



War Related Traumatic Experience Correlates with Older Adult's Post-trauma Life Behaviors

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Abstract. This literature review incorporates a case study to discuss the relationship between the post-war life behaviors of older adults who have experienced war-related trauma. The first behavior is unconscious recall of war-related scenes, and older adults with PTSD are more likely to recall specific traumatic war memories. The second effect is that war-related trauma in older adults can indirectly and directly produce intergenerational transmission, and this transmission can affect all three generations. To be more specific, there are three key components that lead to intergenerational transmission: functioning and involvement in the family unit; family atmosphere and patterns of communication. In addition to this, providing appropriate treatment for PTSD in older adults and how encouraging them to engage in treatment is a future concern.

Keywords: War Related Disorder · Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder · Older Adults · Post-Trauma Life

1 Introduction

Epidemiological studies on war-related trauma and the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in older adults are being conducted worldwide. War-related trauma was reported by 92.7% of Austrian veterans who experienced World War II [1]. This data is unexpected, which indicates that the prevalence of war-related trauma in the elderly is very high. In Germany, the prevalence of war-related traumatic events was higher in older adults than in younger adults, and the prevalence of PTSD doubles which was 3.4% [2, 3]. The results were also highly consistent across nations, with the prevalence of PTSD among Vietnam veterans being 11.2% according to the PTSD Checklist for DSM-IV supplemented with PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 items (PCL-5) assessment criteria, the prevalence among female veterans was 6.6% [4]. Undoubtedly, war-related traumatic experiences, including PTSD, a very common disorder for older adults who have experienced war. However, whether war-related experiences affect the post-war daily life of older adults is a direction that has not been extensively studied. The war experience has a persistent effect on the relationship between the post-war daily life of older adults. Thus, in this study, a literature review was conducted to correlate the behavior of older adults in post-war life with traumatic experiences. In order to effectively demonstrate the impact of war experiences on post-war life, a participant

who lived through the war was invited to correlate the symptoms and manifestations of post-war trauma with his old age, so as to confirm the indelible impact of early war experiences on survivors.

2 Case Study

A 67-year-old Chinese man who survived the local “Sizhong Party and Hongsi Party” politically related war struggle when he was 7 years old was invited to participate in the study. To protect the privacy of this participant, he will be referred to as Shang in the rest of the study. The study used self-interview as a method to collect information using an interview questionnaire provided by Bar-Ilan University and the American Psychological Association Interdivision COVID-19 Task Force, Older Adults and Caregivers Work Group. The study was completed with a descriptive analysis of Shang’s childhood war experiences and his life in old age. The researcher excerpted recollections related to his childhood war experiences that Shang mentioned in interviews:

“I was born in 1995 in a small rural village in Zhejiang Province, China. When I was 7 years old, a political struggle led to the sacrifice of innocent ordinary people. Shang also and his family had to flee for their lives as well. I escaped with my family in a boat, but countless bullets splashed from the striking hull of the boat and fell into the lake with a lot of water. In the process of escaping, one of my aunts was unfortunately shot in the throat, but was taken to the hospital in time to survive. The way we protected ourselves was very simple, my dad took all the quilts in the house and covered the table and told everyone to hide under the table, it was very unreliable but it was the only way we could protect ourselves at that moment.”.

3 Literature Review

3.1 Flashback of Specific Trauma Scene

Flashback is a symptom of posttraumatic stress disorder, the re-experiencing of a traumatic practice after some initial adjustment to the trauma. Words, sounds, smells, and scenes experienced during the initial trauma can trigger flashback uncontrollably [5]. Flashback refers to involuntary, vivid images that occur in the state of wakefulness [6].

The study by Jones et al. investigated whether the prevalence of flashbacks changed over time in soldiers who had experienced intense warfare [6]. The selection of wars included First World War, Second World War, Malaya and Korea, and Persian Gulf War. The findings revealed that flashbacks were less prevalent during the First and Second World Wars. However, as time progressed, it became more frequent than in long-ago wars. In particular, flashbacks were recorded significantly higher among veterans of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Meanwhile, flashback symptoms in PTSD patients were also examined in detail in the two-year follow-up study by Sack et al. [7]. The purpose was to find out whether they suffered from PTSD and the diagnostic symptoms of depression. The results showed that the prevalence of PTSD was about consistency and very variable

as it was six years earlier. Eighteen percent of participants developed PTSD five years after the traumatic experience. Furthermore, participants with PTSD were more likely to recall specific traumatic war memories. In the study by Berntsen and Rubin, a sample of older Danes were interviewed and asked to recall their experiences during the German occupation of Denmark in World War II [8]. The results showed that as age increased, the occurrence of events recalling the German invasion and surrender increased for Danish participants. These participants were under 8 years old at the event of the traumatic experience, but their current levels of post-traumatic stress and vivid memories of stress were both positively correlated.

In Shang's interview, he said, "I am very afraid of hearing the sound of firecrackers or fireworks during New Year's Eve, because the sound is very much like the sound of bombs and bullets. That's why when our grandchildren want me to light fireworks for them, I refuse to do so. It's like I'm lighting a bomb and I'm afraid it will suddenly explode. I feel sad because I can't be as close to my grandchildren as other grandfathers, and they may think I'm a strict grandfather who doesn't even want to set off fireworks with them."

