category of memory which provides the basis to understand what is being remembered and why. Memory is viewed as an organizing phenomenon which ensures cohesion and sense of

selfhood. Therefore, parental reluctance to share certain moments of the family history often results in inconsistent identities in children and a controversial tie to their homeland (Cattel and Climo, 2002; Connerton, 1989). The theoretical framework based on psychoanalysis and anthropology informs the research method I use to explore the process of transmission of war experiences. It is composed by a set of techniques used in anthropological fieldwork and psychological research and therapy, and namely the semi-structured interview, the life-story interview (conducted in the mother tongue of the respondents), the participant observation, the genogram (family tree), and children's drawings on a preliminary given topic. In what follows I am going to outline my observations and provide each with an interpretation.

3. Silence, therefore fragmentation

"I am not sure whether you will understand me. I have done things that may now seem not normal in situations which were not normal (M, 40, male)".

"I will tell my son when he is old enough to understand (R, 44, male)".

The selected quotations from interviews with veterans represent in condensed form the parents' attempt - and especially of those who were directly engaged in warfare - to avoid the topic of the war. If asked to tell a story or when provoked by place or event, they tend to communicate fragmented facts such as dates, names, places while avoiding detail and emotion. Although this observation has been already made with regards to many trauma patients, in the specific case of war-related trauma I will single out one particular reason for parents' silence: the controversy of experiences.

Regardless of the fact that the public discourse in each Yugoslav successor state is very clear about who fought whom in the recent wars, soldiers' feelings with regards to their involvement in warfare seem to be controversial. Starting from the clear statement of having gone to the front to protect themselves and their families, they often arrive at a dubious and painful narrative about their actual position during the war. The ambiguity of experiences is most visible in war veterans who were exposed to death on a scale they had not before imagined. During and after the war they seem to have been assigned the role of horror keepers, or in other words they are expected to keep their memories locked because recalling them may have

a devastating effect on the self and the other. In brief, in contrast to women's life-preserving position during the war, men had a more unclear one. Although many of them went to the front in order to protect life – or at least this is what they believed in, they often ended up killing people and witnessing life's destruction. Thus, the heroic narrative has become firmly bound to a horrific one, which is not expected to be shared. Furthermore, at a rational level, veterans' families declare the readiness to listen and understand those who survived horror, but when faced with the reality of the possible answers, they are afraid of what they may hear. The wife of a former soldier answered my question about what she would like to know but had never asked her husband with the following:

"I'd like to know whether he has killed somebody. But I don't dare ask him because I fear my own response to his answer".

Men's (unconscious) uncertainty about the questions "What did I participate in?" and "What had become of me during the war?" gives rise to some unarticulated suspicion in children and wives about what their fathers and husbands may have done and/or witnessed. Consequently, men often spare parts of the narrative. This contributes to a quite fragmented version of the past where the time line is not a continuum, but can be better presented as an interrupted sequel of episodes with gaps between them where events cannot be still plausibly explained and are therefore kept secret. Stories of the war are impossible to tell in a consistent manner also because of the surreal aspect of the experience. Running through a mined field with mines exploding around, surviving after a mass execution or being spared by change in a prison camp are experiences which border the supernatural in respondents' imagination. Incapacity to tell a consistent story is also due to another phenomenon: the feeling that everything was possible and allowed in war. This 'functioning without a framework' is in sharp contrast to what is known as a norm before and after the war and makes life in war look thrilling, surreal and indescribable. Finally, the inability to talk about the war is worsened by many other factors which vary in each individual. For some of the survivors, there is a clash between their private narratives and the public discourse which prevents them from arriving at a plausible version of the past. In other cases, the lack of items which preserve memory such as family albums, toys, gifts, and other objects lost or destroyed in the war widens the blank spots in parents' experience as they do not have any ex-

ternal sites of memory to help them organize their experience. Gaps in memory transmission often make it difficult for children to produce a consistent narrative of their family's past and they need to "invent" parts of it. They must imagine parts of their family history, so to speak, in order to know the world as it looked before they were born.

4. The memories' gender

Men's narratives on the war differ from those of their wives and mothers. Related to their previously discussed more involved position in the warfare, men's narratives often appear to be more fragmented, violent and deprived of emotional reflexivity in comparison to women's stories. Women, on the other hand, can be seen as having the role of life keepers during the war, as they were the ones to supply the home with water and food, organize the daily life, take care of the children and the elderly, and often leave the country in order to rescue themselves and their children. Consequently, women feel more comfortable with talking about the war with their children.² Very often, the result is that the narrative which gets transmitted across generations in a more consistent and transparent manner is the one of the mothers. Their relative ease to talk about the war is reflected in the order family members talk to me with women agreeing to see me first. Fathers' experience is being often communicated through silence, disability, body language, and war jokes. Another significant resource of information for children about the last and previous wars is grandparents since they maintain a close relationship with grandchildren in many Balkan families.

