Sequential traumatization of children

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This is a report on a follow-up study (Keilson 1979) on the fate of Jewish war orphans in the Netherlands with reference to the well-known events of the Second World War and to the special position of the Jews as a minority in the countries occupied by the German army. The study was planned as a systematic analysis of a succession of massive «cumulative» traumatic situations caused by man-made disaster and which continued even beyond the conclusion of the war. The situation of extreme stress which these children experienced can be formulated as an intertwining of persecution and the state of being orphaned.

MATERIAL

The study is based on investigations of a representative group consisting of 10 percent of the total number of Jewish war orphans. The children for whom guardians had to be appointed after the war had been born during the period from 1925 to 1944. Most of the children in the Netherlands who had gone into hiding with one or several foster families survived the persecution, and a small number survived the concentration camps. There was a wide age range among the children as well as differences in environment both with regard to their background (socio-economic, religious, cultural) and with regard to their foster families during the war. The exogenous factors which played a role in cumulative traumatization were also highly differentiated during as well as after the war. A study was made as to whether there is any relationship between more or less similar situations of stress and permanent changes of personality in various age groups.

It is clear that a study with such objects in view may claim to be a scientific investigation only when definite methodological demands are satisfied. The methodological problems of the present follow-up study were not small. Some of the more important problems are mentioned in order to assist in a better understanding of the results.

The material available consisted of post-war records prepared by staff employees of the Government Committee for War-Foster Children (Dutch abbreviation, O.P.K.) and of the Jewish Foundation for the Care of War Orphans, »Le-Ezrath Hajeled« (Hebrew: to the aid of the child).

The records contain the previous history (insofar as it could be traced) of the child — descent, socio-economic status of the parents, and the child's situation during the period of persecution. They also include the report of an enquiry into the future foster environment and the future guardian which could be the former foster environment during the war, a non-Jewish body, a private individual, or a Jewish legal body. On the basis of the findings collected in these records, the O.P.K. committee specially appointed for this task made recommendations to the courts on the guardians to be nominated.

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METHODS

First the material had to be arranged and the effects of traumatization and rehabilitation defined in order to gain an understanding of persecution in its sequences and consequences with regard to the individual and to social psychological aspects.

At the same time, the hypothesis of age-specific traumatization was studied by two independent methods: 1) a descriptive clinical investigation. When this method is adopted, clinicopsychiatric diagnoses and psychosocial symptoms of deficiency (cf Weijer) are described both within and between the various age groups and compared with each other. 2) a quantitative statistical analysis. In this analysis, the statistical relationships between variables are studied.

In addition to the above theory of age-specific traumatization, the theory of the severity of traumatization was also advanced. An examination was made as to whether a relationship exists between the severity of traumatization during youth and the severity of the personality disorders subsequently revealed in follow-up studies.

Unlike studies on persecuted adults, in which the phenomenon of persecution was approached from the point of view of an assault on the mature personality, a situation of extreme stress was considered to be an integral part of the development of the child. The three following questions, framed in simple words, served as a point of departure from the theoretical considerations: (1) What sort of orphaned children survived the persecution? (2) What did the Netherlands and particularly the grievously hit Jewish community do for them? and (3) What became of them later — for example twenty-five years after the war ended?

The main problem was to develop a method by which to examine and formalise the relationship between the age of the subject at the time at which persecution started and the resulting development disturbances and, further, to formulate criteria by which the various forms of stress due to the persecution could be classified by type and weight. Realising the impossibility of expressing the weight of the misery suffered in terms of numbers and in view of the wide range of situations of stress, I had to confine myself to adopting the external factors of this situation of extreme stress, which had to be defined as criteria, rather than measuring mental reality. Therefore, only what happened to the child in question was catalogued, not the manner in which the child experienced and assimilated it. These criteria also serve to indicate degrees of stress which rendered the material amenable to a certain degree of quantitative treatment. The point of departure for the statistical treatment of the findings in the follow-up studies was the evaluation in terms of figures of the mode of functioning in the three following spheres of life: occupation, marriage, third environment.

The lost-named sphere of life includes modes of functioning during leisure and in congenial environments. The mode of functioning was assessed mainly with reference to satisfaction, conflicts and flight-or-flight behaviour.

RESULTS

Introducing the concept of traumatic sequence to classify and define the various stages of traumatization was found to be useful in presenting the clinical facts as well as in quantitative analysis. The following three traumatic sequences can be clearly differentiated: (1) the occupation of the Netherlands and the beginning of the terror waged on the Jewish population, onslaughts on the social and mental integrity of Jewish families; (2) the period of direct persecution, starting with the deportations of parents and children or the separation of mother and child, the children going into hiding with impromptu foster families, detention in concentration camps; and (3) the post-war period, during which the main issue was that of appointing guardians, which offered two alternatives: (a) continuation of the child's stay with the non-congenial foster family and all the group-dynamic and individual psychological tensions inherent in that situation (baptism, coping with the state of orphanhood, loyalty and identity conflicts, problems of mourning, interference with schooling and vocational training, etc); and (b) renewed separation of the child from the environment in which it was developing to be returned to the congenial, also traumatized Jewish environment. Clearly this would not be supportive of an undisturbed development.

