

READER'S FORUM

Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma: Guilt, Shame, and the "Heroic Dilemma"

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The idea of shame or guilt being transmitted from one generation to the next is closely linked to trauma and culture. In this article, I first consider the psychoanalytic perspective on transgenerational transmission of trauma (TTT) and then explore three emotional states of mind—shame, pride and dignity—which play such a large part in managing this problem. There are various perspectives on TTT in the literature—prominent being those of Volkan (2002), Faimberg (2005), and Kogan (1995)—whose definitions of it overlap considerably. The central point in these formulations is that the traumatic experiences of one generation can be transmitted *unconsciously* to the second, and often third generation, in some fashion, such that these children and grandchildren find themselves living out—in their private or professional lives—certain aspects of the original traumata in a way that they

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cannot recognize or understand because the origins are hidden. The authors seem to agree that if the original experiences were made conscious, later unconscious repetition would be less severe or may even disappear entirely. One might speculate, although we have little evidence for this, that if the first generation of survivors was able to communicate its experiences and its suffering in a coherent and meaningful way to its children, that TTT would not occur. However, as authors like Primo Levi (1986) or Kertesz (1992) have discussed, this may be an almost impossible achievement, since it means imposing clarity and meaningfulness on actions that are so barbaric as to transcend the borders of normal experience.

There are two main questions here: (1) how survivors might unconsciously transmit such traumatogenic experiences to their descendants and (2) how they are recovered, construed, or reconstructed in the course of therapy of those in the second and third generations. Gampel (1986) and Kogan (1995) consider that parents unconsciously exploit their children through a massive process of projective identification to contain the mourning and aggression that they would otherwise have had to feel themselves and which might have made them self-destructive. This notion is consistent with Grubrich-Simitis's (1984) idea of *concretization*, a failure of symbolization; Because the parents in the first generation can find no metaphors, no symbolic, language-based way of expressing or communicating what happened to them, their experiences become a kind of concrete "thing" inside the child or grandchild that cannot be discussed. In a similar way, Faimberg (2005) talks of "the telescoping of generations," and Volkan (2002) speaks to the transmission of *group* experiences, or, perhaps more exactly, of fantasies about what happened to the whole social group.

GUILT, SHAME AND REPARATION

It is important here to differentiate the sense of shame from that of guilt, specifically survivor guilt, as posited by Niederland (1968) and taken up by Wardi (1992) and others. Guilt is more an *ob-*

ject-related feeling, less exclusively connected to the self-image or the sense of identity. With guilt the focus is on the feelings and thoughts of survivors (or later, in their children) that they remained alive while others, perhaps more worthy than themselves, had been murdered, so that their lives are owed to the deaths of others. Survivors of this kind of trauma may also feel that they had failed to save the lives of those who were near and dear to them, and rather escaped themselves. Also, they may indeed have had to do things in order to survive, which their conscience could not otherwise countenance. This guilt cannot be easily resolved just by pointing out that it is incommensurable with what they themselves were forced to suffer—the patients know this—but it can be alleviated through the processes of mourning and reparation.

Mourning is the working through of all of the conflicting emotions connected with the lost object and the lost relation, basically a process of re-membering, putting the various members of a disjointed body back together. As such, it is connected with reparation, trying to make good in some way what has been damaged or destroyed. In this context, Wardi (1992) identifies specific family members in the second generation as “memorial candles.” These are the children who are committed to reparation, to reading about the Holocaust, to remembering, perhaps to writing about it, while denial is often encouraged in their siblings, who are thus presumably freed for the future for having nothing to do with the traumata of the past. Hermann Hesse once wrote: “Next to the need to remember, mankind has no greater hunger than to forget” (1932), and in survivor families both of these tendencies are often present in extreme fashion and are subject to being split off from each other.

Shame, being more connected to the self than to the object, is often harder to overcome than guilt. It is not negotiable, since there is no one to whom amends can be made. Shame has to do with how we see ourselves and how we could be seen by others, and it can be every bit as devastating as guilt, but without any possibility for mourning or reparation, of making good what has been damaged or destroyed.

The problem of shame is that it antedates guilt as a much more primitive affect. As Freud articulated, in his essay on *Mourning and Melancholia* (1916), guilt and mourning depend on the establishment of psychic structure in the individual, for instance, in the differentiation between ego and superego as internal agents. However, the experience of being shamed usually occurs as a social and relational event before such a clear internal psychic structure has been built up in the infant. It can indeed become an unpleasant impetus toward establishing an early feeling of separate individual subjectivity and responsibility in the small child. The very young child may seem perfectly secure in his/her sense of collective belonging—to the mother, to the family unit—until he/she is first confronted with the experience of being shamed, as when the parent scolds the child by saying “What have you done? You should be ashamed of yourself!” At this moment the child is ejected from the undifferentiated sense of belonging and sees him/herself as capable of good and evil acts. Through this experience of being shamed he/she now also has something about which to be guilty.