5. Jokes

Jokes and joking occupy a central place in remembering the war and dealing with war-related memories in both men and women. However, men tend to gather with front mates and remember combat situations, while women are more open to share their stories with "outsiders". Veterans' gatherings – formal and informal – are considered of a great importance and front comrades are valued as family members. These gatherings serve the goal of repeating the scene of the war, mostly through jokes. War jokes have become a significant vehicle of handing down the war memories to the next generation in an acceptable form. Jokes and joking with the war serve the goal of

2 This is different when women were victims of war rape. In this specific case, their story seems better organized again but it omits the moment or period of sexual abuse.

avoiding the reality of death and the pure horror aspect of the story. People tell jokes in order not to talk about how traumatized they are and in order to be able to talk about the war without psychologically falling apart. Moreover, the ability to joke is used to prove that one is still alive and able to enjoy life; that one has won against death. Joking with the war betrays the triumph of immortality and omnipotence over the temporary and is therefore used to somehow verify that life during and after the war is possible. Joking is also used as a proof that people can gather together for purposes different from conducting or suffering violence. It shows not only that life has been somehow preserved, but also that participants' humanness has also survived.

6. Self-harm, sexual drive and drug abuse

Following the informants' life histories, one can see that the war acted as an amplifier of earlier problems. Domestic violence in early childhood, later delinquency or alcoholism's impact was often aggravated by the first-hand experience in the war. The war was felt to have been chaotic, unstructured and surreal experience which enabled people transgress their previously established internal boundaries. Whereas these internal boundaries were not very securely established, the war experience linked to previously unresolved issues aggravating their traumatic impact. Three phenomena which could be linked to pre-war traumatic experiences but triggered in war have been most present throughout my interviews: self-harm, an amplified sexual drive and drug abuse.

6. 1. Self-harm

Drawing on previous research on self-harm, primarily in borderline and post-traumatic stress disorder patients, I denote the concept of self-harm as a deliberate bodily self-injury. Most of my respondents, who practiced self-harm, mention self-cutting, burning or scratching while under the effect of alcohol and/or drugs, or when experiencing severe psychic pain. In spite of the fact that many have severely damaged their bodies, none has mentioned the intention to commit a suicide. Self-harm has often taken place as a part of a group game in the combat zone or while dealing with war-related memories in the aftermath of the war. However, most respondents do not feel comfortable while tackling the issue and are very unclear about the reasons for damaging their body. Some have even tried to cover the scars that resulted from the self-injury with a

tattoo. On the basis of my interviews, I advance the hypothesis that people who were not able to deal with mental pain opted for self-harm as a coping mechanism providing relief of intense death-related anxiety. Faced with destruction on everyday basis, soldiers for example practiced self-harm as a way of evoking pain at the bodily level in order to deafen the psychic pain. Second, in situations where everyday life in war has made people callous to disturbing sights and events, self-harm was a way to prove that they were still normal; in other words that they were still able to experience pain, therefore they remained sensitive to the world as they had been before the war. Finally, evoking pain may have had the meaning of checking out whether alive. The more specific aspect of self-harm during the war as told by informants is its group setting. Often performed as a part of a group game, self-harm may have had the role of a symbolical representation of the theatre of the war in a smaller setting where there were victims, perpetrators and witnesses. These games allowed everybody to take all three positions by being the victim, the perpetrator and the witness of his/her own self-harm. I imagine that this served the goal of making sense of the uncanny; explaining an inexplicable reality by putting oneself in each possible position in order to view the world of the war from each possible angle. Finally, self-harm was practiced with a great dose of emotional excitement. I argue that war experiences were perceived on the verge between life and death and were therefore felt to be unexpectedly thrilling. They provided the individual with the feeling of having exercised control over life and death at least for a moment in a context where life and death were actually totally controlled by someone/something else.

6. 2. An amplified sex drive

"There is so much sex in war. It is enough to wear a uniform... You know why? Because you could die at the very next moment (A, male, 43)".

"Once I was the first to make fun of people who got married during the war... And then... I got married myself, one year before the war ended (S, female, 41)".

In this vignette I argue that an amplified sexual drive in war is a response to an aggravated sense of vulnerability and exposure to death. As recent research in hospitals and other (total) institutions shows, the encounter with death, illness and dis-

ability on everyday basis evokes a life-asserting counter-response. The feeling that one could be killed and was not in control of his/her life, the lack of activities to provide meaning in life and the frustration in front of the unknown contributed to an amplified sexual drive. This sexual drive may be a component but is not equal to what was underlying war rape, so the latter is not the topic of this paragraph. The amplified sexual drive in war often took the shape of promiscuity, numerous marriages or the desire to have children in order to oppose meaninglessness in everyday life in war. Heightened libido is explained by male respondents also as a way of proving masculinity which was felt to be essential in combat. Children born during the war are often referred to as saviors and meaning-givers. Sometimes fathers sought demobilization, used to come home regularly or visited the family abroad in order to see their babies. Mothers share that they had someone to live for which fed into their motivation to survive the war. Often children born in the war and immediately after have developed a special connection to one or both parents and have become their "weak point". This special attitude is due to the specific role these children had, and namely showing in the most tangible manner that life could not be entirely destroyed.