Defining the post-war period as a third traumatic sequence (ending, within the scope of the present study, with the child's coming of age legally) is consistent and of importance from the point of view of psychiatry. Rehabilitation also comes within this sequence.

The separation of mother and child constitutes an important external factor. The present classification into six age groups was based on this fact in accordance with the theory of psychodynamic development.

With an extension of the concept in child psychiatry of the basic needs of the youngest age groups, the traumatic modalities of each age group were individually formulated, starting from the premises of what was essential to normal development. Against the background of the deadly threat of the period of direct persecution during the war and the instability during the post-war period, all the various deficient life situations stand out more clearly in the three traumatic sequences.

DISCUSSION

Before discussing the results of the follow-up study, I would like to mention that character-neurotic developments, anxiety-neurotic developments and chronic reactive depression were chosen as the main diagnoses. Although anxiety can be supposed to be the central experience of all persecuted children and as such a syndrome which can be discovered at all stages of their development, more differentiated diagnostic categories are possible. The hypothesis of the age-specific traumatization is confirmed by the frequency count in the diagnostic table. This result is supported by the results of the quantitative-statistical investigation. Character-neurotic developments with difficulties in making contact and feelings of personal and social insecurity predominate in the younger age groups, while chronic reactive depressions are more dominant in the adolescent group. This age-significant shift was also observed by other authors, for example, von Baeyer, Häßler and Kisker. Moreover, it is striking that there is a high percentage of anxiety-neurotic developments in

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the prepubertal group to which an age-specific significance is also attributed. Hence, an age-specific shift takes place from the character-neurotic developments over the anxiety-neurotic developments to the chronic reactive depressions. This shift becomes more plausible when we diagnose the chronic reactive depression not only as regards the mood in itself but also as a defence mechanism against memories and situations which are animated again in the fantasy.

A striking feature of the clinical studies was that a new form of traumatization seemed to appear in the third age group (4-6). This was attributed, among other things, to the presence of first memories or residual memories of parents or parental home. This clinical impression was verified by statistical studies.

The categories of psycho-social deficiency as formulated by Wöijel are used to gain some understanding of psycho-social dysfunction supplementary to the usual diagnosis. The results obtained by the calculation of percentages are compared both within and between the various age groups. The high percentages for emotional disturbances in all age groups are striking. The category «discrepancy between intelligence and school and vocational trainings» makes plain this peculiar effect of traumatization for the third, fourth, and sixth age groups. The importance of the factor «trainings» generally appears from the calculations of percentage for these categories: no training at all, training which has been cut short or ended in failure (between 23 percent and 50 percent — extremely high for the third, 41.6 percent and the sixth, 50 percent).

Studies on the theory of relations between the severity of traumatization and the impairment of psycho-social functioning during adult life revealed a correlation between the results of the follow-up studies and the degree of traumatization in the third traumatic sequence. The problems of identity and loyalty are specific for all the cases studied. Problems of gratitude, mourning, fantasies of the parents having survived, survivor guilt, and problems of guardianship are likewise to be found throughout the material.

The studies of the cases under investigation show a direct connection between group-dynamic and individual psychological tensions coming from minority and majority relationships and also demonstrate that problems of loyalty and gratitude inhibit the process of mourning, reinforcing the internal conflict situation of the child.

The follow-up study of children orphaned by man-made disaster shows that not only the period during which the actual disaster takes place (second traumatic sequence) but also the subsequent period (third traumatic sequence) is essential to an adequate understanding and evaluation of the events in the traumatized development of the children. Approximately twenty-five years later, children showing a favourable second, but adverse third traumatic sequence will display development features which are less favourable than those of children showing an adverse second, but favourable third traumatic sequence. The significance of the third sequence is determined by the quality of the foster environment and its ability — or inability — to break the chain of traumatizing factors and so mitigate the entire process — i.e. the necessary aid is supplied by the foster environment or a timely request for assistance and supervision is made, or such aid is not supplied or sought in which case the traumatic events will be further intensified in their entirety. The last-named factor is of particular importance in those cases in which private individuals who will no longer be subject to supervision are appointed guardians. This accounts for the fact shown by the present study that the appointment of guardians does not of itself constitute a predictive factor in regard to the further development of the child and gives reason to consider the extent to which the appointment of guardians of severely traumatized children should be bound by a regulation concerning social psychiatric supervision. The results found here are applicable both to the children in hiding places and to the children in concentration camps. Within the scope of the present study, from a statistical point of view, significant differences between those two groups were not found as far as social functioning is concerned.

It must at least be taken into consideration that one cannot weigh up the degree of traumatic experience entailed in deportation of parents and child together and the witnessing of the holocaust, compared to the effect of memories of an uncertain farewell and fantasies about the fate of the parents. That is beyond the scope of any statistical treatment.

References: