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Interrupting Intergenerational Trauma: Children of Holocaust Survivors and the Third Reich

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Abstract

This qualitative study used descriptive phenomenology to examine experiences of healing and reconciliation, for children of Holocaust survivors, through dialogue with children of the Third Reich. Descriptive phenomenological interviews with 5 participants yielded several common essential elements. The findings indicated that participants experienced a sense of healing of intergenerational trauma, a reduction in prejudice, and increase in motivation for pro-social behaviors. The degree to which these findings may reflect a shift in sense of identity, as well as the implications of the findings for conflict resolution, intergroup conflict reduction and peace psychology are discussed.

Keywords

Holocaust – intergenerational trauma – peace psychology – Third Reich – dialogue groups – intergroup conflict – conflict resolution – reconciliation

The study of the intergenerational transmission of trauma began in the 1960's when clinicians first noticed a large number of children of Holocaust survivors

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entering psychotherapy (Danieli, 1998). This research initially focused on Holocaust survivors and their children, and later was widened to include other traumatized populations including survivors of other genocides, Vietnam veterans, survivors of domestic violence, and others.

Several meta-analytic studies (Sagi-Schwartz et al., 2008 and van IJzendoorn et al., 2003) found children and grandchildren of holocaust survivors demonstrated no significant difference from controls on various measures of psychological well-being. Fridman et al. (2011) also found adult off-spring had no differences in their physical, psychological, and cognitive functioning compared to matched controls.

Giladi and Bell (2013) despite finding levels of secondary traumatic stress that were within the normal range for offspring of survivors, levels of secondary traumatic stress were significantly higher than control groups. Notably, they found lower levels of differentiation of self, and poorer family communication compared to their control groups. This is consistent with other research that has identified distinctive patterns of personality characteristics and milder psychological vulnerabilities (Felsen, 1998; Solomon, Kotler & Mikulincer, 1998; Sorscher & Cohen, 1997; Yehuda, Schmeidler, Elkin, Wilson, Siever, Binder-Brynes, Wainberg & Aferiot, 1998). These vulnerabilities included sub-clinical chronic depressive and anxiety reactions, guilt, unresolved mourning, agitation, insomnia, and nightmares. Felsen (1998) also found tendencies towards mistrustfulness, difficulty expressing emotions, difficulty regulating aggression, chronic guilt and self-criticism. Sorscher and Cohen (1997) found that the children of Holocaust survivors had significantly more Holocaust ideation than other Jews of their generation; that is to say, the parent's trauma is an ongoing part of the children's day-to-day mental lives. This suggests the presence of an unmet need for the children of survivors to process or integrate the traumatic experiences which their parents have transmitted to them. Yehuda et al. (1998) found that the intergenerational transmission of trauma, specifically PTSD symptomology, was predicated upon the severity of the PTSD symptoms of the parent. They found a direct relationship between the PTSD symptomatology of parent survivors and the degree of similar symptoms in their children. They also found suppressed cortisol levels both in Holocaust survivors that had been diagnosed with PTSD, and their children. More specifically, this finding was confirmed by Van IJzendoorn et al. (2013), identifying cortisol levels were suppressed specifically in survivors with dissociation. Suppressed cortisol in PTSD cases has been associated with a nonengagement style of coping with PTSD symptoms, emphasizing withdrawal and avoidance. Low cortisol levels have been linked to depression, chronic pain, sleep disturbance and fatigue.

Discussing the holocaust, Volkan (2001) introduced the term 'chosen trauma' to refer to the shared mental representation of a large scale trauma that the ancestors of a group suffered at the hands of an enemy. Volkan suggests that when such a chosen trauma is reactivated, it can trigger a variety of problematic responses. Research indicates that one by-product of intergenerational trauma is the perpetuation of prejudice, and the resulting potential for violence and conflict. Aversive feelings by Jews towards historical and contemporary "outgroups" appears to be a vulnerability related to being a Holocaust survivor. Several studies have found an aversion to Germans and German related activities amongst Holocaust survivors (Cherfas, Rozin, Cohen, Davidson, & McCauley, 2006; Robinson & Metzger, 2008). For some, this aversion was limited to those most closely related to Nazi perpetrators, while for others the aversion applied to anyone with German ancestry. Cherfas et al. found that participants who demonstrated this aversion to Germans had also generalized this aversion to other groups, including Arabs and Muslims.

