



Reading Trauma as an Intergenerational Phenomenon

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Abstract

The twentieth century is the era of human violence and anger, tragedy and trauma. The world in this century witnessed the most unforgettable scenes of global wars, massacres, labor camps, terrorism, and collective catastrophic incident, especially Holocaust, which has been the most terrifying type of mass murder and torture. In this respect, the trauma is a phenomenon that is kept in the collective memory of a community and the experience archive of a nation. It is a wounded memory that transfers from one generation to the next generation. For example, children who have witnessed their parents' fears of a specific voice or image show signs of fear or phobia to the same thing. To some extent, it is acquired, and somewhat it is genetically transmitted. The attention to the trauma was gradually increased, and the collective trauma of the war was investigated. During the World War I, many soldiers were victims of fear of what they had witnessed. After the end of the war, the truth of the trauma was in oblivion, however, what the World War II and the Vietnam War woke up in the minds of the people were a trauma of previous experiences and the commemoration of war. The current study tries to investigate the ways that a traumatic aftermath of an experience can be transferred through generations.

Keywords: Collective trauma; Intergenerational Trauma; Memory; Repetition Compulsion

Introduction

The traumatic nature of the catastrophic incident does not quickly occur and the traumatic experience is detectable through a period of latency. That is why the factor of time should not be overlooked in the traumatic event. That is, the response to the trauma occurs over time and what is known as the passage of time which is called history. The topic that this study focuses on is the historical memory of a nation that is unwittingly struggling with the issue of trauma. Trauma is defined as: "An event in the life of the subject characterized by its intensity, the inability of the subject to respond to it adequately and the lasting pathogenic effects it causes in psychic organization" [1].

Sigmund Freud began to use this concept of trauma to apply it to the psychological field. He described it as an experience that, in a very short time, generates an excitement in the psychic apparatus so great that it is incapable of tolerating or elaborating it. Freud explains that it can be both a very shocking event and the sum of small events (which would be tolerable if they happened in isolation). Trauma initially was chiefly linked with rare and radical incidents, but now has become an influential and multifaceted hypothesis that covers contemporary history, literature, culture and critical theory. So, trauma theory settled in the 1990s related to the ethical turn that developed in the previous decade and which influenced literary theory and philosophy. In different

forms, the growing attention on trauma was a reaction to concerns about memory, politics, representation and ethics that turned out to be noticeable in the twentieth century, and which have generally concentrated on the life-threatening forms of ferocity and victimization that was revealed after World War II [2].

As numerous philosophers have asserted, “ours appears to be the age of trauma” (Miller and Tougaw 1), a “catastrophic age” (Caruth-Exploration 11) featured by the presence of collective and individual pains. Trauma, as an “all-inclusive” phenomenon (Caruth Exploration, 4) [3], also establishes an interesting cultural model as Roger Luckhurst writes, “it has been turned into a repertoire of compelling stories about the enigmas of identity, memory and selfhood that have saturated Western cultural life” (Trauma Question 80) [4].

The notion of Intergenerational trauma is the basis of this study. For achieving to this this point the study is going to cover the prominent works that are done on the concept of memory, history and collective form of remembering. Currently, the term “trauma” is used in different contexts: clinical, academic and every day. It is part of our daily vocabulary when one says that “I was traumatized” or that it was a “traumatic experience” and we use it both for superficial things and for really critical situations. On the other hand, the concept of Intergenerational trauma is quite recent and little known. Psychoanalysis strongly emphasizes the importance of the first years of life. Our first experience is determinant in the development of our personality; the contact with significant objects will greatly mark the way we perceive ourselves, other people and the world in general [5].

The concept of Intergenerational Trauma tries to expand this vision of how the psyche is structured. This term explains that not only the events that we live in childhood are important; But the traumatic experiences undergone, but not elaborated, of previous generations are determining for the structuring of our personality. Abraham and Torok, Hungarian psychoanalysts, developed this theory after working with Holocaust survivors [6].

It is true that Freud did not speak explicitly of the existence of Intergenerational traumas, but in his texts we can find the bases on which this theory was developed. On the one hand, already in “Totem and taboo” Sigmund Freud spoke of the unconscious transmission that happens from generation to generation. On the other hand, in “Beyond the pleasure principle” introduces the concept of compulsion to repetition, explaining the need to “repeat” a traumatic situation when it cannot be elaborated. The trauma returns again and again unconsciously, for example through dreams or symptoms. In Studies on Hysteria Freud describes his ‘first full-length analysis of hysteria’: ‘This procedure was one of clearing

away the pathogenic psychical material layer by layer, and we liked to compare it with the technique of excavating a buried city’ (Freud and Breuer 206). In ‘The Aetiology of Hysteria’ he says that ‘the fact that the scenes are uncovered in a reversed chronological order justifies our comparison of the work with the excavation of a stratified ruined site’ (198) [7].

