

Separation-Individuation Conflicts in Children of Holocaust Survivors

HARVEY A. BAROCAS, PH.D.
AND
CAROL B. BAROCAS, M.S.W.

ABSTRACT: This article examines the developmental conflicts of children of Holocaust Survivors with specific emphasis on psychic trauma and second-generation Survivor effects. Issues related to depression, guilt, and aggression are discussed in relation to Mahler's separation-individuation process. Developmental failures at early phases may predispose these children toward low self-esteem, narcissistic vulnerability, identity problems, and impairments in interpersonal relations. The need for further research and clinical investigation is emphasized to help develop preventive measures and attenuate the effects of the Holocaust on future generations.

I saw things I knew no little girl should see. Blood and shattered glass. Piles of skeletons and blackened barbed wire with bits of flesh stuck to it the way flies stick to walls after they are swatted dead. Hills of suitcases, mountains of children's shoes. Whips, pistols, books, knives and needles (Epstein, 1979).

This article will examine the impact of the Holocaust on the separation-individuation process in children born to concentration camp Survivors and will identify specific developmental conflicts that seem to characterize these individuals. Special emphasis will be placed on the long-term effects of the Holocaust and the transmission and perpetuation of pathological patterns of adaptation in the second generation.

In recent years we have observed an unusual number of children of Holocaust Survivors seeking professional help. These children have come of age, now in their 20s and 30s, and have identified themselves as the heirs of the Holocaust. The "conspiracy of silence" is finally over, and the mental health profession has indeed begun to recognize the emergence and second-generation concentration camp effects (Barocas & Barocas, 1973; Rabinowitz, 1976; Sigal, Silver, Rakoff, & Ellin, 1973; Trossman, 1968). The inclusion by the American Psychiatric Association of posttraumatic stress disorders in the DMS-III is further evidence of this trend.

Based on clinical experience with such patients, our impression is that

these individuals present symptomatology and developmental conflicts that bear a striking resemblance to the concentration camp survival syndrome described in the international literature (Des Pres, 1976; Dimsdale, 1974; Eitinger, 1962; Niederland, 1964). In children of Survivors, the horrendous scenes of the Holocaust are still fresh in their drawings, writings, dreams, and fantasies many years later (Epstein, 1979). The children seen in our practice present a picture of impaired object relations, low self-esteem, negative identity formation, and considerable personality constriction. They also exhibit increased vulnerability in stress situations and pathological regression and some temporary blurring of ego boundaries when confronted with experiences reminiscent of the Holocaust.

Many of the conflicts observed in children of Survivors will be explored from an ego psychological point of view and regarded as a developmental failure of the separation-individuation process to proceed normally because of the long-range effects of the Holocaust. According to Mahler (1972), when the symbiotic stage of development is unpredictable and painfully frustrated in the first 2 years of life, instead of need satisfying or, alternately, being marked by too much exclusiveness when the mother cannot accept the child's separation, the result in both cases may be separation panic, dread of dissolution of the self, and fear of loss of identity. Thus the step of separation-individuation is experienced as a catastrophic threat, creating an inhibition of independent assertion in the child. Similarly, separation and anxiety can persist when the mother has fostered too intense a tie with the child and does not encourage autonomous functioning. Consequently, one of the manifestations of this inhibition may be the fear of final individuation and autonomy.

Mahler believes that separation-individuation is, at best, partial. Catastrophic life events and posttraumatic stress disorders such as those observed in Holocaust Survivors are likely to make separation-individuation for children of Survivors even more difficult. Utilizing Mahler's developmental framework, we will examine how concentration camp Survivors were rearing their own children, seemingly far removed from the horrors of the Holocaust.

PRICE OF SURVIVAL

It is reasonable to hypothesize that the price of survival for these people may have been deep-rooted disturbances within the families they formed after liberation. Individual and collective ritualized mourning were not experienced, and grief was not worked through. The Survivors have never managed to escape the guilt and terror of the years that left them orphans. Many of them live in constant fear of renewed persecution and experience frequent depression that often leaves them unable to form normal relationships

(Barocas & Barocas, 1973). Many of the Survivors had married hastily in order to huddle together against a hostile environment and as an attempt to reconstruct some semblance of their lost families and provide some necessary symbiotic gratification following massive object loss. When many of the marriages proved unsatisfactory, all their hopes focused on their children, which inflated the importance of their relationship to their children.