While Allport (1954) did not specifically outline the role that intergenerational trauma played in the development of prejudice, he identified several conditions believed to be necessary in order to reduce prejudice which appear to be relevant to the situation of intergenerational trauma. These included a supportive environment, equal status between groups, close contact, and cooperation. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) conducted a meta-analytic test of the intergroup contact theory which supported Allport's contention that these conditions were necessary for contact situations to result in prejudice reduction. Under these conditions, they found greater contact resulted in lower levels of prejudice, and that these positive attitude changes were frequently generalized beyond the specific contacted individuals, to their groups as a whole.

The development of a superordinate identity is also an important contributor to prejudice reduction identified by several theorists (Dovidio and Gaertner, 1999; Kelman, 1999). According to Tajfel's (1982) social identity theory, positive self-concept is largely formed out of perceptions of what makes the group one belongs to positively distinctive. Thus people have a tendency to perceive out-groups unfavorably as a means of enhancing self-esteem. Kelman (1999) suggested that members of groups working towards reconciliation can develop a common "transcendent identity," which compliments group identity rather than supplanting it; this new identity provides a means of overcoming the tendency to devalue others.

Reconciliation is relatively new in conflict resolution and peace building and is growing area of interest (Hauss, 2003). A prominent example of reconciliation is the dialogue groups that have brought together the children

of Holocaust survivors and children of the Third Reich over the last 20 years (Bar-On, 2002; Busse, Emme, Gerut, & Lapidus, 1999; Kaslow, 1998; Volkas, 2009). Bar-On and Kassem (2004) also applied these methods to bring together Israelis and Palestinians to tell stories to one another about their respective families and histories of suffering. Vollhardt (2009) describes the “To Reflect and Trust” method employed by Bar-On and Kassem as an example of an intervention that successfully fosters the development of constructive victim beliefs.

The To Respect and Trust (TRT) groups were semi-structured facilitated dialogue groups that began in 1992 and met annually over a 15-year period (Harris, 2007). These groups made storytelling the foundation of their work, and enabled members of these groups to reflect on their personal and collective history. The group members reported this process resulted in the development of mutual trust, stemming from group members helping each other to reflect on their earlier prejudices (Bar-On, 2002). The primary goal of these groups was to promote growth and healing for the participants (Bar-On, 2002; Busse et al., 1999; Kaslow, 1998). Notably, many group members articulated a secondary hope of preventing future crimes and genocides by sharing their learning and growth, exporting these to other situations. Bar-On (2002) identified several factors that made the work with children of Holocaust survivors and perpetrators different from the processes of other conflicted groups. Importantly, the original conflict occurred several decades in the past, and there is a widespread global acceptance that the Jews were the victims and Germans the victimizers.

In these groups, the Children of the Third Reich reported their own distinctive motivation to participate in dialogues. The collective German identity following the war went through a dramatic transformation, acquiring a stigma through its association with Nazism and the Holocaust. Staub (2003) noted it is important to remember that “Perpetrators are also wounded . . . engaging in great violence against others inflicts its own wounds” (p. 798). Staub found that perpetrators tend to shield themselves from their pain, guilt, and shame in a variety of ways. He noted that healing for perpetrators and their children may involve being more open to experiencing this pain, and the pain of the other, as a precursor to reconciliation. Bar-On (1995) conducted interviews with children of the Third Reich and found significant distress amongst this population, caused by the discrepancy between their own values and the actions of beloved parents. While different in nature from the formative experiences of the children of Holocaust survivors, the children of perpetrators have also experienced difficulties stemming from their family histories, similarly creating motivation to participate in these sorts of dialogue groups (Bar-On, 1996).

If we accept the theoretical assumption that intergenerational trauma, when left uninterrupted, perpetuates prejudice, violence, and the potential for

continued conflict, then any potential means of interrupting intergenerational trauma must be central to the aspirations of Peace Psychology. The aim of this study was to explore the experience of an intervention intended to interrupt and heal intergenerational trauma, through dialogues between the children of victims and perpetrators.

