







## Examining the Psychological Impact of Intergenerational Trauma on Family Dynamics in Post-Conflict Societies

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aims to examine the psychological impact of intergenerational trauma on family dynamics in post-conflict societies. By exploring personal experiences, psychological effects, and coping mechanisms, the research seeks to understand how trauma is transmitted across generations and how families manage its complex ramifications.

**Methods:** This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews with 21 participants from multiple generations within families in post-conflict regions. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software, following the transcription and systematic coding of interview data. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the research themes.

**Results:** The study identified three main themes: personal experiences of trauma and conflict, psychological impacts on individuals and families, and coping mechanisms and resilience strategies. Participants reported significant psychological effects such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Emotional responses included grief, anger, and helplessness, while behavioral changes involved aggression, withdrawal, and substance abuse. Coping strategies ranged from individual practices like mindfulness and exercise to seeking family and community support. The use of traditional healing practices and the availability of community resources were crucial in managing trauma. The findings highlight the enduring nature of intergenerational trauma and its profound impact on family dynamics.

**Conclusion:** Intergenerational trauma profoundly affects family dynamics in post-conflict societies, with significant psychological and emotional consequences. Effective coping mechanisms involve a combination of individual resilience and support from family and community resources. The study underscores the need for comprehensive, culturally sensitive interventions to address the multifaceted challenges posed by intergenerational trauma. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies and quantitative approaches to enhance the understanding and management of intergenerational trauma.

**Keywords:** Intergenerational trauma, family dynamics, post-conflict societies, psychological impact, coping mechanisms, mental health.

## 1 Introduction

Intergenerational trauma has been documented across various cultural and historical contexts, often manifesting in communities with a history of severe conflict and displacement. For instance, the impact of historical trauma in Asian American families, as explored by Cai (2022), highlights the complex interplay of cultural memory and family communication in transmitting trauma across generations (Cai, 2022). Similarly, the scoping review by Chamberlain et al. (2019) on parenting after childhood maltreatment underscores the enduring influence of early traumatic experiences on parental behaviors and child-rearing practices (Chamberlain et al., 2019).

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the concept of intergenerational transmission of trauma, which posits that trauma can be passed down through both biological and social mechanisms. Crombach and Bambonyé (2015) provide evidence of this process in Burundi, where childhood maltreatment increases the risk of abusive behaviors in adulthood, perpetuating a cycle of violence (Crombach & Bambonyé, 2015). This framework is supported by Fargas-Malet and Dillenburger (2016), who examine the behavior analytic approach to conflict-related trauma in Northern Ireland, emphasizing the role of learned behaviors and environmental factors in perpetuating trauma (Fargas-Malet & Dillenburger, 2016).

The psychological impacts of intergenerational trauma are profound and multifaceted, affecting mental health, emotional well-being, and interpersonal relationships. Hoffman et al. (2023) describe how parent torture and family functioning influence youth adjustment in war-affected families, highlighting the interconnectedness of family dynamics and individual psychological outcomes (Hoffman et al., 2023). This relationship is further explored by Isobel et al. (2019), who identify key strategies for preventing the transmission of trauma across generations, emphasizing the importance of early intervention and supportive family environments (Isobel et al., 2019).

In post-conflict societies, the family unit often becomes the primary context in which trauma is experienced and transmitted. The significance of justice in the psychotherapeutic treatment of traumatized individuals, as discussed by Kizilhan and Neumann (2020), underscores the need for addressing both individual and collective experiences of trauma (Kizilhan & Neumann, 2020). This perspective is echoed by Ullah et al. (2023), who examine the silent but pervasive impact of intergenerational trauma

on mental health in Afghanistan, calling for comprehensive approaches to support affected families (Ullah et al., 2023).

