Between Silence and Storytelling: Intergenerational Transmission of Holocaust Trauma and Identity through Family Education

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Abstract

This paper investigates how traumatic memory, identity, and prejudice are transmitted from one generation to the next by Holocaust survivors in the process of family education. On one hand, the issue of intergenerational transmission of traumatic experiences has been mainly studied in relation to the psychological and biological processes of inheritance by modern scholars, and on the other hand, by concentrating on the micro-process of education within the framework of the family and focusing on the roles of the emotional mechanism and narrative approaches in the process of transmission, this paper presents an in-depth exploration of survivor stories, memoir narratives, and theoretical frameworks, specifically Hirsch's "Post Memory" and "Redemptive Self" by Adaperson, in order to clarify how and in what way the process of "emotional containment, silence, and fragmentation" stands as a unique and specific form of the "Implicit Educational Mechanism" and how and in what way it significantly impacts the descendants' cognition of identity and historical knowledge in relation to the reconstruction of the identities and the construction of intergenerational education in the framework of both "family narratives and cultural narratives in the form of films and other memorial education activities and related phenomena." This paper presents specific guidance for contemporary "Trauma Education and Prejudice Education."

Keywords: Holocaust; family education; traumatic memory; emotional containment; postmemory; identity formation; intergenerational transmission

1. Introduction

The twentieth-century Holocaust is one of the most traumatic events in the history of humanity, resulting in the deaths of millions of Jews, as well as having a profound influence on the spiritual realm and cultural heritage of the Jewish people. This event in Jewish history has transcended the boundaries of time and space, entering the psychological realm of subsequent generations. In the family memories of the survivors and their successors, trauma has gone beyond the boundaries of individual physical or psychological damage, as it has been reconstructed and reproduced through family, educational, or cultural discourses. This process has been explained through Marianne Hirsch's theory of "postmemory," which allows the second or third generations, who have not experienced the trauma personally, to still inherit their ancestors' traumatic experience at a psychological or cultural level.

Nevertheless, in light of the fact that "intergenerational transmission of trauma" has recently been recognized as an important area of academic inquiry, current studies on the issue have thus far been narrowly focused on pathological studies on the individual level of psychological analysis, exploring such problems as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [4]. Although these studies have managed to uncover the long-term effects of trauma on mental health, they have, on the other hand, been rather short on exploring the importance of family education and ordinary emotional interactions in intergenerational trauma. Family, as "the basic unit of culture and emotion," acts as both the conduit for intergenerational transmissions of memory and as "trauma education" in second and third generation Holocaust survivors, who often come to absorb certain distinct emotional logics and historical identifications as a result of family educational and emotional dynamics structured by certain oral and emotional taboos of their parent and grandparent generations' verbal and psychic expressions and avoidance of emotion itself. Research carried out by Johns and colleagues indicated the importance of family communication in second generation Holocaust survivors' Jewish identity and mental health, as open communication was shown to reduce "historical loss" whereas its repression and avoidance lead to emotional disconnection and inner states of anxiety and distress.

Recently, there has been an increased interest in the way the "mechanisms of family narratives" and the associated "cultural memory" influence identity-building and moral consciousness of descendants. From research carried out by Wolf (2019), the descendants of those who survived the Holocaust not only have "pain and fear" with regard to "family narratives" but recreate "family memory" with "positive feelings like humor and warmth," so that the "traumatic memory" becomes diverse forms of "family memory" through the "emotional recoding" of traumatic experiences [7]. Krauskopf and others (2023) find that children not only feel "psychological distress and emotional significance" when they try to learn about the history of their family and form "a reflexive identity" due to the intergenerational responsibility they feel for the family history and identity [8]. Both studies point to the fact that traumatic experiences not only continue with the next generation through family education but are regenerated with the help of "family narratives" and "cultural symbols."

This paper will show that analyzing the topic through the prism of the three dimensions of emotional education, family narratives, and cultural memory will provide a comprehensive understanding of the role the Holocaust plays in constructing the Jewish identity with the passing of time. On the other hand, with the aim of cross-analyzing the two processes of "emotional encapsulation" and "postmemory," this research will provide an approach in understanding that trauma is a multidimensional concept in the psychological field but a cultural practice that continues through the prism of the ‘internalization’ and reconstruction through education.

2. Research Framework

In this regard, the current study extrapolates "family education" to be the primary medium of analysis through which to explore the transfer and transmission of the trauma resulting from the Holocaust, thus attempting to go beyond the confines of conventional psychology and biological approaches to the study of "traumatic legacy." Much analysis on the issue of the transfer of traumatic legacy in relation to the psychology and anxiety levels of descendants of Holocaust survivors [9] has been performed, with suggestions for transfer mechanism strategies via epigenetics, such as the transcription of the gene FKBP5 to post-War stress response, presented in [10]. These, however, mostly relate to pathological expressions on an individual basis, rather than an analysis on a positive form of "educational" family interactions for transfer through generations, which is attempted to be placed in context in the current study.