Method

Descriptive phenomenology is a qualitative psychological research method created by Giorgi (2009), adapted from Husserl's method of philosophical inquiry. Giorgi's aim in creating descriptive phenomenology was to create a social science methodology underlain by a different epistemology than quantitative research methods, explicitly designed for the exploration of human experience. Descriptive phenomenological studies involve a detailed qualitative analysis of in-depth, non-directive interviews with a small number of participants. The aim is gain a rich, nuanced understanding of the essential elements of the participant's narratives, rather than to assess the degree to which those findings may be generalizable to the population from which the sample is drawn.

Consistent with the common procedures of descriptive phenomenology, this study used a purposive sample of five participants (Giorgi, 2009). All participants were, by self-report, Jewish adults who had one or both biological or stepparents that were survivors of the Holocaust. All participants had been voluntary members of the dialogue group *Healing the Wounds of History*, facilitated by Armand Volkas. Participants of this study had dialogues with self-identified adult children of the Third Reich; because these children of the Third Reich were not participants in this study, no demographic information about them is available.

The participants of the present study were initially invited to participate in this study by the primary facilitator of the series dialogue groups that they had participated in. All participants had been members of this series of dialogue groups on at least one occasion sometime within the past 15 years. These dialogue groups were made up of approximately equal numbers of children of the Holocaust, and children of the Third Reich. Typically, the group size was 10, and the groups had two facilitators, who were usually Jewish. The dialogue groups were structured similarly to the *To Reflect and Trust* groups (Bar-On, 2002) using group member's storytelling and reflection as the primary content of the group interaction. None of the participants had any prior contact with one another prior to these dialogue groups. The dialogue groups were all conducted in The United States, in English. None of the authors of this study

were involved in development or implementation of these dialogue groups. Consistent with the common procedures of descriptive phenomenology, the interviews and data analysis were conducted by the primary researcher. The interviews were all conducted in English.

To protect the privacy of participants, they will be identified only by pseudonyms. Amy was a 71-year-old Caucasian, divorced female. She reported that both her parents escaped Nazi Germany during the war. Robert was a 48-year-old Caucasian, single male. Both of his parents were in concentration camps. Kevin was a 60-year-old Caucasian, married male. He reported that both of his parents were in a concentration camp. Debbie was a 49-year-old Caucasian female in a committed relationship. Her father was held in a concentration camp, and her mother was in hiding during the war. Alice was a 54-year-old Caucasian female in a committed relationship. She reported that both her parents had been in a concentration camp. All participants reported having dialogues with children of the Third Reich who had described themselves as having a parent that was a member of the Nazi party. All participants signed informed consents detailing the purpose of the study, and participants granted express permission to have quotes from their interviews included in the published study.

Consistent with the procedures of Descriptive Phenomenology (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003) data were collected through non-directive interviews. Participants were asked one open-ended question, to describe in as much detail as possible their experience of a discussion with a child of the Third Reich. When necessary, non-directive follow-up questions were used to have participants expand upon or clarify their responses. The interviews were roughly one hour in length and conducted in a single session. The interviews were audio taped, and were conducted in the participant's homes. The lead researcher made verbatim transcriptions.

Consistent with the data analysis procedures of descriptive phenomenology (Giorgi, 2009), initially, each of the participant's transcripts was read thoroughly to ensure a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the data. Then, each transcript was divided into meaning units, with divisions placed every time a significant shift in meaning was deemed to occur. The next stage of the analysis was the transformation process, in which the language of the meaning units was re-written to highlight the psychological content of the participant's data, to make implicit psychological content clear and explicit, and to generalize the data so it becomes easier to integrate different participant's data into a common structure. The lead researcher attempted to do this maintaining a psychological perspective and the attitude of the phenomenological reduction, using processes of reflection and imaginative variation. The process of imaginative

variation enabled the discovery of constituents, interrelated parts of the data, within the transformations, which are in turn rendered into a constituent description of the general structure of the experience of the phenomenon of interest. The lead researcher conducted the interviews and the data analysis process, while the other authors of the study audited the lead researcher's work.

The lead researcher is himself the child of a Holocaust survivor, and utilized a process of directed introspection to identify several assumptions he held about the phenomenon of interest before beginning the study. These included an expectation that the interview participants might have gone into the dialogues having negative preconceived biases against the children of the Third Reich, being suspicious of their motives for participating in the encounter, and being wary for denial or minimization of suffering by the children of the Third Reich. Another identified assumption was that the dialogue groups themselves would be an emotionally challenging, but positive experience.