Socioeconomic and cultural factors play a crucial role in shaping the experiences of trauma and the resources available for coping. Studies by Lee and Liu (2001) on coping with intergenerational family conflict among different ethnic groups reveal significant variations in how families perceive and manage trauma, influenced by cultural norms and socioeconomic conditions (Lee & Liu, 2001). The modeling study by Sim et al. (2018) on Syrian refugees in Lebanon further illustrates how war exposure and daily stressors impact maternal mental health and child psychosocial adjustment, highlighting the compounded effects of ongoing adversity (Sim et al., 2018).

In post-conflict societies, the availability of community support systems and the presence of social stigma can significantly influence the healing process. The role of civil society in post-conflict peacebuilding, as discussed by Parver and Wolf (2008), emphasizes the importance of community engagement and support in facilitating recovery (Parver & Wolf, 2008). Pierson and Thomson (2018) also highlight the critical role of power-sharing and civil society in addressing gender-specific impacts of conflict, underscoring the need for inclusive and equitable approaches to post-conflict recovery (Pierson & Thomson, 2018).

The mechanisms through which trauma is transmitted across generations are complex and multifaceted, involving both biological and social pathways. Biological mechanisms include genetic and epigenetic changes resulting from exposure to trauma, which can affect the stress response systems of subsequent generations. Social mechanisms involve the transmission of trauma through family narratives, behaviors, and communication patterns. As noted by Chamberlain et al. (2019), the history of childhood maltreatment and its impact on parenting practices exemplifies how learned behaviors and environmental factors contribute to the perpetuation of trauma (Chamberlain et al., 2019).

The critical interpretive synthesis by Isobel et al. (2019) on preventing intergenerational trauma transmission identifies several key strategies, including promoting secure attachment, enhancing parental mental health, and providing trauma-informed care. These strategies are essential for breaking the cycle of trauma and fostering resilience within families (Isobel et al., 2019).

Addressing intergenerational trauma in post-conflict societies requires a multi-faceted approach that integrates

mental health services, social support systems, and policy interventions. The significance of justice in the therapeutic treatment of trauma, as highlighted by Kizilhan and Neumann (2020), underscores the need for addressing both individual and collective experiences of trauma (Kizilhan & Neumann, 2020). This perspective is supported by Binningsbø et al. (2023), who explore how measures taken to address wrongdoings during armed conflict affect post-conflict justice, emphasizing the importance of transitional justice mechanisms in supporting healing and reconciliation (Binningsbø et al., 2023).

Efforts to support affected families must also consider the broader socioeconomic and political context. The research by Collier and Hoeffler (2004) and Collier et al. (2008) on aid, policy, and growth in post-conflict societies provides valuable insights into the economic dimensions of recovery, highlighting the need for sustainable (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Collier et al., 2008) development and inclusive policies. Similarly, the work of Lindberg and Orjuela (2014) on corruption in the aftermath of war underscores the challenges of governance and the importance of transparency and accountability in rebuilding trust and social cohesion (Lindberg & Orjuela, 2014).

The study of intergenerational trauma in post-conflict societies reveals the profound and enduring impact of trauma on family dynamics and individual well-being. Through a qualitative approach, this research sheds light on the complex interplay of psychological, social, and cultural factors that shape the experiences of trauma and the mechanisms through which it is transmitted across generations. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive and culturally sensitive approaches to support affected families, addressing both immediate needs and long-term resilience. By integrating insights from various disciplines and contexts, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of intergenerational trauma and informs policies and practices aimed at fostering healing and recovery in post-conflict societies.

## 2 Methods and Materials

### 2.1 Study Design and Participants

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the psychological impact of intergenerational trauma on family dynamics in post-conflict societies. The qualitative approach is particularly suitable for exploring complex and deeply personal experiences, allowing for a

nuanced understanding of how intergenerational trauma manifests and affects families over time.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of individuals affected by intergenerational trauma. The sample included members from multiple generations within families, encompassing grandparents, parents, and children. Participants were recruited from communities in post-conflict regions, specifically targeting those with a history of conflict-related trauma. In total, 30 participants from 10 different families were included in the study.