Infertility problems and menstrual irregularities, including complete cessation of menstruation, were common aftereffects in Survivors of the Holocaust (Des Pres, 1976). Expectant mothers, while feeling permanently damaged and apprehensive about their capacity to nurture and rear children of their own, were simultaneously driven to become parents to replenish the previous losses. Many mothers also reported fantasies and dreams that the developing fetus was not receiving sufficient nourishment, and they could vividly recall memories of their own emaciation in the camps. Such mothers felt a constant need to push food on their children and hoard food unnecessarily, anticipating some future disaster. While their children slept, there was also constant checking and rechecking on them out of a heightened concern for their safety and welfare. Strangers were always suspect, and children were extremely overprotected and sheltered.

Unfortunately, in the years that followed, the children also became victims of the Holocaust. They were deprived of grandparents and other relatives, and they were cheated out of the parents they might have had if there had never been a Holocaust. Although well fed and provided for materially, many of these children felt emotionally impoverished. There was considerable emotional deprivation due to the greatly limited and restricted affective resources, the impaired object relations, and the grief-stricken preoccupation of the parents. Regrettably, the physical and psychic depletions many of the Survivors experienced in the camps seems to have interfered with their ability to assume the responsibilities of "good-enough parenting" and normal family life.

CHILDREN AS REPLACEMENTS

The need to resurrect their lost families is very intense for the Survivors. Fantasies of restoration of murdered loved ones are painfully relinquished after much suffering. Children are viewed as replacements for lost family members, providing some partial gratification for reunion fantasies. In these families we also found a powerful, abiding but intrusive devotion to the children, who became the *raison d'être*. The offspring of survivors, especially the first born, are usually identified with and named after dead relatives who are imbued with beautiful, idealized, or heroic qualities by the parents, thus fostering an intense identification with someone who has suffered and died. When these children are very young, the parents transmit a strong need to

make up for the loss of their deceased family members by telling them such things as "you are all we have left," while pointing out similarities to those relatives who perished.

Given the family history and dynamics, the early parent-child relationship becomes rather symbiotic, and the normal developmental separation-individuation process represents a severe threat to the family homeostasis. As Mahler (1972) has suggested, the child's progress through the separation-individuation process is experienced by many mothers as a loss of the symbiotic object and not as a gain in object relationship with the individuating child. Consequently, these families have not set eventual separation of parent and child as a goal, and strong efforts are made to maintain the symbiotic bond and thwart individuation. The fearful attitude of the parents is also shared by the children and is manifested in the difficulty of both in separating from each other, a separation that evokes deeper fears and annihilation.

The development of a separate sense of self in many of the children is experienced as a terrible narcissistic injury to the family, since the intrapsychic stability of the concentration camp family is precarious and is readily upset in major ways by the growth process. Many of these children suffer considerable guilt at being or wanting to be different from their parents. Any separation that implies rejection evokes guilt.

We also see an intensification of the "rapprochement crisis"; there is a constant struggle against fusion on the one side and isolation on the other. Such chronic ambivalence hampers the children in later relationships. Autonomous strivings are not actively encouraged and create much anxiety and feelings of helplessness in the parents. At puberty, these conflicts are further intensified in the face of mounting needs for individuation. Joyous occasions such as bar mitzvahs, graduation ceremonies, and weddings create much ambivalence. Such significant events bring on added grief and sorrow that diminish any potential happiness. The individuation process of the children seems to reactivate the lifelong mourning of the Survivors and the additional threat of yet another object loss.

CHILDREN FEEL OBLIGATED TO FULFILL PARENTS' DEMANDS

The children of Survivors are particularly vulnerable and are frequently forced (by emotional means) to assume the major responsibility for preserving the integrity of the family. They feel obligated to fulfill their parents' demands, particularly the preservation of the family unit, which is emphasized as a top priority. Dating is frequently avoided and marriage postponed, since the early developmental phases have not been completed. These individuals encounter a profound crisis at the prospect of leaving home. They

develop acute anxiety, phobic and panic reactions and, in some instances, cases of ego decompensation have been observed.