In descriptive phenomenology (Giorgi, 2009), the strict procedures governing the questions that the interviewer may ask largely prevent the researcher's biases from contaminating the data collection process. Additionally, throughout the research process, the researcher maintains the attitude of the phenomenological reduction, one aspect of which is the bracketing of the researcher's own past knowledge as he works with the present experience. This bracketing, also known as the *epoché*, is not a matter of the researcher forgetting, or being unmindful of past experience, but rather of maintaining an awareness of it to prevent it from having a distorting influence on the research process.

Results

This section presents the structure; analysis of the data indicated that there were sufficient commonalities within the children of Holocaust Survivor's experience of dialogue groups with children of the Third Reich to present the findings as a single structure. The constituents of the structure are then presented in subsections that use quotations from the interviews to provide a richer and more profound sense of the participant's experience than the structure is able to convey.

The Structure of Children of Holocaust Survivor's Experience of Dialogue Groups with Children of the Third Reich

Children of holocaust survivors who choose to participate in dialogue groups with children of parents who had participated in the Third Reich were motivated to do so by a hope of mitigating negative impacts of psychological familial

holocaust legacies in their lives. They experienced themselves as possessing a worldview that involved profound anger, fear, and uncertainty which they perceived to be a legacy of their parent's experience of the Holocaust, transmitted to them in interactions with their families. They experienced their Holocaust legacies as a profoundly burdensome responsibility, put upon them by family, that they wished to be freed from. They approached the dialogue groups with a sense of anxiety derived from a long standing aversion to Germans, and an expectation that the dialogue groups might be a profoundly upsetting experience. However this anxiety was balanced by a belief that they themselves were atypically open to the prospect of reconciliation, and an expectation that children of the Third Reich who chose to participate in the dialogue groups would be likewise atypical of Germans, in that they would have already begun to work through their issues related to their legacy as children of perpetrators.

The children of holocaust survivors felt that having an active facilitator who treated both groups equally, an inclusion roughly equal numbers of the two types of participants contributed to the groups feeling safe, productive and collaborative. They experienced a humanizing effect in regard to the children of the Third Reich, derived from their sense of connection with them in the dialogue groups. This sense of connection emerged from recognizing cultural commonalities between themselves and children of the Third Reich, developing a sense of empathy for the pain the children of the Third Reich experienced in regard to their heritage, experiences of forgiveness and caretaking of the children of the Third Reich that occurred during the groups, a realization that they as children of Holocaust Survivors also have within them the potential to become perpetrators, and that the children of perpetrators have potential to be victimized. However, even after this humanization, the children of Holocaust Survivors continued to experience some ambivalent feelings towards Germans as a group and the children of the Third Reich group members. This partially informed an expectation on the part of the children of Holocaust Survivors that these dialogues would prove to be one important part of a longer-term process of working through the effects of their Holocaust legacies. The children of Holocaust Survivor's perception of the importance of the dialogues stemmed in part from the sense that their suffering, and that of their parents, had been validated by their Holocaust legacy being compassionately acknowledged by children of the Third Reich.

Holocaust Legacy Derived Fear, Anger and Uncertainty

Participants described their worldviews as involving profound fear, anger, and uncertainty, which they have attributed to their Holocaust legacy transmitted by their family. All the participants expressed a belief that this negativity had impacted their professional and private lives in several adverse ways. Amy

described it as, “Being maimed with bitterness, a really angry view of the world and feeling powerless, feeling like a victim”. She believes this legacy influences both her private and professional life. Both Robert and Kevin felt a pervasive sense that they had to be vigilant throughout their lives with regards to when and to whom they disclosed that they are Jewish. Debbie described learning from her parents that to be noticed was dangerous, leaving her with a sense that she must remain hidden in both her private and professional life. Debbie said “This thing that when fear would inspire a desire to be invisible, or need to be invisible, and that on some level things I was taught about in my family about how being seen is dangerous. This push pull about the longing to be seen, and the fear to be seen.”