More specifically, the integration of the literature suggests that this study combines three strands of research. First, it engages the idea of "emotional encapsulation" from emotion theory to identify how the survivors demarcate the narrative parameters of "what can be told" and "what must not be touched" via the selective repression and expression of strong emotions [11]. Second, it uses the theory of "postmemory" from Marianne Hirsch to examine how the next generation rebuild their understanding of the past and identity of belonging via the non-verbal symbolism of silence in the family, pictures, and environments [1]. Finally, it incorporates the thoughts of the sociology of education into the understanding of the family education process as an informal and incessant process of "cultural transmission" via the constitutive power of implicit values and historical consciousness present therein [12].

With regard to the material selection, the current study uses three categories of texts for the analysis. The first category includes survivor narratives, including oral as well as literary texts like the experience narratives of the concentration camps by Walter Frank and Joseph Mandrowitz. The second category would include literary narratives by the next generation born to Jewish survivors, like Edith Eger's The Choice, which provides information on the psychological experiences and family interaction patterns that the next generation goes through during their developmental stages. The last category would include exemplary theoretical texts like the "postmemory" by Hirsch and the "redemptive self" narrative structure by McAdams, among others.

As for the method, this paper employs qualitative analysis methodically with a view to studying significant vocabulary, narrative techniques, and emotions in the aforementioned texts. It also tries to reveal possible mechanisms of educational importance while taking into account the historical contexts involved in the texts themselves. By inter-connecting the disciplines of psychology, memory, and education sociology, this research tries to establish an analytic framework that weaves together culture, education, and emotion into three dimensions in an effort to comprehend, in a holistic manner, the mechanisms through which memory of the Holocaust is carried down through families and their impact on their descendants' sense of identity.

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1Emotional Encapsulation and Coping Mechanisms

"Emotional encapsulation," a product resulting from extreme survival conditions, is one of the fundamental ways in which Holocaust survivors coped with a disaster situation. In his memoir, Walter Frank remembers:

"Closing off his heart" was the way in which he maintained a certain level of mental balance in the camp ("you get even used to that"). In other words, Frank was attempting to repress fear and despair and thus render himself capable of dealing with the daily brutality and starvation with a certain routine-like detachment: a rather deliberate process of emotional numbing in response to an atmosphere full of death.

Frank's testimony also establishes another technique in maintaining hope: his love affair with a Polish Jewish woman in the concentration camp served as his spiritual lifeline in "holding on to life." This "emotional investment" does not negate "emotional encapsulation" but rather explains the complexity of trauma survival: in controlling their emotions, people actively design meaning structures that are basically future-directed. In the context of post-war family education, his survival experience was translated into implicit values like "pragmatic adaptation," "emotional repression," and "finding spiritual solace" that are interpreted by his descendants in non-verbal ways.

The case of Joseph Mandrowitz is a different story. Again, his memories convey his inability to escape from the torture of memories of the concentration camps, car horns giving him terror, and night dreams replete with visions of German soldiers chasing him. He failed to achieve a strong emotional encapsulation, his memories of the trauma coming back to him consistently and severely, reflected in strong PTSD. More importantly, within his family, instead of consolidating memories into an “educational” form, he impacted his offspring in a “disorganized” manner, reflected in his descendants’ “undue alertness to the outside world, increased sensitivity to his descendants’ emotions, and, in some instances, the induction of ‘intergenerational trauma.’”

By comparing these two cases, it has been shown that the difference in trauma processing strategies affects family educational patterns and the descendants' emotional cognitive structures directly. Emotional encapsulation not only has the nature of a psychological response but also has the nature of an intergenerationally extensible foundation for educational language.

3.2. Silence and Fragmented Narration: Implicit Educational Mechanisms of Family Memory

While some survivors readily spoke about their experiences during the Holocaust, a significant number opted for silence, avoidance, or selective storytelling. "Family silence" is not only a protection mechanism for those who have experienced trauma but is, in itself, a unique form of "educational language" in which history and identity anxiety are conveyed to the next generation through ambiguity, tension, and the unspoken.

In her book “The Choice”, Edith Eger confessed that she "chose silence in order to shield her daughter from carrying within herself the pain that I experienced." She continued to write, "I don't know what they are

saying when I am not there. but I can choose my silence" (Eger, 2017). Such silence is partly motivated by love and care, partly by an awareness that "there are things that cannot be expressed in words." Such "not speaking it out loud" creates an inner conflict in the family, which makes children experience "a vague fear and curiosity about 'the past'" that triggers self-inquiry.

As Hirsch has written of “postmemory,” it is “not a remembering but a subsequent creation of images.” The second generation are no mere receivers of this postmemory but are active in constructing images from silence to fragments. This process is clearly no mere psychological operation but also has cultural significance in that it is an educational process in that they increasingly fill their silence with intellectual curiosity in constructing memories through question-answering and reading.