6. 3. Drug abuse

A significant part of my male respondents – particularly former soldiers – share experiences of drug addiction after the war. However, some of them have started using soft drugs during the war. In the following paragraph I will link drug addiction to the lack of humanness in war and the possible early experiences of emotional deprivation. As mentioned by some of my informants, drugs were often taken as a way of avoiding emotional pain evoked by flashbacks, nightmares and memories of the war. Drugs were used as a substitute of the feeling of being accepted and unconditionally loved; they can be considered a temporary weapon to fight trauma-related depression.

Following my earlier thought about the war as an amplifier of previous problems, I advance the hypothesis that people with childhood experiences of emotional deprivation may have found it more difficult to deal with horror scenes in war since their capacity to emotionally reflect the world outside has not been properly developed. The difficulty to handle traumatic sights and events in war has often resulted in a delayed response in drug addiction in the aftermath of the war as a way of deafening the psychic pain related to war trauma.

7. Weakened paternal function, strengthened religiosity

In psychoanalytical literature, the function of the father is mostly connected to the establishment of the order through the first external prohibitions the child faces in early development. In later years, the internal censorship or the internalized paternal figure in other words helps sustaining order and law in the wider community. In the post-war environment of Bosnia and Herzegovina, children seem to experience a conflict with regards to the paternal figure. On the one hand, they struggle to imagine their fathers as competent, reliable and moral, but on the other, they are faced with the suspicion about their fathers' debatable morality in war, degradation in captivity and depressive withdrawal in the aftermath of the war. Furthermore, the two basic rules which sustain order in a human community and are therefore in the basis of civilization – the prohibition of murder and incest – have been severely violated during the war namely by men. Killings and rape, although claimed to be done by "the other", often leave the suspicion about one's own father's involvement. This seriously challenges the paternal function in the post-war environment and feeds into the fantasy that transgression of any kind is possible and rarely sanctioned. In fact, those who are meant to sanction were probably the first to transgress. The necessity to provide some framework and establish order seems to find a solution in religiosity. In all three main religious groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina religion is experiencing a revival. I argue that this represents the group dimension of the compensation for the damaged paternal function. It compensates for the collapse of the function of the Father inside the family. There is a pursuit of an external authority to sanction and regulate since at a more intimate family level fathers have failed to sustain the order they had themselves once created in Yugoslav times.

8. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that transmission of memories in the post-war context of Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a clear-cut process. It is marked by fragmentation of history, handicapped sense of selfhood and belonging in children and a crisis of the paternal function in the family. The lack of a consistent and non-controversial reflexion on one's own experiences in the war puts the emphasis on jokes, body language and silence at the expense of a coherent war narrative people could communicate to their children. Children are

exposed to the controversies and inconsistencies both on a family and wider social level. They seem to struggle to make sense of their parents' experience while at the same time trying to protect the parents from re-experiencing psychic pain. In the context of a troubled paternal function and controversy with regards to the past, religion may be seen as an external tool sought by people in order to explain, regulate and sanction.

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Prenošenje traumatičnih iskustava u obiteljima preživjelih u ratu u Bosni i Hercegovini

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Ovaj članak istražuje proces prenošenja ratnih iskustava s roditelja na djecu u suvremenom bosanskom kontekstu. Rad se oslanja na studije u psihoanalizi i kulturnoj antropologiji. Pomoću dubinskih intervjua s obiteljima, obiteljskih stabala i dječjih crteža, pokušavam shvatiti zašto i kako roditelji svoja traumatična sjećanja komuniciraju djeci te kako djeca reagiraju na roditeljsko prisjećanje nedavne prošlosti. Ukratko, tvrdim da roditelji izbjegavaju temu rata, a ovo izbjegavanje je posljedica dvoznačnosti njihovog ratnog iskustva. Drugo, njihova nevoljkost za razgovor o pojedinim dijelovima vlastitog života rezultira u fragmentaciji povijesti te posljedično kod djece stvara fragmentirani osjećaj pripadanja i sebstva. Fragmentacija se također odražava u činjenici da su ratni narativi rodno uvjetovani, što znači da se ženske priče o ratu razlikuju od one njihovih muževa. U većini slučajeva muškarci imaju poteškoća u dijeljenju svojeg ratnog iskustva s vlastitom djecom iz tri glavna razloga. Prvo, ne uspijevaju postići jasni narativ o vlastitom sudjelovanju u ratovanju. Drugo, čini se da im nedostaje jezik kojim bi opisali iskustvo koje osjećaju kao jedinstveno i ponekad nadrealno. Naposljetku, njihove priče se ne poklapaju uvijek sa službeno priznatom inačicom povijesti.

Ključne riječi: ratna trauma, prenošenje trauma, očinska uloga, Bosna i Hercegovina