



# TRANSGENERATIONALE

SYMPOSIUM REPORT

## THE LONG SHADOW OF TRAUMATISING PAST

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Ten directional insights  
after the symposium  
"Transgenerationale"

BY

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On 3 November 2022, AMCHA Deutschland e.V. organised the symposium "Transgenerational – Legacies and Memories after Collective Violence" in cooperation with the Jewish Museum Berlin and OFEK e.V. in Berlin.

The symposium presented both well-known and new findings on the transgenerational consequences of trauma after collective experience of violence and initiated a dialogue between psychological, sociological, and artistic perspectives.

- What is collective trauma?
- How can it be inherited from the previous generation?
- What needs to be considered when dealing with subsequent generations?
- What is the potential of transnational and transdisciplinary exchange?

At the hybrid event, 21 speakers and 80 participants at the W. M. Blumenthal Academy discussed the effects of collective violence across generations and how these consequences can be mitigated or overcome. They also looked at the aspects that connect the collective stories of violence from different contexts, how they can be differentiated and the role of psychosocial and political work. They also looked at the similarities and differences of collective stories of violence and considered the role of psychosocial and political work.

Based upon the discussions during the symposium, both need for action and experience and insights on the issue are summarised below in ten findings on dealing with descendants of survivors of collective violence and transdisciplinary exchange.

# 1

## COUNTERACT DECONTEXTUALISATION: The concept of trauma must be used critically and in a differentiated way

Being a specialist term in medicine and psychology, the term "trauma" is now used not only in other disciplines but also in everyday language. On the one hand, its establishment has contributed to the recognition of long-lasting psychological consequences; on the other hand, the fuzzy use of the term has broadened its contours so that almost all negative experiences are described as "traumatising". This blurring makes transdisciplinary exchange more difficult, but at the same time helps to articulate the consequences of violence and the resulting needs in the political use of the term. The term "extreme traumatising" is therefore proposed to distinguish it from the inflationary use of the term "trauma".

Trauma or the experience of traumatising violence – such as genocide and torture – is often equated with the development of (psycho)pathological conditions, illness, and victim status. However, the experience of extreme, man-made violence does not necessarily lead to illness, but it does leave its mark on survivors, subsequent generations, and beyond that, the society in which the violence was perpetrated.

Even though the term trauma is often used in individual psychological contexts, it has to be recognized that collective experiences of violence are gained in a specific social and political context. Since different perspectives result in different uses of the term these all should be taken into account, even if this may involve the danger of using the terms indistinctly.

# 2

## TRANSGENERATIONAL TRAUMA: Explanatory pathways and continuities across generations

Collective violence is transmitted across generations and influences the lives of those who are born into the traces of this past. With different concepts experts (e.g. in the field of psychological, social science or biological disciplines) try to explain how trauma is transmitted – and what is transmitted in the process. The findings focus on different areas. Empirical studies on non-clinical populations have not found any increased psychopathological burden among descendants of survivors of the Shoah so far.

Psychodynamic perspectives assume that descendants perceive and absorb feelings that have been passed on by their parents (or grandparents) and that cannot be traced back to their own direct experiences. Thus, the term "emotional inheritance" describes this transmission of emotions and experiences, unconscious memories, evaluations, and behavioural routines. Research is currently being conducted into how and under what circumstances these "legacies" manifest themselves in representatives of the next generation.

Different explanatory approaches for transgenerational transmission use different methods, data, and basic assumptions. These can be very different or, in the best case, complementary. Therefore, a cross-disciplinary exchange can promote a sophisticated understanding of the mechanisms for transmissions and transmitted contents.

It is possible that the trauma of their parents which descendants have not experienced themselves co-determines their own experiences of violence and discrimination. Descendants may themselves become victims of (collective) violence, especially in a (perpetrator) society that is hostile towards them. Thus, a direct causal link between trauma following collective violence and ongoing experiences of discrimination can remain across generations.

It can be stated that descendants of survivors are often deeply marked by the traumas of their parents. There may be special needs here, including psychosocial needs, which should be addressed in a supportive manner.

How exactly collective traumas of the ancestors and persistent experiences of discrimination (racism, anti-Semitism, etc.) of the descendants are connected should be further researched in a powerful critical way.

# 3

## BEARERS OF MEMORIES: The tension between attributions and assignments of the "Second Generation"

Merging representatives of one generation into a homogeneous group can help to formulate political demands and to go beyond the framework of individual attributions. At the same time, a term like "Second Generation" has its limits. The fact that one parent is a survivor of a specific experience of violence can often be the only commonality of representatives of a generation. This aspect becomes more important in cross-contextual exchanges between

descendant generations, as even less identity-forming commonalities are often shared.

In terms of the persecution background of the parent generation the group of descendants is also very heterogeneous, yet commonalities can be found: Many stand up for the recognition of the experiences of violence inflicted on their ancestors and are committed accordingly.

In remembrance work and political education, descendants fill gaps in the discourse of remembrance and question the consensus in German remembrance culture, often as a necessary reaction to compensate for the lack of impulses from the majority society.

Nevertheless, the successor generation is often not included in memorial work, because they are accused of being characterized by "personal concern" instead of "scientific objectivity" (which is unabashedly attributed to the descendants of the perpetrator generation). Thus, they would have no legitimacy to participate in the discourse.

To define a shared identity as the Second Generation, more opportunities for exchange between descendants and majority society are necessary, where issues like the power of definition and attributions can be critically examined. Descendants must not be used as witnesses to tell the stories of their parents and grandparents. Their topic should be how persecution has affected successor generations and how it has shaped their real lives.

Descendants of survivors should be offered spaces where they can exchange ideas, experience community, and discuss conflicting family constellations. Support like this must be accepted as a task of society that contributes to the inclusion of descendants and social diversity.

# 4

## FROM EXPERIENCES TO NARRATIVES: Trauma can be experienced collectively

The subsuming of different destinies to one collective trauma can only partly do justice to the individual experience. Nevertheless, the concept helps to bundle individual experiences.

Collective trauma is a symbolic, cultural narrative that is often fed by memories of survivors. These are often fragmentary,

non-chronological and riddled with omissions. Often, they only come to be known and acknowledged a long time after the experience of violence, after surviving a genocide (such as in Armenia or Namibia) or when told by descendants. Based on individual and reliable narratives, a collective narrative can emerge which can in turn help to shape and classify one's own memories.

In their analysis of societies with collective trauma, concepts of conflict transformation take into consideration that they have not completely coped with their violent past. Focussing just on despair, fear, insecurity, and one's role as a victim inhibits not only healing but also social cohesion and peace.

When working on collective trauma in society, it is therefore important to deal with narratives as identity-forming points of reference. In order to cope, more safe spaces should be provided where it is also possible to work with diverging narratives that contrast with each other.

The causal relationship between individual trauma processing and societal peacefulness should be critically examined and should be further researched in a transdisciplinary manner.

# 5

## **BREAKING THE SILENCE: Recognising the connection between individual experiences and the trauma of the parental generation**

Survivors often share their traumatic experiences only in fragments or not at all. In therapeutic work with survivors and their descendants, it is therefore important to first overcome this concealment. Talking about individual or family trauma can be a necessary survival mechanism, subsequently also for the descendants. In the psychological care of survivors of the Shoah, it has become clear that an early therapeutic offer can be helpful in giving survivors a voice and thus visibility.

Moreover, it is important to give the second generation an opportunity to deal with the past and to understand their experiences and emotions in the context of parental traumatising, to process their experiences in order to find their own positions. Breaking the transmission of trauma or changing its quality should ultimately be one of the goals of this confrontation. Meeting other victims can also be a substitute for family, especially if the victims have been torn away from their family by violence. Being part of a community, it will be possible to break the silence, make (political) demands and overcome shame.

The healing process is not only individual-psychological, but also social: the experience of a community is therefore pivotal to the work with survivors and descendants. Sharing trans-generational experiences of violence can foster empathy and solidarity – even across group identities.

# 6

## RECOGNITION BEYOND MERE RHETORIC:

### Collective trauma must be recognised and dealt with at the social level

Social and political dimensions play a significant role in coming to terms with collective violence, as the causes of the crimes are located in society. Often, victims of collective violence have not only to cope with mental scars but also with the deprivation of their livelihood. Economic and political security have a particular influence on mental health. Therefore, the recognition of crimes and the accountability of the perpetrators and their descendants is a necessary prerequisite to give victims and their descendants the opportunity to regain their names, their integrity, their place in society and to live on. Those affected are often surrounded by power asymmetries and do not have enough opportunities to share their experiences and receive sufficient support. Especially when the majority society predominantly represents the perpetrators and their descendants, it must acknowledge its historical responsibility and continuously strive for sincere recognition in order to remove the breeding ground for group-based misanthropy. These are essential preconditions for being able to talk about terms and concepts at all.

**Recognition must not remain lip service: The seriousness of a commitment like "Never again" is only measured by whether it is implemented.**

Therefore, the resilience discourse moves in the area of tension between individual self-empowerment and the abdication of responsibility on the part of society. The term resilience – like the term trauma – is increasingly used in an inflationary way and too often equated with an individualisation in dealing with the consequences of violence. A central concern is to critically examine the connection between the concept of resilience and transgenerational trauma, especially in contexts of collective violence.