Anxiety and Emotional Preparation for the Dialogues

Participants felt anxious about the prospect of engaging in dialogue groups with children of the Third Reich, and had felt they had to brace themselves for a potentially unpleasant experience. They indicated that this aversion to participation in the groups was a manifestation of a broad aversion they felt throughout much of their lives at the prospect of being around Germans. Robert and Alice were quite anxious in the beginning when considering participation, declined participation for several years, and only finally decided to participate after having engaged in psychotherapy to process the decision. Robert said “When I first heard of it I was intrigued and a little scared. (the facilitator) said these are not a bunch of skin heads, he tried to put me at ease. I was worried about my own anger. I was afraid of what it was going to bring out in me.”. All participants but Amy responded to German triggers such as accents or a “certain look” that in the past had raised their anxiety when exposed to a person they believed was German. Debbie stated, “You sound like the people that killed my relatives. You look like the people who wore those uniforms.” Amy’s experience of this was somewhat distinctive, in that she also discussed pressures from her family and friends not to participate in the dialogue groups, and that her relatives were still upset with her in the aftermath of her participation. Amy said, “I should have titled my play ‘how to meet with the Nazis and still be friends with your family’, I am still trying to make peace.”

Distinctiveness of Group Participant’s Attitudes Towards Reconciliation

Participants saw themselves as not representative or typical of the children of Holocaust survivors prior to participation, but rather saw their willingness to overcome their initial anxiety about facing children of the Third Reich as

something that might not be common among the children of holocaust survivors. They also discussed an expectation that the children of the Third Reich in the dialogue groups would be a select group of Germans who were seeking reconciliation, had already begun to work through their issues related to their legacy as children of perpetrators, and that their stance would not be the typical stance among Germans. Both Debbie and Alice perceived the fact that the group participants chose to live in the United States as an indicator that they were accustomed to being around Jews. Alice noted: "The ones (Germans) I met in the group are very different. There is a sense that they have spent a lot of time around Jews . . . they have looked at themselves, they have a sense of loss about it, and they see you." Despite their perception that this was not a representative group of Germans, the participants still had a sense that some of the positive aspects of their experience could be generalized to other Germans as well. Debbie said, "I knew on some level this was a very select group of Germans, they were Germans who were choosing to live in the United States rather than Germany. Choosing to participate in a workshop that they knew would be extremely challenging for them. So it wasn't like I was saying that now I can relate to this whole generation differently or this whole country differently. There was a way that it was very specific but I also felt it was really symbolic and emblematic of something bigger than them as individuals."

Sense of Inherited Holocaust Legacy as a Burden

Participants acknowledged that many of the feelings and attitudes that their families had transmitted to them regarding the Holocaust survivor experience had adversely affected their lives. This was something that the participants had an awareness of prior to the group participation, but their awareness of the importance of this also grew and developed gradually throughout the course of the dialogue groups. All participants felt a strong sense of burden regarding this legacy, and felt they would like to be relieved of this burden. Amy chose to participate in the dialogue groups as a means of better understanding how the Holocaust affected her, and to try to reduce the power it held over her, and in particular her career. Robert described being angry with a particular Holocaust survivor, who made him feel he was responsible to carry the burden of Holocaust vigilance to future generations. Roberts said "It was her insistence that I carry this thing forward as the central part of my life, that it is something that I have to remember, that it is the shaper of my life. I felt very angry about that. She expected me to feel that way. My parents, friends, and family expect that my job in life is to remember this. I want something more meaningful or joyful in my life.

Conditions of Successful Dialogue Experience

Participants believed that certain important conditions contributed to making the dialogues productive. All participants believed that it was very important to have had a sense of safety in the group. This was created by having an active facilitator who treated both groups equally, and included roughly equal numbers of the two types of participants. Robert, Debbie and Alice believed that their groups involved a spirit of collaboration that was conducive to making the groups successful. Debbie in particular felt that members having the power of “co-creation” let the disparate group members united towards a common goal.

Humanization of Children of the Third Reich

Participants experienced a humanizing effect in regard to the children of the Third Reich, derived from their sense of connection with them in the dialogue group. Robert said, “It expanded my worldview, my sense of what a German person is. (They) became less of a mask or a face, to be human”. Debbie experienced a sense of connectedness from the dialogue groups stating, “Dissolving all of those so called absolute boundaries between me and some German . . . feelings of connectedness . . . that in many ways we were more alike than we were different”. There were several important factors that contributed to this humanization including: recognizing commonalities between themselves and children of the Third Reich, developing a sense of empathy for the pain they experienced in regard to their heritage, developing realization that they as victims also have within them the potential to become a perpetrator, and that the children of perpetrators have potential to be victimized.

