

Short communication

Children and Women in the Context of Trans-generational Trauma: Does Armed Conflict Lead to Trauma or does Trauma Lead to Armed Conflict?

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My observations

I started my career in 1979 EC as a graduate assistant in Asmara University at about 22 years of age. I joined civil servants by then who were donating to the government one month of their salary divided into 12 months in response to the infamous “Call of the Motherland”. Nearly 34 years later, as full professor in my middle years, I have come to meet another “Call of this Motherland” again in 2013 EC. Those who were guerilla fighters by then were able to seize government power and enjoyed it nearly for 27 years until such time that they were chased out to the old status three years ago. However, the discourse remains unchanged: Everything for the same cause, for the same war in the north; the parties are the same, the location is the same, the fighters are the same; except for the drone. Now, I realized again that going another 30 years back in history was yemegistunewaygirgir (MengistuNeway’s Protest) where a lot of people were killed because of the 1955 coup d’état attempt. You can continue tracing saga of events going back in the history of Ethiopia at regular 30 to 35 years intervals.

My views of history

For me, this is like history repeating itself. I would not go by the common proverb “Those who don’t learn from history are doomed to repeat it”. I rather go for my own adage “Those who learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” As a student of psychology, I would say history is not a teacher to learn from, it is a student that needs to be taught/ educated, it is not

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a doctor that can prescribe medicine to the patient, but it is a patient that needs treatment itself. In apparently contradictory fashion to commonsense, I, from a psychological perspective, consider history as a bad master that enslaves humanity than a good teacher at least in the Ethiopian scene. Even from a global perspective, no wonder that the world hasn't learned anything from the two wars and is now in the verge of getting into the third one; believe me, there will not be World War IV because you will not be having survivors from the third one, if it happens.

I am neither blaming history nor praising it; I am simply trying to conduct a non-political psychological analysis to bring to light what history has for us and how we need to deal with it.

How my argument is organized

My argument is of course based on scientific research that proves in the end that our social savvy, call it commonsense, that holds the view that “only true forgiveness and reconciliation ensures peace” is indeed valid. In pursuit of this idea, I will try to deliberately avoid the circularity of our argument with respect to the above question and will present my case in support of the second question, “trauma leads to armed conflict?” Then finally, I will briefly show how to break the cycle of human suffering attributed to armed conflict by treating the past.

No question about psychosocial impact of armed conflict

One of the fundamental cosmic disorders of the modern era is a making of war. In five thousand years of civilized human history, more than five thousand wars were fought (Sigh, 2005), excluding the non-state, small and local wars. We are now then in era of ‘violent social order’ (Chandra, 2005) where violence, poverty and injustice reinforce one another ultimately perpetuating human suffering and psychological trauma.

But the question is “why children and women are paying the bill?”

When the elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers. Armed conflicts in any of its forms bear special delirious effect on women and children. It is commonly said that "older men declare war. The youth fight the war. And, women and children pay the bill."

Although the perilous conditions children experience in war zones are often discussed in isolation from the women who nurture and care for them, the impact of armed conflict on children and women needs to be understood in relational terms; not in isolation from one another (McKay, 1998) for the obvious reason that whenever there is one, there is always the other all the time under normal circumstances.

In the context of war, they both are called “helpless victims of war” (Elbedour, Bensef, and Bastien, 1993), the “collaterally damaged” population (Elbedour, Bensef, and Bastien, 1993, p. 806), ultimate symbolic humiliation of the male enemy (Seifert, 1993), the worst side of militarism (Hynes, 2003), and the double disability group, particularly women (Gardam, 1997) etc.

Armed conflict on children and women also share similar impacts in the sense that both of them transcend from being individual to generational in nature; the difference being slightly on which generation the impacts tend to unfold themselves on. While impacts on children are impacts on future generations, those on women are impacts on present generation as well.

Although not in the scope of this speech to talk about psychosocial impacts of war, we may need to underscore that war-induced dislocations have myriad repercussions including economic deprivations, pervading sense of anxiety, despondence, and lack of security. Extreme forms of psychosocial reaction are called trauma, which is characterized by emotional instability resulting in personal and social malfunctioning of the child (Save the

Children, 1997). Trauma is an emotional shock, producing long-lasting, harmful effects on the individual (APA, <https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma>). It is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Shock and denial typical follow the trauma event. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea (APA, <https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma>).

While all kinds of trauma may not translate into a disorder (PTSD), evidences, however, indicate that untreated trauma become intergenerational (Franco, 2021).

What is trans-generational trauma?

Intergenerational trauma (sometimes referred to as trans-generational, multigenerational, historical, collective trauma..) is defined as trauma that gets passed down from those who directly experience an incident to subsequent generations (Franco, 2021). It may begin with a traumatic event affecting an individual, or multiple family members, or a larger community, or an ethnic group or other groups/populations (historical trauma) (Franco, 2021).