Survivors had few close friends and their social lives centered largely around their children. "Honor thy parents" seems to be a chief commandment in the children's moral code, thus causing much unconscious guilt over the murderous and destructive impulses toward them. We have observed that the deep moral obligation of the children to their family serves the purpose of warding off intolerable guilt feelings.

The Survivors, being terrified of their own aggression and unable to express it, may communicate subtle cues for their children to act out the aggression and consequently gratify the parents' wishes. Frequently, the spouse of the Survivor may encourage the child's aggressive behavior as a vicarious expression of his own anger with the emotionally absent spouse. Reports of aggressive, explosive behavior in these children upon reaching adolescence are thus understandable (Sigal et al., 1973; Trossman, 1968).

When the children were reprimanded by their parents for misbehaving, epithets like "swine," "idiot," or "filth" were hurled at them—the same invectives their Nazi guards had used on them. Parental identification with the oppressive and aggressive Nazi forces was striking, and Survivor parents were particularly susceptible to reliving memories of the Holocaust, with any regression activated by stressful life events. Many of our patients have reported that when they acted aggressively, they were told "You're just like a Nazi." The pathology of the parents, exposed to the Nazi persecution, eventuated in a sadomasochistic interaction when they had to discipline their children. These intense power struggles are relived transferentially in treatment and create considerable difficulty for therapists, who are also viewed as Nazis.

Some Survivors viewed their children as if they were reincarnated Nazis and were frightened by the murderous feelings recruited in them by their children's behavior. When parents would lose their tempers, they would frighten their children by denouncing them as the "enemy." The children often felt devastated by this comparison and were forced to suppress their rage. This also created considerable guilt that they would be classified as sadists who were torturing their parents. Such conflicts added further to the problems of individuation and severely hampered their ability to use healthy aggressive energy in the service of separation.

PARENTS' MESSAGE: "BE QUIET AND GRATEFUL"

Concentration camp parents seem unconsciously to curb their children's aggressive behavior to insure their survival in a world that was still perceived as hostile and untrustworthy. They lived with the constant fear of being

evicted from their apartments unless they were model tenants. The constant message from the parents was "be quiet and grateful for what you have" and "don't rock the boat" for fear of retribution by hostile authorities. The children were forever being admonished to "keep the lid on" their behavior. Survivor parents continually emphasized to their children the need to submit in order to survive, promoting a masochistic life-style.

Patients have reported being greatly restricted and inhibited from making noise as children; they also indicated considerable parental anxiety during their motoric development. However, later in their development these same children, while away from their parents on vacation, would protest against the passive-submissive position they were taught as children and would act out their daring and adventurous fantasies eventually, when they returned home, usually depressed, they assumed their old restrictive and unassertive patterns.

The enormous inhibition of aggression that intensifies symbiotic conflicts also adds to the anxiety of adolescence and the emerging sexuality while simultaneously complicating and interfering with oedipal resolutions. The developmental failures in the separation-individuation process make it difficult for children of Survivors to deal adequately with stresses imposed by oedipal conflicts. Moreover, the persistence of unresolved pregenital rage interferes with adult sexual enjoyment, as evidenced by heightened fears of hurting and damaging their partners. The fusion of sex and aggression is replete in the sexual fantasies of these individuals, where repressed hostility emerges in intense sadomasochistic images of brutality, rape, and sodomy. In having to deal with the conflictual issue of intrusive images of their parents' sexual brutalization, problems of impotence, premature ejaculation, and sexual dysfunction are common.

While their parents' will to resist had been broken in the camps, the children are furious at their parents' passivity and blame them for their misfortunes, setbacks, and letting themselves be victimized. They harbor much anger and resentment toward the German people and have murderous, sadistic revenge fantasies of dropping bombs on Germany. They also feel entitled to reparations and restitution because they, too, feel permanently scarred by their cumulative narcissistic injuries. Yet German restitution laws do not apply to the rehabilitation of Survivors' children.