The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard (1980), in his essay on the concept of anxiety, grasped this clearly when he discussed the question of Original Sin. The paradox, as he sees it, is that Adam knew nothing of Good and Evil before he ate the apple. He only learned of this after having eaten the forbidden fruit, so that his decision to eat the apple was in fact innocent, utterly devoid of guilt. Nonetheless God punished him as if he were guilty, which is hardly consummate with divine justice. So in this myth we can see the tragedy of childhood—children are punished even before they know the difference between good and bad. It is through this primal injustice, through being undeservedly shamed, through becoming, in a certain sense, an “outcast,” that the child begins to learn about what is good and what is bad. What is “bad” about oneself is initially apprehended by the child as something which has made the parents behave ‘badly’ towards him/her.

We speak of wanting to “sink into the ground for shame.” Shame is indeed felt as a death of the self, and how are we to raise the dead? Since this cannot be done by reparation, the first re-

course may be to a manic reaction involving some kind of grandiose defense. As Freud (1921) and later Kohut (1971) have argued, self-inflation is one of the major and necessary primitive defenses against feelings of infantile helplessness and destabilization of the self-image. What interests us in this context is how such a defense is mobilized against the helplessness of a generationally transmitted trauma.

SHAME, DENIAL AND PRIDE

I offer two brief examples of this defense against shame, one specifically individual, the other a group reaction. The first is Sigmund Freud's own recollection, in his dream-book (1900), of hearing, as a 12-year-old child, how his father as a young man was walking in the streets of Vienna when a stranger began to insult him with anti-Semitic remarks and threw Sigmund's father's hat into the gutter. Freud describes his deep feelings of identification with his father's plight not as guilt, which he could hope to repair or make good, but as a shameful humiliation that could only be countered by grandiose fantasies—leading, we may surmise, to Freud's identifications with such historical Semitic leader-figures as Moses and Hannibal.

The second example is the collective reaction of Israeli society to the influx of Holocaust survivors after the war. It is well documented that the predominant reaction was one of shame. Such survivors were often not asked about their experiences in the extermination camps or were not willing to talk about them, since this did not agree with the nation-building pride of the previous pioneering generation of Zionists and the self-confidence or even self-idealization necessary to fight and win the War of Independence.

These vignettes highlight the pattern of a reaction formation: an initial affect of shame, of an abasement of the self, which is then denied and counteracted by pride, an aggrandizement of the self for defensive purposes. This sequence is nothing specific to the Jews; we need only think of other discriminated minorities, who in

reaction to a history of humiliation and scorn, designed for themselves such slogans as “Black Pride” or “Gay Pride.” Indeed some theorists on the recent waves of Islamic terrorism and self-aggrandizement see this as the result of a long and general humiliation of the Arab world in recent history, made explosive by the particular fate of the Palestinian people. The shame at their defeat in 1948 had been nourished by years spent in refugee camps in Arab countries that refused to give them citizenship or integrate them into their societies, thus not allowing them even their basic human dignity.

Some events in my own personal history may help to illustrate how feelings of shame and identity confusion could be transgenerationally transmitted. During the student rebellions in Western Europe in 1968, I was an active participant. I remember demonstrating in Frankfurt in 1970 and wearing a Palestinian kefiyah round my neck like many others there, protesting against the still-present Nazi influence on German society and the Israeli treatment of Palestinians *almost as though they were the same thing!*

It was only two years later, in Munich, with the ruthless assassination of Israeli athletes at the Olympic Games, carried out under the orders of Arafat, that I felt shame at what I had done and began to dissociate myself from those former connections. I originally thought that I had been protesting about purely political ideology, about oppression in its broadest sense, and had not realized the dimensions of my own family heritage and Jewish background. This made me recollect how, as a child in London, where my parents had fled from Hitler’s regime in Austria and Germany, I had asked my parents about the Holocaust and how it had affected my family. Both of my parents came from assimilated families whose members had been baptised as Christians for three generations, and both said that they were, or felt, in no way Jewish, that they had gone into exile for purely political reasons because of their intellectual opposition to the Nazis.