### 2.2 Measures

#### 2.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for both guided and open-ended responses. This method was chosen to facilitate in-depth discussions and to capture a wide range of perspectives on intergenerational trauma and its impact on family dynamics. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a private setting to ensure confidentiality and comfort for the participants.

The interview protocol was designed to explore key themes related to intergenerational trauma, including:

- Personal experiences of trauma and conflict
- Perceived psychological impacts on individual and family levels
- Coping mechanisms and resilience strategies
- Communication patterns within families regarding trauma
- Changes in family dynamics over time

The semi-structured format allowed interviewers to probe deeper into relevant areas as needed, depending on the responses of the participants.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software, a qualitative data analysis tool that facilitates the organization, coding, and interpretation of large volumes of textual data. The analysis followed these steps:

- Transcription: All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.
- Coding: Transcripts were imported into NVivo and coded systematically. Initial codes were developed based on the interview protocol and were refined through iterative analysis.

- Thematic Analysis: The coded data were analyzed to identify key themes and patterns. Thematic analysis was used to understand the commonalities and differences in experiences and perceptions across participants.

Theoretical Saturation: Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no new significant themes or insights were emerging from additional interviews. This ensured that the analysis was thorough and comprehensive.

### 3 Findings and Results

The study included 21 participants, representing a diverse cross-section of individuals affected by intergenerational

trauma in post-conflict societies. The sample consisted of 12 females (57%) and 9 males (43%), ranging in age from 18 to 75 years. The participants were categorized into three generational groups: 5 grandparents (24%), 8 parents (38%), and 8 children (38%). In terms of educational background, 4 participants (19%) had no formal education, 10 participants (48%) had completed primary or secondary education, and 7 participants (33%) held higher education degrees. The socioeconomic status of participants varied, with 8 individuals (38%) classified as low-income, 9 (43%) as middle-income, and 4 (19%) as high-income. This demographic diversity provided a comprehensive understanding of how intergenerational trauma impacts different segments of society.

**Table 1**

*Categories, Subcategories, and Concepts*

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
Personal Experiences of Trauma and Conflict	Nature of Trauma	War experiences, Displacement, Loss of loved ones
	Immediate Reactions	Shock, Fear, Confusion
	Long-term Effects	PTSD, Chronic anxiety, Depression
	Family Stories and Narratives	Shared memories, Family myths, Oral histories
	Cultural Context of Trauma	Cultural taboos, Rituals, Collective memory
Psychological Impacts on Individuals and Families	Mental Health Issues	Anxiety, Depression, PTSD
	Emotional Responses	Grief, Anger, Helplessness
	Behavioral Changes	Aggression, Withdrawal, Substance abuse
	Interpersonal Relationships	Communication breakdown, Trust issues, Support networks
	Generational Differences	Perception of trauma, Coping styles, Psychological resilience
Coping Mechanisms and Resilience Strategies	Community Support Systems	Counseling services, Peer support groups, Social stigma
	Individual Coping Strategies	Mindfulness, Exercise, Art therapy
	Family Support	Emotional support, Financial support, Advice and guidance
	Community Resources	Healthcare services, NGO support, Community centers
	Traditional Healing Practices	Herbal remedies, Spiritual practices, Ancestral rituals
	Psychological Interventions	Therapy, Medication, Support groups
	Resilience Factors	Optimism, Adaptability, Social connections
	Educational and Outreach Programs	Workshops, Awareness campaigns, Educational materials

#### 3.1 Personal Experiences of Trauma and Conflict

Nature of Trauma: Participants reported various traumatic experiences related to war, displacement, and the loss of loved ones. One participant shared, "We had to leave our home in the middle of the night because the fighting was getting too close. I still remember the fear in my children's eyes." These experiences form the core of intergenerational trauma, affecting both the individuals directly involved and their descendants.

