

Short Communication

The Intergenerational Impact of the Holodomor Genocide on Gender Roles, Expectations and Performance: The Ukrainian Experience

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Abstract

This study investigated the long-term impact of the Holodomor genocide of Ukrainians on survivors and their adult children and grandchildren. The findings showed that stemming from the perceived disproportionately high number of male deaths during the genocidal period; the Holodomor continues to affect gender roles, expectations, and performance, even into the second and third generations. These results suggest that intergenerational transmission of trauma, caused by the Holodomor, continues to exert an impact in modern day Ukraine.

INTRODUCTION

Our knowledge of collective trauma comes from research on the impacts of the genocides of Armenians [1], Bosnians [2], Ukrainians [3] and Tutsis of Rwanda [4], the Holocaust [5], the killing fields in Cambodia [4], the internment of Japanese-Americans [6], and the colonization of Indigenous peoples [7]. A growing body of evidence also suggests that a distinction seems to exist between individual and collective trauma [8]. Whereas individual trauma affects the health and well-being of the person, collective trauma can also impact family functioning and is posited to affect the greater community-society [9]. Further, the literature also suggests that the impacts of collective trauma are passed down from generation to generation, a phenomenon known as the intergenerational transmission of trauma [10].

The objective of this study was to investigate the potential impact of trauma, from the 1932-1933 Holodomor genocide of Ukrainians, on survivors and their adult children and grandchildren. The Holodomor was a Soviet-Russian orchestrated genocide committed against Ukrainians [11,12] that took place between the late 1920s and the 1930s. After the mass execution of Ukraine's political elite, artists, academics, writers and intellectuals [13], Stalin then organized a genocide against the Ukrainian people by confiscating harvests and foodstuffs [14]. As a result, 3 to 6 million died of starvation [15] and millions

of Ukrainians were shot or deported to Siberian concentration camps where they perished [13]. The word 'Holodomor' means "murder by hunger" [14, page xxix] and is commonly used to define the genocide of Ukrainians. In this study, we used qualitative methods to investigate how three consecutive generations perceived the impact of the Holodomor on their lives in modern-day Ukraine.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To investigate perceived intergenerational impacts of the Holodomor genocide, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Ukraine between July and November 2010 with 45 participants from 15 families. Specifically, each family was comprised of a survivor (Mage = 86.4 years; Range = 82.2 - 91.0) and his/her adult child (Mage = 57.6 years; Range = 51.6 - 65.2) and grandchild (Mage = 30.3 years; Range = 22.3 - 40.2) of the same line, thus allowing for the investigation into the potential impact on three generations. Given that male life expectancy in Ukraine is 62.3 years [16], more female survivor participants (87% female) were expected; whereas 53% of the second and third generations, combined, were female.

Purposeful sampling [17] and a snowball technique [18] were used to find participants who were willing to share their perceptions, opinions and experiences. All participants were interviewed in locations of their choosing, which in most cases

were their homes. Participants were not directly asked about gender-related issues. Instead, open-ended questions like “What does the Holodomor mean to you?” allowed the participants to answer in ways that made sense to them. Open-ended questions also helped to avoid the possibility of participants answering questions in relation to categories and constructs presented by the interviewer. With this approach, participants had greater freedom to bring up issues that were important to them. As such, not all participants raised every issue addressed in the results. This is in line with standard qualitative methodology, when a subset of participants brings up an issue that is not prevalent in all of the participant reports (or even a majority), but instead “captures something important” [19, page 82] in the narratives that helps to answer the research question [19].

All interviews were conducted in Ukrainian by the lead author, who had previously learned the language while residing in Ukraine, prior to this study. Translations and transcriptions of the interviews’ audio recordings were conducted. Next, a thematic analysis [19] was conducted on the transcripts to organize patterns in the data into codes and then themes, which in turn formed the results of this study. NVivo software and manually prepared notes and charts were used to identify codes and themes. Several topics were identified in the data; however, only themes related to gender roles, expectations and performance are presented in this article. Ethical clearance for this study was granted by Carleton University’s psychology Research Ethics Committee.

RESULTS

The results of this study suggest that the Holodomor genocide still exerts an impact on survivors and their descendants. Specifically, four interrelated themes pertaining to gender roles, expectation and performance were identified in the data. Participants reported that due to the disproportionate *targeting of men* during the genocidal period: an *undermining of men* occurred, *additional burdens* were placed on women, and a lack of *male role models* ensued.