**Recognising and promoting the resilience of individuals and groups after collective experiences of violence is of great importance. Sophisticated resilience-building measures and exercises can be used. In many cases, a healing effect can**

be achieved if those affected do not only see themselves as victims, but become aware of their own strength. However, it must be emphasised that individual resilience is also influenced by structural conditions and external attributions.

# 7

## JUSTICE WITHOUT A "BLUEPRINT"

### Legal and non-legal procedures must work together at the interface of remembrance, reappraisal and justice after collective violence

The interaction of civil society initiatives and the logic of judicial procedures requires targeted coordination. Both perspectives have their limits as well as potentials. There are no transferable and universally valid concepts for success regarding the procedure and format. In the legal consideration of transgenerational issues, descendants can also be considered as affected parties. However, the greater the temporal distance, the greater the legal justification effort. It should be noted that the justice system itself has to deal with its entanglements in the context of injustice and collective violence. A strong sense of belonging to a group can make it easier for those affected to shape the process of coming to terms with the past, although this group identity can only emerge in the process itself (e.g., in the case of testimonials during a truth commission).

Legal procedures cannot not be regarded as isolated events but must be embedded in an overall process of social reappraisal of collective violence.

An exchange between actors from different contexts about their experiences with legal processes in their respective countries can help to understand the variety of possible options and measures - including questions of legal process design: Those affected (survivors and their descendants) must be involved. Certain duties of care must be fulfilled - from guaranteeing safety to providing appropriate psychosocial and cultural support.

# 8

## GIVING VOICE TO WHAT MAKES ONE SPEECHLESS:

### Descendants make their perspective on collective violence in society visible through their artistic work

Art can build a bridge between different experiences of violence and thus create awareness of the traumas of others. It can connect to current issues of displacement, torture and genocide and open up emotional access beyond cognitive/analytical representations. In doing so, the boundaries between identity as artist and activist can become blurred. The description of a genocide in literature or song, for example, can take on a symbolic character and thus stand as an example for other (historical) examples. The artist's work is always exposed to external explanation, attribution, and interpretation based on the artist's personal involvement and the socio-political embedding of the work. It is particularly problematic when explicit depictions of violence from contexts perceived as foreign are interpreted by the reader as cultural characteristics.

# 9

## CLEARLY SEPARATED TOGETHER:

### There is a need to differentiate the concept of trauma for perpetrators and victims, also concerning descendants

Collective trauma does not include perpetrators and victims equally. Experiencing and acting out violence as well as dealing with the consequences of a collective experience of violence must be differentiated. While descendants of the persecuted and survivors deal with the trauma of persecution across generations, descendants of perpetrators more often maintain distance to issues that can remind them of the deeds of their ancestors. Forgetting is always an option and one of the few commonalities in victim and perpetrator memory, even if victims only have this privilege for a short time. These boundaries become blurred when population groups are repeatedly and alternately affected by violence or perpetrate violence.

Accordingly, it must be clarified when it makes sense to differentiate between (descendants of) perpetrators and victims and in which cases this differentiation can possibly hinder a process of overcoming the past and peace.

In political contexts, the use of the concept of trauma must be reserved for survivors, victims, and their descendants. An instrumentalisation of the term and a perpetrator-victim reversal must be counteracted. Further exchange is needed on what this means for contexts and societies where perpetrators and victims cannot be clearly distinguished, especially when the boundaries within families become blurred.

# 10

## TRANSLATION WORK FOR INTERACTION:

### **Concepts and assumptions of actors must be understood according to their socio-political field of action and synergies must be promoted**

Framework concepts for dealing with traumatised persons provide necessary orientation after experiences of collective violence. In the field of peacebuilding and development cooperation, concepts such as Transitional Justice and Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) have become established. In other contexts, these are confronted with trauma discourses and divergent understandings of coming to terms with the past - e.g., with regard to Nazi injustice and in dealing with survivors of flight and torture in Germany. This leads to the formulation of partly different approaches to dealing with collective violence on an international, societal, and individual level as well as to different claims and demands with regard to reconciliation or reparations across generations.

The creation of moderated spaces at the interface of peacebuilding, humanitarian aid, development cooperation and psychosocial care is necessary to promote cross-professional dialogue. These offer experts the opportunity to engage in an (open and critical) exchange with each other in order to discuss different perspectives and approaches and to promote synergies. A complete "integration" of approaches does not always make sense: the interaction of these must rather be understood as a spectrum on which coordination can lead to strengthening the efficiency and effectiveness of psychosocial measures across fields of action.

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