Immediate Reactions: Immediate emotional responses to trauma included shock, fear, and confusion. A respondent

noted, "I couldn't understand what was happening. Everything was so chaotic and terrifying." These immediate reactions set the stage for long-term psychological effects.

Long-term Effects: Long-term psychological impacts such as PTSD, chronic anxiety, and depression were prevalent among participants. "Even years later, I still wake up in the middle of the night, reliving those moments," one participant described, highlighting the enduring nature of trauma.

Family Stories and Narratives: Families often shared their traumatic experiences through stories and narratives, creating a collective memory. One participant explained,



"My grandmother used to tell us about the war every night. It became a part of who we are." These stories serve as both a means of coping and a way to pass down the trauma to younger generations.

**Cultural Context of Trauma:** The cultural context significantly influenced how trauma was experienced and dealt with. Cultural taboos, rituals, and collective memory played a role in shaping responses to trauma. As one interviewee mentioned, "In our culture, we have specific rituals to honor the dead. These practices helped us cope, but they also reminded us of our losses constantly."

### 3.2 Psychological Impacts on Individuals and Families

**Mental Health Issues:** Anxiety, depression, and PTSD were common mental health issues among participants. "I've been battling depression ever since we fled our home. It feels like a part of me is still there," shared a participant, illustrating the deep psychological scars left by trauma.

**Emotional Responses:** Emotional responses such as grief, anger, and helplessness were frequently reported. "I feel a constant anger about what happened to us, and sometimes I don't know how to deal with it," one participant admitted, highlighting the emotional turmoil caused by traumatic experiences.

**Behavioral Changes:** Behavioral changes included aggression, withdrawal, and substance abuse as coping mechanisms. One participant confessed, "I turned to alcohol to numb the pain. It drove a wedge between me and my family." These behaviors often exacerbated family tensions and disrupted relationships.

**Interpersonal Relationships:** Trauma significantly impacted interpersonal relationships, leading to communication breakdowns, trust issues, and strained support networks. A participant stated, "We stopped talking about our feelings. It was like a silent agreement to avoid the pain." These dynamics further complicated the healing process.

**Generational Differences:** Differences in the perception of trauma, coping styles, and psychological resilience varied across generations. "My parents never talked about their experiences, but I think it's important for my children to understand our past," said one participant, highlighting a generational shift in dealing with trauma.

**Community Support Systems:** The availability and effectiveness of community support systems, including counseling services, peer support groups, and the presence of social stigma, influenced the psychological impacts of

trauma. "The support group in our community was a lifeline for me. It was a place where I didn't feel judged," shared a participant, emphasizing the importance of external support.

### 3.3 Coping Mechanisms and Resilience Strategies

**Individual Coping Strategies:** Participants employed various individual coping strategies, such as mindfulness, exercise, and art therapy. "Drawing helped me express what I couldn't put into words," one participant explained, demonstrating the therapeutic potential of creative outlets.

**Family Support:** Emotional, financial, and practical support from family members played a crucial role in coping with trauma. A participant shared, "My family was my rock. Without their support, I don't know how I would have survived." This underscores the importance of familial bonds in the healing process.

**Community Resources:** Healthcare services, NGO support, and community centers provided essential resources for coping. "The local health clinic offered free counseling, which was a huge help," mentioned a participant, highlighting the role of community infrastructure in supporting trauma survivors.

**Traditional Healing Practices:** Herbal remedies, spiritual practices, and ancestral rituals were significant for many participants. One interviewee noted, "We used traditional herbs for calming the nerves. It's something passed down from our ancestors." These practices provided a culturally resonant means of coping.

**Psychological Interventions:** Formal psychological interventions, including therapy, medication, and support groups, were crucial for many participants. "Therapy helped me understand my trauma and find ways to manage it," said a participant, illustrating the effectiveness of professional support.