This was, of course, denial, at least on my mother’s part, since according to the Nuremberg race laws, she and her parents, who had fled the country after her, would no doubt have been exter-

minated. She told me that I should not consider myself in any way involved with Jews or Judaism, that this had nothing to do with our exile, and that no one in the family had suffered under the Nazis, all had escaped persecution. It was only 40 years later, after her death, that I discovered among her private papers an official document stating that her own grandmother had been deported to Terezin (Theresienstadt) and killed there. So here was denial, in the generation before, and I had repeated this mechanism of denial. It seemed to me that the shame I felt so dramatically after the Munich terror attacks was connected to a sense of shame that my mother had always felt about her Jewish identity—she would have preferred to be an integrated member of Austrian Roman Catholic society. Like many assimilated middle-class Jews in pre-war Vienna she had felt initially more threatened by the influx of poorer Orthodox Jews from Poland and Galicia who so obviously, through their manner of dress and their speaking of Yiddish, attracted the anti-Semitism that could ultimately destroy her own tolerated status.

THE SECOND GENERATION OF VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS

In the ongoing therapy groups that I conduct in Austria today it is almost inevitable that among the participants there will be children both of victims and of perpetrators of the Holocaust. For the descendents of the victims the greatest shame will usually be in talking about what they had suffered at the hands of their traumatized parents, many of whom showed symptoms of uncontrollably violent or humiliating behavior toward their children. Whether or not we consider this as the defence mechanism of "identification with the aggressor," to use Anna Freud's term (1936), there seems little doubt that home life could often manifest aspects of a concentration camp regime. It sounds like a joke when, in one of Woody Allen's films, a Jewish parent turns on his child with the remark "What are you doing to me? You are worse than Hitler!" However, in fact in some survivor families, this sort of thing is

quite common and no joke at all. There can be enormous inhibitions in telling the group about the hatred toward the parents that such memories arouse. Shame over betraying the way that these parents behaved is very strong in front of other non-Jewish group members who expect one to be only empathic and deeply sympathetic with one's suffering and traumatized parents.

Conversely, the difficulties of the children of Nazi perpetrators are very hard to understand for the Jewish group members, who may either scapegoat them or instead hasten to say: "You don't have to feel guilty about it, it was not you but your parents who did these things to my family, and it is not you who are to blame!" Such remarks are supposed to be comforting or reassuring but usually miss the point, since it is not guilt that is the problem, but an enormous sense of shame that can often only be worked through by a courageous attempt to uncover as much of the buried parental history as possible. Through this active process of examination and analysis, a kind of dis-identification with the parents is made possible, but it is an exceedingly painful process.

We have discussed shame as a reaction of the self to humiliation by others, and also to actions perpetrated by one's own self, both of which can strongly disturb the sense of identity. Transmission of shame (and its denial) to the next generation has affected not only the children of Jewish survivors but also children of German or Austrian Nazi perpetrators. We have also suggested that in certain identity problems there is a kind of false pride that is a defense against a sense of shame and does not really help in the long run. In contrast we can look at a third possibility, the sense of dignity.

HUMAN DIGNITY

The concept of basic human dignity—or more accurately the basic dignity of being an ordinary human being—has been a problem for the Jews in Europe ever since they emerged from the ghettos, and the Holocaust experience has made it seem almost unattainable. Shame and pride seem to alternate and oscillate in the Jewish post-war identity to such an extent that if we are Jewish, if we feel

Jewish, if we can be made to feel Jewish, we can no longer be ordinary in any way.

Human dignity is a quality to which we all aspire, at least in our outer lives. This has its limits, however, if it becomes an inner straitjacket, in the way that one may suffer, as a Jew, under the expectations of others that one should behave especially nobly, just because the Jews have been victims of so much evil. Suffering, at least in the Christian ethic, would seem to confer a special status akin to martyrdom or even sainthood; having experienced such pain, one would seem to be invested with a higher responsibility not to transmit it to others. However, Jews have the right to be ordinary and to behave just as badly as anyone else. It is a burden to be a "chosen people" and to carry such a weight of morality, carved in stone tablets, on one's shoulders. The American author Philip Roth has a deep understanding of this dilemma. In his book, *Sabbath's Theater*, (1995) he questions the whole idea of dignity, of growing old with dignity, of being Jewish with dignity—his hero, an elderly Jewish puppeteer, embarks on an anarchic, amoral career of lechery and deceit without ever quite losing the reader's sympathy. The book is a kind of crazy hymn to growing old disgracefully and to Jews daring to behave badly.

