



Living in “survival mode:” Intergenerational transmission of trauma from the Holodomor genocide of 1932–1933 in Ukraine



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ABSTRACT

Qualitative methodology was used to investigate the intergenerational impact of the 1932–1933 Holodomor genocide on three generations in 15 Ukrainian families. Each family, residing in Ukraine, consisted of a first generation survivor, a second generation adult child and a third generation adult grandchild of the same line. The findings show that the Holodomor, a genocide that claimed millions of lives by forced starvation, still exerts substantial effects on generations born decades later. Specifically, thematic analysis of the 45 semi-structured, in-depth interviews, done between July and November 2010, revealed that a constellation of emotions, inner states and trauma-based coping strategies emerged in the survivors during the genocide period and were subsequently transmitted into the second and third generations. This constellation, summarized by participants as living in “survival mode,” included horror, fear, mistrust, sadness, shame, anger, stress and anxiety, decreased self-worth, stockpiling of food, reverence for food, overemphasis on food and overeating, inability to discard unneeded items, an indifference toward others, social hostility and risky health behaviours. Since both the family and community-society were found to be involved in trauma transmission, the findings highlight the importance of multi-framework approaches for studying and healing collective trauma.

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1. Introduction

Our current understanding of intergenerational transmission of trauma comes from research with collective trauma survivors and their descendants from studies of the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, the second world war (WWII) internment of Japanese-Americans and the colonization of Indigenous peoples. This research suggests that the impacts of collective trauma are passed down from generation to generation and, therefore, affect not only survivors, but their descendants at the levels of the individual, family and community-society (Evans-Campbell, 2008). As such, in order to accommodate the complex sequelae of collective trauma and its intergenerational impacts, multi-level frameworks that include the individual, family, and community-society have been proposed for the study and healing of collective trauma (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Kirmayer et al., 2014). Such multi-level

perspectives are also important for healing traumatized children (Pat-Horenczyk et al., 2014).

At the level of the individual, children of Holocaust survivors have reported fear and mistrust (Rowland-Klein and Dunlop, 1997), depressive mood (Major, 1996), and guilt related to their personal happiness (Bar-On et al., 1998) and parents' experiences (Wiseman et al., 2006) as intergenerational impacts. Third generation studies have shown that grandchildren of Holocaust survivors had higher state and trait anger, perceived others negatively (Iliceto et al., 2011) and themselves less positively, and were rated by their peers as having lower socio-emotional functioning (Scharf, 2007). Descendants of Armenian genocide survivors reported shame (Karenian et al., 2010), while Aboriginal Canadians with parental and grandparental history within the residential school system had increased suicidal thoughts and attempts (Elias et al., 2012).

Pertaining to the family level, adult children of Holocaust survivors reported parent-child enmeshment (Rowland-Klein and Dunlop, 1997), overprotective parenting (Bar-On et al., 1998; Rowland-Klein and Dunlop, 1997) and parent-child role-reversal (Bar-On et al., 1998) as intergenerational impacts. Compared to their counterparts with one or no parent from a Holocaust survivor

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family, grandchildren, with both parents being offspring of Holocaust survivors, had more ambivalent styles of attachment and less accepting parents who did not encourage autonomy (Scharf, 2007). In terms of family communication, offspring of survivors of both the Holocaust (Kav-Venaki et al., 1983) and Japanese-American WWII internment (Nagata and Cheng, 2003) reported little intra-familial conversation about the traumatic events. In addition, Aboriginal Canadians viewed family violence, child abuse and lack of parental nurturing as impacts of intergenerational trauma, stemming from the residential school system experience (Ball, 2010).

Intergenerational trauma is also posited to affect the community-society via loss of culture, values and way of life. However, the impacts on this level are understudied and, hence, less well understood (Evans-Campbell, 2008).

Overall, while many studies have shown adverse intergenerational impacts of collective trauma, some have not. For instance, adult daughters, unlike their Holocaust survivor mothers, did not exhibit a lack of resolution of trauma or signs of traumatic stress (Sagi-Schwartz et al., 2003). Also, as noted by Sagi-Schwartz et al. (2008), other research found little evidence of psychopathology in adult children of Holocaust survivors (van Ijzendoorn et al., 2003), except when confronted with life-threatening situations such as serious illness (Baider et al., 2000) or military combat (Solomon et al., 1988).

While psychodynamic, social learning and biological perspectives (Kellerman, 2001) have individually been proposed as transmission mechanisms, the family has often been viewed as the vehicle for intergenerational transmission (Rowland-Klein and Dunlop, 1997; Wiseman et al., 2006). Dedicated to unravelling the interplay between social and biological forces, the emerging field of epigenetics postulates that social experiences, including familial ones, result in epigenetic changes that affect an individual's genetic expression, in-utero, during early development, and throughout the life course. This field further hypothesizes that epigenetic changes are heritable and “may serve as a cellular memory” (Champagne, 2010, p. 570) of human experiences that also shape the neurodevelopment, behaviours, and the health and well-being of future generations (Champagne, 2010). In the context of intergenerational transmission of trauma, epigenetics may provide a framework to understand how survivor families are affected by complex transgenerational trajectories, stemming from their experiences with collective trauma.