Targeting of Men

Most of the first, many of the second and some of the third generation participants spoke of the disproportionate number of deaths inflicted on males. In terms of gender differences, the *targeting of men* was reported by both men and women in the first and second, but only by females in the third generation. The following female survivor’s account provides illustration:

“A notification came back informing us that all 170 men that had been taken away had died. They offered the explanation that there were two illnesses that had taken them away: tuberculosis and some other illness. One hundred and seventy people cannot simply die from two illnesses. Perhaps some from one and others from the other illness. And this is how my father supposedly died. They likely took them away to force them into labour outside of Kyiv, but he was most likely shot”.

Participants elaborated that men, who were “virile” and “entrepreneurial,” had “intellectual potential” and “tried to help people,” were “labeled enemies of the people” and “led” away and “shot.” In general, men who showed leadership were targeted in order to destroy their organizational efforts against the genocidal regime, as illustrated by a first generation female participant:

“They took these people away so that there would be no opposition or challenge to what they were doing. So, that people were unable to oppose them or to come together as any type of opposition force. They took these people away and got rid of them after the Holodomor. These were strong and virile men”.

Undermining of Men

Some female participants of all generations reported that since “strong and virile” males were especially targeted during the genocide, men adopted an “approach” of appearing “weak” in order to preserve their existence. Female participants also noted that subsequent generations of men continued to learn this “approach” that stems from males having been “undermined” during the Holodomor. As such, women noted that men have lost the “feeling to be strong, active” and “motivated.” Female participants further reported that as a result of the Holodomor genocide’s *undermining of men*, “females are more strong” than males. A third generation female account provides illustration:

“In principle, the man has to be generally in good form. I recognize this problem. It is evident in my generation. We do not have strong, active, creative, responsible men. Everything rests on the shoulders of women. Just as the Holodomor burdened women... In Ukraine, the reality is the stronger gender is the female one. From the beginning, this is how we are raised. The words ‘I do not want to’ do not exist. Rather, there is the underlying requirement that you simply must. And, then there are men. He even sneezes and the immediate response is ‘you poor thing.’ We are raising a substandard male who is unable to properly adapt to life and to take responsibility for oneself as a leader”.

Additional Burdens for Women

Some females of the second and third generations reported that the heavy loss of men resulted in *additional burdens* placed on women. Specifically, due to the genocidal loss of male counterparts and supports, women were forced to assume extra responsibilities within the family unit. As part of the intergenerational impact, successive generations of women still assume, and feel overwhelmed and stressed by, these extra burdens in their own lives as explained by a third generation female:

“It was predominantly women who struggled and survived the Holodomor. Somehow they were extremely poor, but still managed to survive. It was extremely difficult...That is why I have such a strange job because in this family, who is the man in the family? Me. Not my mother. Not my father. Me. It is rather hard. Because it means hard work. It means duties. And sometimes it is rather hard to feel, not like a normal woman, but a woman with two hard backs. With two hard backs. It is very hard to find a normal boyfriend. You understand why? Because I cannot have high heels, I have two heavy backs”.

Loss of Male Role Models

Differing from the female-only reports regarding the *undermining of men* and the *additional burdens* for women, men raised the issue of *loss of male role models*. However, this was the least reported issue. Specifically, one participant from every

generation noted that the heavy loss of men resulted in a lack of male role models, in terms of male guidance and support, and the sharing of experiences and values. A second generation male participant spoke of the impact of lack of male role models in his life:

“If my great-grandfather had not died from the Holodomor, I would have been more knowledgeable because he would have passed along to me the history of his experience when he fought in the war. He would have passed along his sabre to me when he served in the tsarist army. He would have shared these experiences with me and I could have been wiser. One can speak about these things. That a grandfather would have taught his grandson in life, but I did not have a single grandfather in my life. I had one single grandmother who was alive who lost her husband in 1938. He was shot by the NKVD [precursor to the KGB]. Stalin. Had there been no Holodomor, I would be much more spiritually knowledgeable. I would know more stories from my grandfather”.

The only female that raised this issue described it as a concern related to men, as noted in the following excerpt:

“It is rather hard to grow up as a normal man without fathers and uncles, without older brothers with rather specific but very strong values. Also examples in this life. How to be a man. Not only in body, but also in character. How to be a strong shoulder for friends”.

