



The grandchildren of war:

A transgenerational perspective on traumatic memory

Extended abstract

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In this paper I analyse the relationship between war trauma and transnational identity. My aim is to show how war trauma experienced by German families during WWII impacts on the identity formation of younger generations, in particular grandchildren with transnational identity. Data is provided by interviews in Turkey in 2016, on 45 individuals with German mothers and Turkish fathers, aged between 17 and 75. Interviews focus on how members of the wartime generation conveyed their experiences and memories to their grandchildren and how traumatic legacy is interpreted by this transnational third generation. How did the war affect the generation of mothers and grandmothers? How do grandchildren interpret these generations' memories of war? The paper thus seeks to understand both how war trauma reconstructed the cultural perspectives of the wartime generation itself, and what role the memory of war plays in the perspective of the third generation.

Despite the numerous studies on the direct transmission of traumatic memory and identity, there has been only a limited amount of research on the indirect transmission of traumatic memory across multiple generations. An anthropological perspective is concerned not only with how the memory is recorded, but also how these records are transmitted. My first contribution is to problematize traumatic memory by observing it across three generations. This approach focuses on specifically female agency in the transmission of traumatic heritage / historical trauma. My second contribution is to present the relation between traumatic heritage and cultural identity within a trans-generational framework. Here, it needs to be recalled that the content of traumatic memory concerns not only to what is remembered, but also how those memories are transferred. My third contribution is to show how tendencies caused by wars are reproduced through these transnational identities.

As the War unfolded, the experiences of German families formed a kind of family memory. The second generation of German women that came to live in Turkey by marriage to Turkish men reproduced their and their children's war memories, thus reconstructing their identities, even as they tried to leave those memories behind.



The Turkish-German third generation are privileged to be able to live their lives both in Germany and in Turkey. This generation is particularly interested in family history. Their German mothers' cultural adaptation to Turkey was mostly somewhat painful. This may have contributed to the emergence of the traumas of their mothers, who generally wished to remain silent. The majority of individuals interviewed thought that their mothers' experience of the aftermath of the war had deepened their trauma. New traumas resuscitated old ones.

The Turkish-German third generation frequently came across WWII in social environments. Especially during childhood, from close relatives on their father's side, from peers and even teachers, they were subject to marginalizing labels such as *giaour* ("infidel"), "German seed", or "Nazi". Both their mother's adaptation difficulties and/or their experience of degrading speech aroused their interest in their German family's histories of war, prompting them to ask such questions like: "What did my family witness?"; "What do they think about these experiences?"; and "How do they make sense of the War?"

The experience of transnational identity has intensified the grandchildren's curiosity about family history. Their attempt to scrutinize the past has caused parts of the war memory to resurface. The study reveals that the German families try to hide the memory of war or experiences of Nazism from their grandchildren. The first reaction the grandchildren meet as they search for the war memories of their family elders is usually silence. This strategy of staying silent is adopted as a means of self-preservation.

The war experience also reshaped the habitus of German families. Here, the details distilled from the memory of family members and transferred to subsequent generations are of great importance. The majority of the families experienced pain and poverty during and after the War. Families endured traumatic events such as death, deprivation, injury and mutilation. Resulting in physical and mental injury, these events opened up a traumatic space in the memory of German families. Looking at how this memory is transmitted, it is striking that grandchildren seem to find that it is women rather than men who are willing to talk about the war. Masculine memories of Nazism tend to be repressed. It is women that rewrite and reproduce family history, thus conveying it into the present. German women are subjects that create a history as a history. The content of what is being transmitted has a theme of victimisation, however is reframed by struggle. The War has now been justly dealt with, after a struggle with the injustice it brought.

The study demonstrates major changes in habits, understandings and relationships in families that endure the trauma of war, and in certain everyday practices such as social and domestic relations, social status, class, possessions and estate inheritance. In other words, the victimizing factor of war altered the conception of the world and ethics. War memory is a reference for subsequent generations' quest for a stronger stance on the path of life.

War memory is very important in the development of the cultural capital of the third generation. In trying to understand the wartime past of their families, grandchildren have tried to discover the meaning of being German. Throughout this process, they have reconsidered the social relations, values and behaviour both of their German parents and themselves. Grandchildren come up with new strategies after having contact with these repertoires of war. Children have been able to develop new strategies by deduction. No matter



how bitter these memories were, the deductions were perceived as “gains” for the future. War memory prompted the Turkish-German generation to redesign their habitus.

This research reveals that an emphasis on identity difference leads people to reproduce those difference and to gain a closer understanding of their family histories. In their quest to explore their German identity, members of the Turkish-German third generation have reproduced the dual origins of their own identity.

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