This Canadian study examined the impact of collective trauma experiences, stemming from the 1932–1933 Holodomor genocide of Ukrainians, on the survivor generation and their adult children and grandchildren. A brief overview of the Holodomor is presented for context. The Holodomor was a Soviet-Russian orchestrated genocide (Naimark, 2010) devised to kill and subdue ethnic Ukrainians and destroy their culture and aspiration of statehood, as separate from the Soviet Union (Kliid and Motyl, 2012). Beginning in the late 1920s and continuing into the 1930s, Stalin ordered the mass arrest and execution of Ukrainian political leaders, academics/intellectuals, writers, linguists, artists, singers, students, clergy and lawyers (Conquest, 1986). During this period, Ukrainian uprisings against the Soviet-Russian regime occurred (Conquest, 1986; Mace, 1986), but by this time much of the nation's intelligentsia and leadership, capable of mobilizing a revolt, had been arrested or executed (Conquest, 1986).

Then, in 1932–1933, Stalin and his chief architects, Lazar Kaganovich and Viacheslav Molotov orchestrated a genocide against the Ukrainian people (Kliid and Motyl, 2012). With the goal of starving Ukrainians, Stalin directed confiscation of harvests and foods in Ukraine. Watch towers were erected across the Ukrainian countryside to prevent the population from accessing food supplies (Conquest, 1986). In addition, blockades and travel restrictions

prevented Ukrainians from searching for food (Marples, 2012). Exact death tolls are uncertain, as Stalin displeased with census data from Ukraine after the genocidal period, ordered the execution of the lead census takers (Subtelny, 2009) and subsequently suppressed the data (Conquest, 1986). However, estimates of death tolls (Conquest, 1986; Maksudov, 1986) from starvation of Ukrainians range from 3 to 6 million (Subtelny, 2009). In addition, millions more were shot or deported by cattle cars to Siberian concentration camps where they perished (Conquest, 1986). Even though referred to as one of the most horrible events of the twentieth century, the Holodomor is not well known as the Soviet regime denied its occurrence (Conquest, 1986). The Ukrainian word Holodomor, meaning “murder by hunger” (Kliid and Motyl, 2012, p.xxix), has been adopted by western writers and academics to define the genocide of Ukrainians.

The objective of this study was to investigate whether potential trauma, stemming from the Holodomor, continues to exert an intergenerational impact. A qualitative thematic analysis was used to explore how first, second and third generation Ukrainians perceived the impact of the Holodomor on their lives. As far as we know, this is the first study to investigate the intergenerational transmission of trauma stemming from the Holodomor in Ukraine and to examine this genocide from a social science perspective.

2. Method

Interviews were conducted with families comprising a grandparent survivor, an adult child, and an adult grandchild of the same line. This approach allowed for comparison between the three generations to answer our research question: how does potential trauma, stemming from the Holodomor, continue to exert an intergenerational impact? All interviews were conducted in Ukraine in the Ukrainian language. Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for thematic analysis were used. Specifically, patterns in the data were identified to help answer the research question, themes were identified to represent the data, themselves, as opposed to fitting a preselected theory, and themes were not prioritized according to their prevalence in the data.

2.1. Participants

Forty five participants ($M_{age} = 58.1$ years, 64.4% women, age range: 22–91 years) were selected to represent three successive generations, belonging to 15 families. Each family consisted of a first generation survivor, a second generation adult child and a third generation adult grandchild of the same line. Although gender balance was attempted during recruitment, 87% of the first generation participants were female. Given that the average life expectancy for men in Ukraine is 62.3 years (United Nations [UN], 2012), a higher ratio of females to males was anticipated for first generation participants. Of the second and third generations, combined, 53% were female and 47% were male.

The average age of the first generation participant was 86.4 years (Min = 82.2, Max = 91.0). On average, the survivors were 8–9 years of age during the 1932–1933 period. Eighty percent of the first generation participants had lost approximately 3 family members to the Holodomor genocide. Fifty three percent of the first generation participants had not completed elementary or high school; 13% had finished high school and 33% had a bachelor level post-secondary education. All of the first generation participants were retirees and many had worked as teachers or communal farm workers. Most (80%) of the first generation participants were widowers or widows.

The average age of the second generation participant was 57.6 years (Min = 51.6, Max = 65.2). The majority (87%) of the second generation obtained a minimum of a bachelor-level university

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