The outcomes of the Literature Review study highlight that flashbacks are an important indication of PTSD and have a high occurrence in the daily lives of surviving older adults. The symptoms of flashbacks correspond to the manifestations in Shang's daily life. In war, people cannot predict which direction bullets and bombs will come from, so they must be alert at all times. And the fireworks at New Year's Eve have a similar principle which is after the explosion will be sprayed in all directions. The sound of fireworks and firecrackers would trigger Shang's flashback, reminding him of the uncontrollable explosions of wartime bombs. The disclosures experienced during the war would remain placed in the context of their later life [9]. Whether it was the sight of fireworks, the sound of firecrackers, the smell of fireworks after they were set off or the scene of his children and grandchildren setting off fireworks, either was undoubtedly a trigger that brought Shang back to his childhood experiences of war and emerging special scenes from the war.

3.2 Intergenerational Effects of Trauma

The cross-sectional study by Schick et al. [10] addressed the prevalence of PTSD in civilian survivors of the war and their children. Fifty-one Kosovo families were selected and other psychological scales such as trauma exposure, and posttraumatic stress (UCLA Posttraumatic Diagnostic Scale) were measured. The results showed that the incidence of trauma exposure and posttraumatic stress was observed in both parents and children. In addition, there was a positive correlation between posttraumatic stress symptoms in the father and depression in their children. Similar results existed in the study of Castro-Vale et al., [11]. The intensity of the war experienced by the veterans and the effects of childhood trauma and attachment in their offspring were investigated. The

results showed that the veterans' offspring exhibited more psychological distress and were proportional to the intensity of the war experienced by their fathers.

Mechanisms of Transmission of PTSD. In Dekel & Goldblatt [12]'s literature review, the mechanisms are categorized as indirect transmission and direct transmission. Fathers with PTSD who have difficulty controlling their emotions spent a number of projective mechanisms to try to alleviate their own distress directly to their children. Mechanisms such as persecution, aggression, and shame will be projected onto the father, and children might identify with the father's emotional projections and empathize with the father's experiences and feelings. The children would replicate the father's distress and the transfer of trauma would be unconsciously passed from the father to the child.

Indirect transmission is more prevalent which are found by three ways: Functioning and involvement in the family unit, family atmosphere, and patterns of communication. Firstly, fathers with PTSD had difficulty regulating their intimacy with their children, which resulted in the father's absence from daily family involvement and may be frustrating for the children. Prolonged ambiguity can lead to depression in individuals close to the father, which marks the transfer of the father's trauma to the child or mother. A second indirect method of transmission is the family atmosphere. Veterans with PTSD tend to be in a state of hyper-arousal and lower self-control that tend to use verbal and physical violence to solve family conflicts. Being in such a family environment for long periods of time can have negative psychological, social, and academic effects on children. The third way is that the communication patterns of fathers with PTSD have been at the core of a pain transmission mechanism. In the context of a veteran's family, sensitive war-related topics are avoided in communication in order to prevent the father's distress from increasing. This can lead to communication becoming very ambivalent or confusing [13]. Even if the children initiate the conversation, the father will only reveal part of the details of the trauma which prevents the child from understanding the reality of the events. Talking excessively to the child about the war experience was another extreme way in which the child received a lot of information that was inappropriate for their age and beyond their cognitive abilities, also resulting in distress [14].

"I barely tell my children and grandchildren that I went through the war," Shang told researcher in the interview. "I don't want to recall these frightening memories over and over again. My granddaughter once asked me curiously if I had been in the war, and I told her that I had. But I don't want to tell her in detail what happened. I don't think it's necessary for her to know these sad events. I am very sober that my children and grandchildren can live in such a peaceful time as now. There is no need to pass on to the next generation what we have experienced in the older generation, I just want them to be happy and alive."

As mentioned by OP Den Velde [13], discussing the war experience with his family was painful and hence discussion or questioning about the war was forbidden in his family. Although Shang's children sometimes inadvertently mentioned war-related issues, Shang would only selectively disclose some of the details of the war, but would never go into depth about the war experience. Over time, his avoidance of answering the questions makes the family's communication confusing and contradictory. And it has a

continuous effect on the whole family, meaning that Shang's son may continue his way of communication to his grandchildren as well.

4 Conclusion

Overall, there is a noticeable relationship between the post-war lives of the elderly and the trauma of war. In this paper, two main behavioral influences were identified based on Shang's interviews flashbacks to specific trauma scenarios and intergenerational transmission of trauma across three generations. However, most studies have only explored the relationship between the prevalence of post-war-related trauma in older adults, but few have discussed older adults' own perspectives on their post-war trauma experiences. Many older adults view significant adversity as a part of life and do not choose to seek psychological treatment [15]. Those who suffer in silence seeking help and providing them with appropriate psychological services should be carried out in the future concern. Effective approaches and applications for war related trauma in older adults is great need of exploration that can help them reduce trauma symptoms and related stress in the rest of their lives.

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