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War's Mental Health Legacies for Children of Combatants

AIDA DIAS AND LUISA SALES

Portugal was involved in a colonial war between 1961 and 1975 in the African continent. Around one million Portuguese soldiers fought in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau for thirteen years. As in the Vietnam War, the children of Portuguese soldiers lived in a different country and continent, away from a war scenario, and in different times. They became aware of the war through their fathers' eyes.

In 1918, MacCurdy identified, for the first time, "war combat reaction" in soldiers. Bearing in mind that mental health disease in a member can disrupt family functioning and lead to psychopathology in their relatives, it is highly probable that disturbed military staff can transmit suffering to spouses and children.

Consequences of exposure to traumatic events, which could be a posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosis, can cross the individual boundary to family members by a process named "vicarious traumatization, compassion fatigue or secondary traumatization," according to C.R. Figley and R. Rosenheck. Offspring can be affected by acquired biologic vulnerability, which includes transmission of genetic traits, post-conception influences in the uterus, or even by changes in structural and neuroendocrine pathways of body functioning by environmental influences, as discussed in "Stress and Development: Behavioural and Biological Consequences," as well as, "Stress Predicts Brain Changes in Children: A Pilot Longitudinal Study on Youth Stress, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, and the Hippocampus." Analyzing the nature of war trauma transmission, M. Ancharoff et al. describe ways of transmitting healthy or disturbed messages by four mechanisms: silence, overdisclosure, identification, and re-enactment.

Trauma transmission was widely studied in Holocaust children. A review of the literature showed that only in clinical samples do the consequences of Holocaust experience in offspring seem to be passed

on, as reported in “Are Children of Holocaust Survivors Less Well-Adapted? A Meta-Analytic Investigation of Secondary Traumatization.” In *Intergenerational Legacies of Trauma*, Danieli exposed a large number of examples of trauma transmission conditions across generations, including war trauma. Another study was developed with offspring of veterans of World War II, and although the data did not allow for rigorous epidemiological conclusions, long-term, transgenerational effects of fathers’ combat trauma were demonstrated.

The Portuguese colonial war presents a set of conditions that favor the study of war influences on adult children of ex-combatants. Since the Portuguese population has gradually become more open to debate about the colonial war, it is now propitious to study the effects of this historical period that caused important changes in Portuguese society.

This work results from a preliminary bibliographic review within the project “Children of Colonial War: Post-memory and Representations” that aims to analyze colonial war representations in post-war Portuguese generations, regarding individual, familial, and societal settings, and studies the hypotheses of trauma transmission vulnerability. This review was carried out through searches in databases such as EBSCO, Web of Science, and PubMed resources, under keywords such as “war veteran children,” “war offspring,” and “war secondary trauma,” published between 1978 and 2008. The publications were considered if they fulfilled both conditions: subject of study was related to mental health or well-being, and the populations studied were children of war combatants.

Studies were excluded when children of war combatants were directly exposed to war contexts, or if fathers died in a war or were war prisoners. Thus, the majority of the populations studied come from the United States and Australia.

Each author is represented only once, with his or her most recent publication. Information was summarized with SPSS software, in order to compile information about: year of publication, father’s theater of war, scientific impact of publications, children assessment methodology, and major outcomes. From the group of 739 studies that were found, we only integrated 40 papers that fulfill the selected criteria.

From the studies analyzed, 87.5 percent used quantitative methods and 12.5 percent used qualitative methods. Cross-sectional data-collecting strategy was used in 55 percent of the studies, and 15 percent are longitudinal studies. Control group existed in 63 percent of the studies. Parent mental health assessment was carried out in 45 percent of the cases.

Data about children functioning was collected through their parents in 27.5 percent of the studies. Reports or clinical files were used

in 10 percent of the research. The number of subjects in each study is predominantly between 51 and 300 individuals. The most assessed life stages in children are childhood and adolescence; adult children are less analyzed.

Independent variables in the studies analyzed were defined according to war characteristics, such as war zone deployment, combat exposure, and abusive violence in combat. The most studied independent variable was the father's PTSD and combat exposure. War consequences such as the father's absence, separation effects, father/mother violence, and PTSD were also predictors of children's mental health outcomes. Dependent variables in children were assessed in terms of adverse effects on emotions, behavior, social functioning, development, cognition, maltreatment, and personality.

With the analysis of 40 studies, we conclude that 35 of them show negative consequences of fathers' exposure to war on the mental health of children. Emotional and behavioral consequences in children were predicted by father/war exposure effect, other than PTSD. Behavioral consequences in children are positively related to PTSD in fathers, as an outcome of war. Child maltreatment and aggression are also positively correlated with fathers' exposure to war.

The impact factor of publications with articles about the effects of fathers' exposure to war on children's mental health (1,778) is lower than the impact factor of publications in generic fields of Psychology (1,992) and Psychiatry (2,157). This index is a measure of citation of articles, accordingly with data provided by ISI Web of Knowledge. The most cited papers are developed with samples of children of Vietnam veterans.

Scientific publications in the field of the consequences of war for military families started with Lagrone in 1978. Publications about the assessment of children of war veterans began to emerge in 1984, about the time posttraumatic stress syndrome was defined in the *DSM-III R*. Since then, the number of publications has increased; during the past five years, we found at least 17 studies that analyze the effects on children of their fathers' exposure to war in large samples of American soldiers who were deployed to Iraq during the past few years.

The selected studies were developed with children of war fighters who were deployed predominantly to Vietnam, the Gulf, and Iraq. Australian and American governments seem to be concerned about the problem of wars' effects on families, namely with the abuse and maltreatment of children in military families, but also with the longer-term effects of posttraumatic disorders of fathers on children. Our

preliminary literature review about the effects of fathers' exposure to war on the mental health of children seems to show that war comes home with fathers.

Emotional and behavioral problems are the most common reactions of the children of war combatants. Poor social adaptation, higher suicide rates, and dysfunctional personality traits such as aggression and anxiety were also exposed. We also conclude that those negative effects are more common in children of fathers with posttraumatic stress diagnosis, but are not exclusive to them. When the mother can offset the negative effects of the father's misbehavior, however, those symptoms are not found in children.

Between the different points of view on the effects on children of fathers' exposure to war, child maltreatment is the most studied at the present time. A recent longitudinal study of the U.S. population reported that child maltreatment of offspring of military personnel deployed to war zones increased considerably in the period of the Iraq war, according to "Child Maltreatment in Enlisted Soldiers' Families During Combat-Related Deployments," and "Effect of Deployment on the Occurrence of Child Maltreatment in Military and Nonmilitary Families." It seems that deployment and the return home from battlefield really increases child maltreatment at home.

We need to gain a better understanding of the consequences on children of fathers' exposure to war. It is important to use longitudinal methodologies across the different life stages of individuals, and to devote more attention to the adult stage. Although we are aware of the major effects of war on directly exposed populations, we believe it is pivotal to identify the real consequences of war for military families. In most cases, those effects probably remain silent, which makes it impossible to prevent them.

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