Further humanizing the German participants to the Jews was the empathy they experienced upon hearing the German’s stories of suffering, realizing how both groups had suffered because of the war in addition to the shame, and guilt that the Germans currently experience. They believed the dialogue groups gave them a greater understanding and more complex view of children of the Third Reich. Debbie noted:

Feeling guarded, feeling tense, feeling curious. These feelings pretty quickly transformed into a lot of empathy. I recall this sense of felt shared suffering. There was a way that we inherited different versions of an experience . . . my awareness of how much guilt and shame they carried, and how awful that must have been for them, or must be in the present for them . . . It really quickly became this experience of this feeling of compassion, of what a terrible thing for them to have been born into. I actually could see how it could be worse for them. It could be so much worse to hold this feeling of having been the victimizer and not the victim.

The recognition of this pain differentiated the children of the Third Reich from the actual perpetrators in the minds of the participants, and enabled a sense of forgiveness. Kevin said, "What could she do? She could not change her family history!" while Robert said "I came to view Germans as just German. I could kind of let them off the hook". Alice felt mutual caring took place during the groups, and believed this contributed to the transformational healing she experienced in the dialogue groups. Alice said "When you get in the room with somebody and feel their heart beat and see their tears or feel what they are saying. It changes the dynamics of the situation". Amy said, "He began weeping, I took him in my arms, I really felt for him . . . it was a very human moment". Debbie summed up the experience thus:

Can we look each other in the eye? Humanize each other by just listening and feeling heard by one another, and being surprised by my own responses, like when I would see tears in the eyes of someone speaking in that kind of voice, an accent . . . so to hear a strong German accent and yet to hear in the accent these words of shame, and sadness, and pain and all of that . . . and to be surprised by my own response . . . I would become tearful along with them. That was the feeling of empathy that I had most of the time.

Another aspect of the group experience that contributed to the humanization of children of the Third Reich was developing a sense of commonality with them, most prominently a shared German culture and heritage. Robert gave an example of how, when wrote an article following his participation in the dialogue groups, he misspelled German as "J"erman with a J, representing to him the integration of his two cultural identities of being both a Jew and a German. Debbie believed that the dialogue groups helped reawaken her German heritage, breaking down the barriers between her and the German participants, resulting in a feeling of connectedness. She stated:

All that Germanness was so renounced in my family . . . I was so disidentified from my Germanness, but in that moment I recognized that just as the Germans were recognizing certain kinds of familiarity with us as Jews there was that place of realizing that I was a German Jew.

The final factor contributing to the humanization of the children of the Third Reich was the realization that the Jewish participants themselves were capable of being both victims and perpetrators, and that the same was true for the Germans in the group. This involved experiences during the groups that

helped them see the potential within themselves to desire revenge, and by acting on this to potentially become perpetrators. Alice noted that the Germans in her group actually made themselves more vulnerable by making disclosures in the group, possibly opening themselves up to victimization by Jewish group members.

Ongoing Ambivalent Feelings about Children of the Third Reich and Germans

Despite the aforementioned humanization that occurred during the dialogue process, all participants continued to experience ambivalent feelings towards Germans as whole as well as the German group members. Alice described herself as experiencing “the presence of both love and hate” for the German participants. Robert’s ambivalence was evident when he said, “I would see these little kids coming up from the subway (in Berlin). I did not know if I wanted to give them a lollypop or to shoot them. It was confusing to me”. Debbie noted that she felt close to the Germans she met in the groups, and even drawn to them; she noted that the similarities between herself and the Germans were greater than the differences. However, immediately after saying this, Debbie reinforced the point that “the differences between them are also huge.”

Expectation of a Life-Long Working through of Holocaust Legacy

Participants believed their dialogues were a part of a long-term process of working through the effects of their Holocaust legacies. Amy likened this experience to that of an Alcoholics Anonymous member, being a “life-long commitment to recovery”. Debbie felt that processing her Holocaust legacy is a “deepening process that occurs over time,” but that in the wake of her group participation, she had: “courage to keep asking myself questions too, to keep reexamining where I am on the continuum, not just okay now I have transcended and am done”.

