

Human Sciences Encounters in Phnom-Penh: Past Presentations: Intergenerational Transmission Effects of Trauma Stemming from the Khmer Rouge Regime

Intergenerational Transmission Effects of Trauma Stemming from the Khmer Rouge Regime

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We present findings from a study on intergenerational transmission effects of trauma stemming from the Khmer Rouge (KR) regime - comparing "perpetrator" former KR families with "victim" non-KR families. Knowing that many rank-and-file KR members experienced considerable trauma during the KR regime and its aftermath - especially among those involved in active combat duty - a significant number are likely to continue to suffer from the effects of such trauma. Such effects may also have a psychological impact on their children similar to intergenerational effects of trauma known among victims. Nevertheless, there may be important differences between perpetrator and victim families in parent-child communication regarding the former KR past. Former perpetrators may be especially motivated to remain silent regarding their past in order to avoid being judged negatively by their child, given the negative image of the KR regime conveyed in the media. The child may also be aware of parents' discomfort in disclosing KR experiences, and therefore avoid asking about their past - creating a "conspiracy of silence". Such lack of open communication may be an added stressor in the parent-child relationship among perpetrators with consequences for the child's adjustment beyond the effects of parents' trauma. In this study, we examine parents' KR-related trauma and parent-child communication as factors in intergenerational transmission effects.

Forty-eight former KR families and forty-seven non-KR families participated in the study. The KR families were recruited from Pailin and Battambang provinces and the non-KR families from Kandal and Svay Rieng provinces. The mother, father, and young adult child born after the end of the KR regime were individually interviewed. Measures of KR-related trauma exposure, post traumatic stress (PTSD) symptoms, anxiety, and depression as well as measures assessing parent-child communication regarding parents' experiences during the KR regime and attitudes toward the KR were included.

As predicted, both perpetrator and victim groups of parents had comparable relatively high degrees of KR-related trauma exposure and PTSD symptom levels. Support for the intergenerational transmission of trauma was found in the mother-child relationship for both groups, wherein a positive relationship was found between mothers' trauma exposure and PTSD hyperarousal symptoms and her child's anxiety. Regarding parent-child communication, the KR mothers admitted to being less open and more concerned about being judged by her child than non-KR mothers, although no group differences were found for fathers. Moreover, children in the KR group were more motivated not to ask about their mother's or father's KR past relative to non-KR children. Parent-children communication was largely not predictive of the child's psychological adjustment. However, somewhat surprisingly, in both groups the child's report of parents' willingness to communicate about their past KR experiences was positively correlated with the child's anxiety. The possible clinical and social implications of the findings will be discussed.