DIFFICULTIES IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

At another level, the prolongation of a symbiotic experience beyond the phase-specific period seems to have had damaging consequences for the children of Survivors. They often seek a degree of oneness with others that is

inappropriate and handicaps them in their interpersonal relations. Moreover, they are exquisitely sensitive to real or imagined loss experiences, and many difficulties arise when they attempt to enter into and sustain close relationships outside the family.

Concentration camp parents seem unconsciously to put obstacles in their children's path as they move toward independence and identity formation. They are forever reminding them to "be careful" and "watch out." The parents, repsonding to their own symbiotic needs, defeat the children's progress towards individuation by their intrusiveness and heightened anxiety. Because of the previous traumas of the Holocaust and unfulfilling relationships in their own childhoods or currently, it is the parents who need closeness with the children and don't allow them to separate.

Often the children feel that their parents survived the war in order to have them. Because of their unforgettable tragedy, the parents are very pessimistic and feel they can never be happy; they are quite preoccupied with memories of lost relatives. Eventually this attitude hinders their children's belief in their own happiness and becomes a residual part of them, conditioning their response and views of humanity. The children also come to feel that the Holocaust is the single most critical event that has affected their lives, although it occurred before they were born.

The hopes and aspirations of the Survivors are transferred to the children, placing considerable pressures on them. The children give special meaning to the lives of Survivors; they vindicate the suffering they endured and redeem their denigrated identity through special deeds. Educational and intellectual achievements are heavily emphasized. Survivor parents view their lives as sacrifices for their children. They represent the hope of the future, a chance to rebuild a life and grow again. The children may become the bearers of more than the usual amount of parental rescue fantasies. They become representations of the long-awaited Messiah, the wished-for savior who will deliver them from their suffering and help to restore their lost families. Consequently, the children become vehicles for their hopes, aspirations, and future, but they come to feel that their love is contingent on their continued success.

The children's self-esteem is very vulnerable, and their core pathology is likely to emerge in stress situations and revive considerable guilt. Minor setbacks and trivial failures may precipitate disproportionate adverse reactions in these children. The family constellation is conducive to exacerbated guilt feelings and severe depressive reactions when confronted with frustration and failures in their achievements. Failures suggest that the children cannot fulfill the mission of validating their parents' continued unsuccessful attempts to alleviate their guilt through their children's achievements and lead the children either to make endless unsatisfying attempts to prove their worth to their parents or to give up and drop out.

We have also noted considerable performance inhibition and a profound fear of success in children of Survivors. They feel obligated to take on the burden of having to fulfill not only their own developmental needs, but also the unrealistic expectations of their parents in that they must compensate for their sense of worthlessness and lost opportunities. Frequently, the burden is too much to bear, and these children rebel in passive-aggressive ways. Moreover, there is a strong need to undo any growth experiences because of the heightened fears of self-sufficiency and the fear of depriving their parents of the narcissistic supplies that would be lost with their increased independence.

ADAPTIVE SOLUTIONS OBSERVED

Recently, on the positive side, several adaptive solutions have been observed in children of Survivors that have been instrumental in fostering separation and identity formation. Self-help groups, started by children of Survivors, have appeared in many communities and on many college campuses. Such peer group experiences in conjunction with individual treatment have generated some very encouraging results and many eventually serve as a therapeutic model with children of Survivors.

Magazines and books have emerged lately with stories by and about children of Survivors (Epstein, 1979; Rabinowitz, 1976). These same children have been instrumental in developing courses on the Holocaust to make the lessons of the Holocaust a part of the human experience and help them separate from their Survivor parents who cling to memories of the past. As the heirs of the Holocaust, they come to feel it is their moral obligation to explain to themselves and to the world.

One can assume that the aftereffects of the concentration camps will have their impact on an unknown number of future generations. Further research and investigation is necessary to generate a clearer understanding of the complex relationship among the catastrophic events of the Holocaust, the psychological consequences of survival, and the generational impediments in the separation-individuation process following massive psychic trauma.

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*Baruch College
Psychology Department
City University of New York
17 Lexington Ave.
New York, N.Y. 10010*