The term “Transgenerational Trauma” was first described by Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok; they proposed to extend the concept of “trauma” in psychoanalytic theory. Torok and Abraham explain that the symptoms appear not only by what the individual repressed in childhood but also by the unnamed and unspoken “secrets” of previous generations. These authors claim that when the traumatic event is too catastrophic, the person who suffers it fails to repress or elaborate them and is forced to encrypt them. In other words, trauma is not a consequence of the repressed, but of the encrypt. They speak of an encrypted message, precisely because it is something undecipherable, incapable of being elaborated [8].

Abraham and Torok also spoke of a Phantom or ghost effect, to describe the mark left by this encrypted message. The event was very embarrassing and had a very high emotional load for the individual, so it cannot put it into words and it becomes a secret. It is hidden from consciousness, but neither can it be expressed through symptoms. That is why trauma is transgenerational, precisely because it is transmitted to the next generation, in which this trauma “comes to the surface”. Then there is talk of two groups of victims, those who lived the experience; and the second or third generations in which that plot can be manifested. In his “Studies on Hysteria” Freud had already explained how trauma is present when it “returns” and when it shows its effects on symptoms. This theory states that these effects can be seen in subsequent generations, either through symptoms, but also with the possibility of putting them into words, of verbalizing them. Children or grandchildren inherit the conflict. Trauma is not only the repetition of individual suffering, but it can also be a repetition of someone else’s suffering. Investigations have been conducted with children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. Statistics show that this group does not have more personality disorders or mental illnesses than the rest of the population, no more cases of depression or anxiety were found. However, there is a matter of a second generation survivor complex. Its development is marked by the unresolved grief of the parents and this duel is linked to the formation of their identity. For example, a second or third generation member carries (sometimes unknowingly) the name of a dead relative; without ever knowing he/she begins to present similar personality traits, for example, choosing the same profession. All of this happens unconsciously.

The concept of Transgenerational Trauma has been relatively poorly theorized. However, it is still investigated and used in the psychoanalytic clinic. The psychoanalyst Serge Tisseron, for example, has done a vast analysis on family secrets and their influence on different generations. He proposed the term “internalized group” as a very important factor in the development of personality. It was he who stated that not only individual experiences but also those of parents, grandparents and people close to him are important; their experiences will be decisive in the development and psychic functioning of each individual [9].

For his part, psychoanalyst Roberto Loso proposes the term “transgenerational repetition”. At the 2007 Berlin International Congress, he presented the work “Trangeneracional Elaboration” together with Ana Packciarz Losso. Based on Freud’s concept of “compulsion to repetition”, he explained that this repetition occurs not only during the life of the subject, but also through the generations that precede him; And that in each repetition there is something new, that is to say “a failed attempt of elaboration [10-12]”. Psychoanalysis does not only seek to placate or disappear the symptoms, but to understand them, give them a meaning and after all to return conscious to the unconscious. The Trangeneracional Trauma theory seeks precisely to extend this understanding and this knowledge [13]. In this way, it provides a very important element not only for the theory of psychoanalysis, but also for clinical practice.

Many analysts have found that sometimes the patient’s personal history is not enough to explain his symptoms, but that these can be understood when one takes into account the process of repetition that comes from previous generations. Although this theory emerged from the histories of Holocaust survivors [14-16], it has been applied to investigate and understand other phenomena both collective and individual. For example, much research has been done to work with people who have lived other wars, or military dictatorships such as those in Latin America. On the other hand, at the individual level, it has also been used to work with people who have suffered from sexual abuse. After all, this can be considered a private catastrophe. Sexual abuse can certainly be a traumatic experience and the response of the patient to this event will be decisive. This is just one example of how the concept of the Trangeneracional can be applied also to the individual [16].

Revisiting the background of studies on trauma, this paper reach the point that trauma is considered as an unwelcomed moment of experience whether in social or in individual form; an experience that the testifier recalls it as a try to passing through it but this mechanism does not necessarily work out so this recall or compulsory repetition passes through the generations to have the chance of being registered in the

history.

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