DISCUSSION

The results suggest that the Holodomor still exerts an intergenerational impact related to gender, not only on survivors, but also on subsequent generations born decades after the 1930s. Moreover, these findings suggest that gender played a role in how both men and women were, and continue to be, negatively impacted by the genocide. In this context, four themes were identified. Survivors and their adult children and grandchildren viewed the *targeting of men* eight decades ago as resulting in a continual *undermining of men*, *additional burdens* for women and the *loss of male role models* that persisted through the generations. The reported *targeting of men*, which serves as the impetus for the other three themes of this study, has also been documented by demographers who concluded that a disproportionately higher number of men perished during the genocidal period [20]. The disproportionate targeting of men is consistent with Jones’s [21] conceptualization of “gendercide” [22, page 22] as “the physical act of separating men from women as a prelude to consigning men to death [21,page 192].”

The results of this study are also congruent with previous studies on gender-specific impacts. For instance, the *undermining of men* theme is consistent with previous research in which Indigenous Canadian men reported an intergenerational loss of traditional male roles related to their jobs, economic positions, and skills, as impacts of colonization. In comparison, Indigenous men viewed the impact on women’s traditional roles to be less severe, since many of the female jobs were related to childrearing and household and, hence, in their views, they remained intact. Further, since the traditional role of the male was removed, Indigenous men viewed women as needing to assume more leadership positions, so that men could engage in relearning their

place in society [23]. This assumption of leadership, by women, resonates with findings of this study.

Research on intergenerational trauma from the Armenian genocide also seems to resonate with this study’s findings. For example, Karenian et al. [1] attributed the increased levels of post-traumatic stress in females, compared to males, to the “burden is heavier on women” [page 334]. In addition, the *undermining of men*, related to their adopted position of “weakness” to secure survival, is consistent with the literature’s notion that trauma victims often become preoccupied with self-preservation [24] as a means to “counter dangers and reestablish safety” [25, page 243]. However, in the Ukrainian context this strategy appears to still be used by second and third generations, decades after the Holodomor.

In keeping with qualitative methodology, the interviews utilized only open-ended questions to prevent participants from answering according to a predetermined set of topics [18,26]. So, instead of tailoring their narratives toward categories set out by the interviewer, participants were able to raise issues that were important to them. In this respect, men and women did not necessarily address the same concerns. In terms of similarities, men and women noted the *targeting of men*. Also, even though both men and women noted the *loss of male role models*, they raised this as a men’s issue. In terms of gender differences in reporting, only females spoke of the *additional burdens on women* and the *undermining of men*. Concerning the latter, it is possible that the men of this study did not view themselves as having been weakened or undermined, so they did not raise this issue. In this regard, gender has previously been shown to be a factor in how collective traumatic events are interpreted [27]. In general, though, female reports suggested that women were more flexible in adapting to genocide-induced changes in gender roles. In contrast, it is possible that men did not address this flexibility issue due to having adopted denial as a coping strategy. At the individual level, persistent denial may be initially protective [28], but often prevents adjustment to post-traumatic environments and the ability to live in the present [29]. In the Ukrainian context of collective trauma, denial might be an intergenerational impact that not only affects the individual, but also results in continual suffering and victimization, in terms of deleteriously impacting relations between men and women and within the family fabric. An alternative explanation for the gender-specific reports is that participants might be reluctant to disclose sensitive information in interviews, which could result in an underreporting of some issues [30]. Therefore, the possibility also exists that the men of this study purposefully chose not to talk about certain topics.

CONCLUSION

Our findings show that intergenerational trauma, stemming from the Holodomor genocide, continues to exert its effect through gender-specific impacts. These impacts seem to occur at the individual level, in terms of affecting well-being and behaviours. The participant reports also suggest that collective trauma has a long-term, intergenerational impact on how men and women view themselves and each other, in a broader sense and in relation to gender roles, expectations, and performance. In this respect, participants did not only refer to themselves or known individuals in their own personal environments, but

also spoke about a wider impact affecting the greater Ukrainian context. As such, our results suggest that the Holodomor had an impact at the societal level. This result reflects an area that has not been extensively studied and has yet to be well understood, but is consistent with the view that collective traumas play a critical role in shaping socio-cultural norms and values beyond the individual level [9]. The impact of genocides at the societal level has implications for how interventions may address the healing of collective trauma and its intergenerational transmission, which may require the application of multi-level frameworks. Specifically, our results suggest that the healing of collective trauma also requires an understanding of gender-related impacts, in that victimization of men via gendercide might also result in a hidden or less overt intergenerational victimization of women. Hence, the historical roots of collective trauma should be considered for healing its intergenerational impacts.

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