

How the past can make the present tense:

Intergenerational trauma and implications for social cohesion in contemporary South Africa

The race-based injustices of colonialism and apartheid have brutalised generations of black South Africans. *Dr Cyril Adonis* writes about the importance of dealing with this trauma to improve social cohesion in contemporary South Africa.

It is vital to deal with the long-term traumatic impact of historical injustices in contemporary South Africa. We also need to bear in mind that traumatic memories of the past are seldom forgotten, they come to affect not only those who have personally experienced the injustices and its resultant trauma, but also future generations.

This process is known as the transgenerational transmission of trauma, which refers to the way in which unresolved traumas of the past can be subliminally transmitted from one generation to another. While this phenomenon is fraught with complexities, some scholars have insisted on the universal existence of the phenomenon and its effects, arguing that that it seems almost common sense that massive trauma would have a debilitating effect on the victim, and that this would have an impact on the nature of the victim's personal relationships, including parenting.

Despite this, few scholars have written on the subject in post-1994 South Africa. Discussions about the roots of contemporary social challenges often give cursory attention to the role that our traumatic past plays in these. The appeal is often that we should forget about the past, and focus on the present and the future. It has, however, been

demonstrated that in previously divided societies, it is only through dealing with the past that forging a cohesive society becomes possible.

Talking about intergenerational trauma

In 2017, the HSRC in partnership with the Department of Science and Technology and Freedom Park hosted a seminar entitled: Intergenerational trauma and memory: implications for social cohesion in contemporary South Africa.

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The seminar resonated with the HSRC's commitment towards better understanding the cognitive and social structures that create and define change; as well as Freedom Park's mandate of fostering reconciliation, social cohesion and nation building in the country. Among the 108 delegates who attended the seminar were representatives from national and provincial government departments, academic institutions, the media, the HSRC, the Salvokop Youth Development Forum, the Voortrekker Monument, SA Women

in Dialogue, Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre, the Consul-General of Bolivia, representatives of the Netherlands embassy, military veterans, and learners from the Pretoria Technical High School.

The Calata family

A notable presentation was that of Prof. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, who holds a Research Chair for Historical Trauma and Transformation at Stellenbosch University. Gobodo-Madikizela's presentation focused on the case of Nomonde Calata and her son Lukhanyo. Her husband, Fort Calata and three others were brutally murdered by the apartheid government and police in the 1980s and became known as The Cradock Four. The history of the Calata family illustrates various dimensions of transgenerational trauma, and provides insights on the traumatic experiences of Lukhanyo, who was only five years old when his father was murdered.

As a young man, he worked for the SABC and was recently among the eight SABC employees that were dismissed for speaking against government's silencing of broadcasts on violent protests. The Calata case provides a vivid picture of how trauma passes from one generation to another. Gobodo-Madikizela believes that what we are currently dealing

with in South Africa is both a past and a contemporary issue. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) presented a way of liberating South Africans from their past in order to transcend it. This is not to say 'forget the past', but rather to recognise and name the apartheid violations, because when trauma is not healed, it keeps returning to haunt subsequent generations. She argues that young people face an abyss of violence in black residential areas, even in instances where no one has tortured them – it is a kind of economic torture, a form of violence that must be recognised as such.

Aggression transmission

Another noteworthy presentation was that of Prof. Maurice Apprey, who is a professor of psychiatry and neurobehavioural sciences, and the dean of African American Affairs at the University of Virginia in the United States.

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Apprey has written extensively on intergenerational transmission of trauma in the African-American community in the US and focused his presentation on the transgenerational transmission of destructive aggression.

He pointed out that transgenerational transmission of destructive aggression forces us to do things differently. In the context of transgenerational transmission, it is essential to obtain a thorough history, starting with the parents, and going back to the parents' parents. He cited three case studies that illustrated how phantoms from the past resurfaced to haunt later generations.

Healing became possible after taking into account the family history across generations and then reconfiguring the history. When patients seek help after abuse, trauma and apartheid, psychiatrists want to get the events of history translated into a sense of history. The emphasis falls on the

translation of sedimented (or forgotten events of) history to a reactivated sense of history. Apprey noted that transgenerational trauma involves a story of return – we are constantly returning home and discovering that home is not what it was before, we have changed and the home has changed too. Transgenerational haunting forces us to ditch the linearity between past present and future, and rather see time as being circular. Overall, the seminar highlighted the debilitating effect that the past, if not dealt with adequately, can have on the social fabric of a society.

Effect of grim daily trauma

One of the shortcomings of local research on intergenerational trauma has been the almost exclusive focus on cases of extreme victimisation such as those that the TRC has defined as gross human rights violations.

The TRC has conceded that the victims of apartheid were not only the approximately 21,300 who filed gross human rights petitions with the Commission, 'but the millions of Black South Africans for whom collective expulsions, forced migration, bulldozing, gutting or seizure of homes, the mandatory carrying of passes, forced removals into rural ghettos, unemployment, and increased poverty and desperation, were grim daily realities'. In addition to this, it would be important to engage with issues of collective shame and guilt, which, can also be transmitted across generations.

For example, it has been noted that the more the acknowledgment of shame was silenced in the public debates of post-war Germany, the more they migrated into the psyche and the cultural unconscious. Given the superficial manner in which the difficult legacy of apartheid and colonialism has been engaged, it would be relevant to focus on how this affects young white South Africans, particularly in relation to issues of shame, guilt and silencing.

This could help us understand how all of us continue to suffer from what can be referred to as psychic deformations of our violent past. We are also reminded of the fact that the silencing of guilt and shame damages the political culture

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of a democracy. This, according to German politician and political science professor, Gesine Schwan, is because it hinders the realisation of a vivid and motivating consensus on the common values of a polity; and it interrupts the psyches of perpetrators as well as their children, so that it becomes difficult for them to develop the strength of personal identity necessary for good citizenship.

Furthering the research agenda

As a follow-up to the seminar, the HSRC's Research Use and Impact Assessment Unit intends to pursue a number of collaborations to further the research agenda on intergenerational trauma. The researchers plan to work with Apprey, Gobodo-Madikizela, Prof. Tholene Sodi and his colleagues at the University of Limpopo, Prof. Ian Liebenberg from the Centre for Military Studies at Stellenbosch University, the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, the Khulumani Support Group, the Voortrekker Monument, and Freedom Park.

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