Moreover, the lack of communication or selective storytelling in families can cause a phenomenon known as "identity anxiety" for the next generation. Without the orderly transmission of historical memory, the generation experiences difficulty in incorporating their ethnicity, religiosity, or morality into their historical experiences, easily led astray in their grasp of "who we are and where we come from." In the case of Jewish families who immigrated because of the war, this phenomenon becomes a crucial psychological basis for the construction of prejudice consciousness and defensive identity.

3.3 Public Culture and Family Education: Reconstruction of Postmemory via Different Channels

In post-war Jewish families, family histories are not strictly a comprehensive source for memory. Over time, there is a gradual intervention on the part of public culture: films, television programs, education in schools, museums, commemorative ceremonies, which eventually become a significant channel for children to cognize history and rebuild identities. Public stories not only impinge upon receiving family histories but also generate a "reciprocal educational mechanism" with respect to silence and memory within families.

This process can be seen, for example, in the cinematic version of "the Holocaust" in the motion picture "Schindler's List," creating "the Holocaust" as a historical event that carries the narrative filigree of "survival—rebirth—assuming memorial responsibility." The "redemptive narrative" within the realm of public culture, as outlined by Dan McAdams, has given way, in turn, to the "redemptive self" found within American culture, where individuals work to reconstruct life meaning via suffering. The second-generation survivor would certainly integrate parental silence and suffering into "survival—rebirth—assuming memorial responsibility."

It is especially important to note that the impact of public culture is not one-way in effect. What children bring to their families in response to Holocaust knowledge in school or social commemorative practice are often questions, and "inward inquiry" necessarily drives parents to recall, to tell, or to heighten avoidance. This reveals that the field of family education is not closed but rather an open field in dynamic interaction with external structures of memory in public culture.

"Family silence" becomes "public retelling" and then "family dialogue" in a socialized educational journey through traumatic memory. The transmission of history and the formation of identity through family

education is exactly the repetitive movement between "family and society" in which the cultural identification and prejudice defense mechanisms are established for generations of Jewish descendants.

4. Conclusion

The Holocaust is one of the most extreme cases of group trauma in history, extending beyond the painful memories of Holocaust survivors to establish a continuous educational mechanism within families. From the concept of "family education," this paper will demonstrate that, in the process of intergenerational trauma transmission, silence and cultural narrative do not remain passive but instead develop a complex educational mechanism that significantly influences the formation of identity and prejudice perceptions in the next generation.

By examining the methods of "emotional encapsulation" devised and utilized in extremely difficult conditions by those affected, it becomes clear that these psychological processes not only provide an emotional safeguard for survival but evolve into a composed and pragmatic model of a family teaching language. The differing cases of Walter Frank and Joseph Mandrowitz illustrate how different methods of trauma recovery correlate closely with different models of a family teaching system, and varying degrees of their descendants' emotional structures and their capacity for emotional expression.

The universality of the phenomenon of silence and the fragmented form of storytelling in the family not only symbolizes the survivors' defiance of difficult memories but also allows for the descendants to occupy the terrain of imagination to recreate history. Indeed, the concept of "postmemory" theory reveals that the descendants, without personal experience of the trauma and pain of the previous generation, are able to contribute to the "construction of historical memory" not only through environmental atmosphere and symbolic materials but through the form of the fragmented narrative itself. The phenomenon of identity anxiety and the exploration of morality and the responsibility to culture that often ensues becomes a "hidden curriculum" in the education system of the family. Indeed, the case of Edith Eger illustrates that silence itself becomes an educational phenomenon that generates a conflict between shielding and hiding that pushes the descendants to delve deeply into the history of the family. The presence of public culture has led to a feedback effect on the family educational process. Films, television works, and collective ceremonies serve as knowledge and emotional resources for descendants, allowing them to make sense out of historical experience and construct narratives about personal identity. This “outside-to-inside” influence of culture leads to dialogue and re-narrative in the family, causing the family memory to be constantly rebuilt through social interactions and educational processes. The “redemptive self” paradigm within public narratives has given descendants a cultural blueprint for interpreting and connecting family tragedies, promoting the productive exchange between family education and social education.

To conclude, the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory is far more than a psychological or physiological process; in effect, it is a family ritual rich with cultural and educational meaning. “The educational languages of Holocaust families—silence, emotional encapsulation, or re-narrative—are essential to the process of resistant forgetting and the transmission of identity as a means of understanding prejudice.” This comprehension of the process helps us further understand the “historical trauma” process and achieve theoretical reference and insights concerning prejudice education and trauma education.

The study's limitation lies in its focus on textual analysis. Future studies could delve deeper into the variety of these family educational mechanisms or the transformation process of memories through generations, which might include the third or fourth generations, in gaining more insight into the continuity mechanism of family memories. Another area could involve comparative studies, which may cover family educational patterns among various groups, such as war or genocide victims.

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