Intergenerational trauma was first identified among the children of Holocaust survivors (Fossion, Rejas, Servais, Pelc, Hirsch, 2003), but recent research has identified intergenerational trauma among other groups such as indigenous populations in North America and Australia (Aguiar, W. & Halseth, 2015). In 1988, one study showed that children of Holocaust survivors were overrepresented in psychiatric referrals by 300% (Sigal, Dinicola & Buonvino, 1988). The subjects were selected based on having at least one parent or grandparent who was a survivor (Franco, 2021).

When trauma attacks the core of a person's identity, it brings demeaning to life to an individual. Systematic attacks on a person or group's identity, such as the Holocaust are particularly damaging because identity and tradition are essential to perceived meaning in life

(Franco, 2021). It is literally impossible for people to live without feeling specific meaning securely connected in their life (Frankl, 1984). Recovery from such trauma requires the restoration of morale, identity, and purpose.

What are the mechanisms of transmission of intergenerational trauma?

While the existence of intergenerational trauma is well documented in multiple studies across several cultures, the mechanisms of transmission of intergenerational trauma remain unclear (Franco, 2021). Obviously explanations can't be out of environmental and biological explanations.

Consider environmental as a mechanism: parenting accounting for the phenomenon of intergenerational trauma(Franco, 2021)

Trauma's Effects on Parents: Parents may transmit inborn genetic vulnerabilities triggered by their own traumatic experience or via parenting styles that have been impacted by their trauma (Bowers & Yehuda, 2016). Survivors face many challenges when they are parents, including difficulty bonding to and creating healthy emotional attachments with their children.

Effects on Children: Children experience and understand the world primarily through direct caregivers and are, therefore, profoundly affected by their parents' modeling. Children both mimic their parents' behaviors and learn to navigate future relationships based on how they learned to relate to their parents. Enduring coping mechanisms may be forged out of efforts to avoid and/or "fix" a parent's abusive behavior, anger, depression, neglect, or other problematic behaviors.

Consider the role of biology as a mechanism: The role of epigenetics in intergenerational transmission of trauma (Franco, 2021)

Maternal stress and trauma are associated with health consequences for both mother and child, including low birth weight, fetal growth, and preterm delivery (Dunkel-Schetter, Wadhwa, Stanton, 2000). The effect of maternal stress and trauma translate into additional risks for the infant later in life, including hypertension, heart disease, Type II diabetes mellitus, and even cancer (Barker, 1998).

Epigenetics refers to the study of heritable changes in gene expression in response to behavioral and environmental factors that do not change the underlying DNA sequence. In other words, epigenetics is the study of inherited changes in phenotypical properties without a difference in the inherited genetic makeup (Franco, 2021). Recent studies demonstrate that traumatic events can induce genetic changes in the parents, which may then be transmitted to their children with adverse effects (Yehuda & Bierer, 2009).

In 2005, a study conducted to better understand the relationship between the PTSD symptoms of women exposed to the World Trade Center collapse on September 11, 2001, and their infant children's cortisol levels found lower cortisol levels both in the mothers and their babies (Yehuda, et al., 2005). Cortisol is a hormone released through the adrenal gland which helps regulate stress response. These findings speak to the importance of factoring epigenetic effects into our evolving understanding of how posttraumatic effects may be transmitted across generations (Yehuda, et al., 2005).

Take away lessons for mental health professionals treating intergenerational trauma
(Franco, 2021)

Franco (2021) holds that intergenerational trauma may be transmitted through parenting behaviors, changes in gene expression, and/or other pathways that we have yet to understand fully. These may be biological, social, psychological, and/or a mixture of all three. As we trace these modes of transmission, practitioners will be better able to match interventions to

specific factors that either propagate traumatic effects across generations or mitigate against their transmission. When someone or group says “I am hurt”, then don’t reply saying this is a lie; rather be ready to hear more about your partner about it, and then ask what you can do to help in the end...if we don’t listen to and try to figure out how to help other people with trauma of war and armed conflict, then we are one step prepared to bring atrocities in the future that are even worse than the present one.

Culturally-Mindful Interventions can also help to treat intergenerational trauma when it was associated with substance use disorder among. A vital element in this approach is reclaiming and recovering one’s original identity, including traditions, philosophies, and practices, and adapting them to current circumstances and needs. Programs that enhanced identity through cultural affiliations, increased cultural awareness through healing circles and family involvement, and were strongly influenced by traditional spirituality contributed significantly to decreases in substance use, domestic violence (which are often associated with substance use), and an overall increase in individual and communal healing (Coholic, Cote-Meek, et al., 2015).

Finally, it may be okay to continue responding to the “Call of Motherland” for various other motives as well; but we can’t afford to continue sacrificing the generation of Ethiopians every 30 years or so. We need to conduct intervention that needs to heal intergenerational trauma including the recent one that followed the war in the north. We need to specifically target the vectors of trauma (children and women) to quell this intergenerational trauma and liberate the next generation from enslavement of historical trauma. One such approach that proved to be valid and viable both in scientific research and commonsense holds that “only true forgiveness and reconciliation” ensure win-win solutions for all parties and quell transmission of trauma from one generation to another. Anything less than love, be it winning or losing, can only cause human suffering in the end than healing.

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