Validation of Suffering

Participants expressed the belief that their suffering, as children Holocaust survivors, had been validated during their participation in the dialogue groups, because their Holocaust legacy was compassionately acknowledged by children of the Third Reich. Debbie felt it was a powerful experience to “be seen” in the dialogue groups. She said, “There is something about being seen that the workshop did. What it was to see each other, to acknowledge the wish to be seen”. Related to this sense of validation, Debbie felt that it was a powerful experience to be taken care of by children of the Third Reich. Debbie said, “The

ability to let Germans take care of you around this was very profound too . . . it took the devil out of it. I guess is the best way I could say it”.

Amy, Robert, and Kevin all explicitly identified apologies as an important aspect of the experience with regard to validation. Robert and Kevin described receiving apologies spontaneously from Germans they were in dialogue with. Kevin said of one the German participants, “She was remorseful, and apologized rather profusely saying that it was a black mark on the German people”. Amy requested and received an apology from one the Germans in her dialogue group:

She turned to me and said that I apologize for all the German people. For what my people did to your people. That was a liberation and a half for me. In the moment it blew me away, I had no idea what happened . . . Somebody saw me. It was my turn to cry and have a German comfort me. Kindness!

Discussion

Given the aims of the dialogue groups that the participants experienced, the most interesting results are those that indicate or imply a sense of healing in regard to aversive and burdensome aspects of the Holocaust legacy. Results from this study indicate that the participants experienced a sense of healing of perceived intergenerational trauma, as well as some positive shifts in sense of identity. While this study is qualitative, and cannot be said to measure outcomes, the participants reported experiences do seem to be broadly consistent with the goals of the dialogue groups, and suggest that such reconciliation groups may indeed be capable of making a contribution to peace-building. These findings have implications for several bodies of literature.

Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma

The findings of the present study are consistent with much of the literature on the intergenerational transmission of trauma (Danieli, 1998). Participants reported an expectation from their parents and other family members to carry forward the memory of the Holocaust, which they experienced as burdensome, interfering with the pursuit of their own lives. The participants saw their Holocaust legacy as involving a view that the world is a dangerous place, and that caution and vigilance, particularly concerning their Jewish identity, was necessary. Hammack (2009) discusses the existence of “master narratives” that become embedded in a culture, get transmitted to future generations, and have the effect of reinforcing intractable conflicts. The Holocaust legacy

as described by the participants seems to be just such a master narrative, with similarities to the Israeli master narrative described by Hammack in his study of Israeli youth participating in a coexistence program with Palestinian youth. The participants in the present study also seem to have experienced some of the tensions between master narrative and personal narrative that Hammack described. Like the youths in Hammack's study, the present study's participants saw their attitudes as not representative of their group at large, possibly reflecting that their participation in such groups, and the resulting shift in their attitudes, was perceived by them as a deviation from their culture's master narrative.

Intergroup Contact and Prejudice Reduction

There are several theories and findings concerning the conditions which are most conducive to the reduction of intergroup prejudice in contact situations, as originally posited by Allport (1954), (Bar-On and Kassem, 2004; Johnson D. and Johnson R., 1985; Sherif, White, Hood and Sherif, 1961; Staub, 2003). A sense of safety in the contact environment and collaborative effort towards a common goal are two elements that emerged in the findings of the present study that seem to be consistent with some of the existing literature on prejudice reduction in contact situations. This is not surprising, given that the designs of the dialogue groups appear to have informed by some of this literature. Participants felt that the facilitators had created a safe and supportive environment in most cases, and several participants spoke to the collaborative dynamics in the groups and the similarity of the goals of the Jews and Germans in the group, with both groups looking to alleviate the sense of a burdensome intergenerational legacy.

However, sources in the literature on intergroup contact situations have also identified equal status and power as a necessary precondition for prejudice reduction, and it is less clear whether that was the case in the dialogue groups the participants experienced. While all participants were second generation, and thus no direct victims or perpetrators were present, several participants reported feeling that discrepancy did or should exist between the two groups regarding the status accorded their respective suffering. Some participants reported being concerned that validating the German's suffering would inappropriately validate it as being equal to the suffering of the Jews in the group. It should be noted that when Allport (1954) discussed equal status in contact situations, he was not considering contact situations in which one group came expressly seeking the forgiveness of another. Bar-On (1996) suggests that the "symmetry and asymmetry" that is present in dialogues between Jews and Germans is manageable, since the imbalance is culturally sanctioned and

agreed upon. This seems to be consistent with the participant's reported experiences of the Germans asking for forgiveness. It appears that for the most part, participants in this study were able to successfully navigate this issue by avoiding comparisons of degrees of suffering, instead acknowledging one another's suffering as real and meaningful in absolute terms.