In our inner world, as perhaps only the creative novelist can describe it, we recognize this as a just demand, almost a right—the right to be ordinary, even ordinarily crazy (as, it is presumed, non-Jews would be). The second and third generations of Holocaust survivors, must certainly be cautious of acting out their feelings of instability, of split or diffuse identity, the painful legacy of their families' traumatization, in a public or social context. However, it seems also as if they might be called upon to conceal these feelings, to reassure the outside world with their resilience that "things are now O.K." This is not just a Jewish experience. In many different ethnic groups that have suffered extreme persecution, or even among individuals whose traumatic experiences have been in the public eye, the victims may feel that they are somehow forced, or must at great cost, force themselves, into becoming "dignified" role models for others by always being the first to for-

give their injuries and deny their insecurities. However, they can only have the courage to be what they are, whatever that may be. This, Roth seems to suggest to us, is true human dignity.

THE "HEROIC DILEMMA": SOME CONCLUSIONS

The problem of false pride, of the "heroic solution," in adopting an ideological group identity to mask the shameful past, became apparent to me in another context, when I conducted training groups for psychotherapists in Kiev, Ukraine in the mid-'90s. In one such group an intense ideological battle broke out between two male psychiatrists, Ivan and Sasha. Ivan was a staunchly reactionary and chauvinist Ukrainian nationalist, intent on glorifying his country's new-found independence, while Sasha retained his sympathies for, and pride in, the social achievements of the old Soviet system. Their argument became dangerously threatening, the two men yelling and screaming at each other so that no one else in the group dared to speak. Somewhat dumbfounded, all I could think of saying was, "Perhaps some conflicts won't just disappear through therapy, they lie too deep, too far back."

In consequence, some of the women begin to speak of family members killed in nationalist pogroms or denounced to the KGB and murdered in Soviet prison camps. Almost every member of this group had, it turned out, at least one relative who had been deported to Siberia for some reason or other or for no reason at all. The growing attentiveness of the group toward this shared mourning and the increase in mutual understanding show how necessary the previous emotional outburst over ideology had been. What most impressed me most this group experience, which I have discussed in more detail in a previous paper (de Mendelsohn, 2000), was the process by which ideological pride, as an antidote to shame, could finally be resolved by a movement toward remembering, and thus mourning, the horrors and injustices of the past.

It is important to consider the cultural aspects of shame. Here in the West we are accustomed to the fact that people seem to speak out more easily in the small, rather than the large, group. The inti-

macy of the small group seems to allow us more containment for decontaminating the effects of shame, while many people will not speak in the large group for fear of the shame of being ignored, passed over, or humiliated before a large public. In my training work in Japan, I was fascinated to see that the reverse could be true. In the small groups, progress was often very slow, since the participants seemed highly inhibited toward asking for or revealing intimate details of their personal lives. Such behavior was not considered proper in this culture; it could result in a shameful loss of face. In contrast, the large groups had much less difficulty here. The relative anonymity of the large group seemed to allow the Japanese participants much greater openness, as if being in a mass situation gave more, rather than less, privacy than was obtainable in the small group.

The "heroic solution" to the problem of shame, daring to be proud of what was once considered shameful, has its positive functions, since it attempts to restore those ego functions that have been damaged by shameful experience. I do not think that we should always pathologize the heroic solution, but rather give it, as it were, its pride of place. It is only when such pride reaches into the realms of grandiosity that the group or the conductor may feel the need to act. This is not always an easy task, and perhaps certain aspects of therapeutic stance need to be underlined here.

The main point seems to me to lie in avoiding the temptation of shaming the grandiose person before the group, since this will result only in a hardening of the grandiose defence or even in a form of paranoid decompensation. The first task of the therapist is to contain the situation in the group, perhaps by referring to the impossibility of "managing" it in any way, or by declaring one's own evident helplessness or even symbolic "impotence," thus in a way admitting to one's own shame in the role of inadequate conductor. This has the potential benefit of setting up a model that disclaims grandiosity for oneself and allows others in the group to own up to their own sense of powerlessness. As in my example of the training group with Ivan and Sasha, such feelings will tend to reveal a historical background of discrimination and humiliation

among other participants, who in this way can provide empathy for the original conditions under which the grandiose person came to choose his/her strategy.

In consequence a collective mourning process can emerge, less determined by guilt than by a genuine sense of loss and an appreciation of what has become damaged or destroyed in the past. When we are dealing with the more complex phenomenon of transgenerational shame, the most that we can usually do is to trace the personal histories involved, especially when a transference reaction to the group or the therapist has made them come alive. Admittedly, this may not always immediately alleviate the pathology of the individuals concerned, but in my experience the effect is always to strengthen the cohesiveness and the reflective capacities of the whole group and thus facilitate a working-through of some hitherto unseen aspects of what Foulkes (1975) termed the "foundation matrix" of the group.

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