Constructive Victim Beliefs

Several theorists (Aronson & Bridgman, 1979; Busse et al. 1999; Dovidio & Gartner, 1999; Kelman, 1999; Staub, 2003; Vollhardt, 2009) suggest that the presence of constructive victim beliefs can contribute to the possibility of long-term peace building and violence reduction. Constructive beliefs include placing a high value on: inclusiveness, commonality, common in-group identity, empathy, sympathy, pro-social behavior and collective action. Participants identified several commonalities between themselves and the children of the Third Reich; this identification appears to indicate the development of a transcendent identity as described by these theorists (Dovidio, 1999; Kelman, 1999; Tal-Or, N., Boninger, D., Gleicher, F., 2002; Tutu, 1999; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). The most important commonality to arise out of the groups was a shared German heritage. The children of Holocaust survivors and their parents had renounced their German heritage, and few had given thought to the fact that they too were culturally German prior to the dialogues. A second area of commonality which both Jewish and German participants groups share is the suffering related to the Holocaust. Jewish participants reported having given little or no thought about the experience of the children of the Third Reich prior to their participation in the dialogue groups. The empathy derived from this constitutes another constructive victim belief. Empathy, in combination with the newfound commonalities, had the effect of humanizing the children of the Third Reich in the eyes of the Jewish participants.

Internal Process of Forgiving

This research suggests that implicit forgiveness an important component of the dialogue groups and contributed to a sense of healing and reconciliation. Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Milner (2007) described this as emotional forgiveness, which is the replacement of negative unforgiving emotions with positive "other-oriented emotions", and found emotional forgiveness results in positive psychophysiological changes. Models of interpersonal forgiveness have been extrapolated into models of intergroup forgiveness (Rowe, 2007), which suggest that individuals can experience forgiveness towards groups of people they perceive to have historically wronged their own group. Children of

Holocaust survivors came to understand that the children of the Third Reich had in fact not perpetrated the Nazi atrocities, and that forgiveness could appropriately be granted to this generation. It is critical to reinforce that this forgiveness is directed exclusively at the second generation who the children of Holocaust survivors came to realize had nothing to do with the Holocaust, and that the participants did not experience a sense of forgiveness toward the actual perpetrators of the holocaust. Kevin said, "What could she do? She could not change her family history!" Robert said, "I came to view Germans as just German. I could kind of let them off the hook". While one might argue that there is attributional distinction between forgiveness of a wrong committed, and a determination that someone was not in fact a wrongdoer, the participant's experience appears to have held the meaning of forgiveness for them, and to be consistent with some of the existing forgiveness literature.

Implications for Future Research

This was an exploratory study, which focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of the essential meanings for the children of Holocaust survivors, in their dialogues with children of the Third Reich. Clearly; a similar study of the children of the Third Reich who participated in the same type of dialogue would lead to a more comprehensive understanding of these groups. Additionally, dialogue groups similar to the ones in this study have been conducted with other groups, such as Israelis and Palestinians; similar qualitative research with these groups, as well quantitative research on a larger scale could give us a better understanding of the degree to which the findings of this study may be more widely applicable. It may also be useful for future studies to look at reconciliation groups whose conditions vary from those of the children of the Holocaust—children of the Third Reich situation: first generation reconciliation groups, groups whose conflicts remain active, or groups for whom the statuses of victim and perpetrator are not so clearly established.

Finally, the participant's experience of long-term change as a result of their participation in the dialogue groups would benefit from both qualitative and quantitative follow up research, to assess how extensive, how common, and how profound such change is. It is these changes which may enable reconciliation dialogues to do more than just improve the lives of those who participate directly in them. To the extent that the intergenerational transmission of trauma is partially responsible for prejudice, conflict, and violence, the capacity for dialogue groups, such as those described in this study, to alter the feelings and behavior patterns derived from this intergenerational trauma, is the means by which the groups can contribute to a more sustainable and enduring peace.

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