**Resilience Factors:** Factors such as optimism, adaptability, and social connections contributed to resilience. "Staying hopeful and connecting with others in similar situations gave me strength," one participant reflected, highlighting key elements that foster resilience.

**Educational and Outreach Programs:** Workshops, awareness campaigns, and educational materials were vital in spreading knowledge and support. "The workshops taught us valuable skills to cope with our emotions and support each other," explained a participant, underscoring the importance of education in trauma recovery.

These findings provide a comprehensive understanding of how intergenerational trauma impacts family dynamics in

post-conflict societies, highlighting both the challenges and the resilience strategies employed by affected individuals and families.

#### 4 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study elucidate the profound psychological impact of intergenerational trauma on family dynamics in post-conflict societies. Through semi-structured interviews with 21 participants, the research identified significant themes related to personal experiences of trauma, psychological effects, and coping mechanisms. These themes align with and extend existing literature on intergenerational trauma, providing valuable insights into how trauma is transmitted across generations and its impact on families.

Participants reported diverse traumatic experiences related to war, displacement, and loss of loved ones. These experiences have deeply influenced their psychological and emotional well-being. For example, the narratives of war and displacement were similar to findings in studies by Crombach and Bambonyé (2015), who documented the long-term effects of childhood maltreatment in Burundi, which increased the risk of abusive behaviors in adulthood (Crombach & Bambonyé, 2015). The pervasive nature of trauma experienced by the participants echoes Cai's (2022) work on historical trauma in Asian American families, which emphasized the role of intergenerational communication in transmitting trauma (Cai, 2022).

The study identified anxiety, depression, and PTSD as prevalent mental health issues among participants. These findings are consistent with Hoffman et al. (2023), who noted that parental torture and compromised family functioning adversely affect youth adjustment in war-affected families (Hoffman et al., 2023). Emotional responses such as grief, anger, and helplessness were also commonly reported, reflecting the significant emotional burden carried by individuals who have experienced trauma. Isobel et al. (2019) underscored the importance of addressing these psychological impacts through early intervention and supportive family environments to prevent the transmission of trauma across generations (Isobel et al., 2019).

Behavioral changes, including aggression, withdrawal, and substance abuse, were identified as coping mechanisms among participants. These behaviors often exacerbated family tensions and disrupted relationships, aligning with findings from Fargas-Malet and Dillenburg (2016) on the

impact of conflict-related trauma in Northern Ireland. The disruption of interpersonal relationships, including communication breakdowns and trust issues, was another significant impact of trauma (Fargas-Malet & Dillenburg, 2016). This is supported by Sim et al. (2018), who highlighted the compounded effects of war exposure and daily stressors on maternal mental health and child psychosocial adjustment among Syrian refugees in Lebanon (Sim et al., 2018).

Participants employed a variety of coping strategies, including mindfulness, exercise, art therapy, and seeking support from family and community resources. These strategies reflect a combination of individual and collective resilience mechanisms. The use of traditional healing practices, such as herbal remedies and spiritual rituals, underscores the importance of culturally relevant coping strategies in post-conflict societies. Kizilhan and Neumann (2020) emphasized the role of cultural practices in the psychotherapeutic treatment of traumatized individuals, noting that justice and cultural understanding are critical components of effective therapy (Kizilhan & Neumann, 2020).

The availability of community resources and supportive social networks were crucial for participants in managing trauma. This aligns with Parver and Wolf (2008), who discussed the role of civil society in post-conflict peacebuilding, emphasizing the importance of community engagement in facilitating recovery (Parver & Wolf, 2008). Educational and outreach programs also played a significant role in spreading knowledge and support, as highlighted by Pierson and Thomson (2018), who discussed the impact of power-sharing and civil society involvement in addressing gender-specific impacts of conflict (Pierson & Thomson, 2018).

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, there are several limitations to consider. The reliance on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews may introduce recall bias and social desirability bias, potentially affecting the accuracy and honesty of participants' responses. Additionally, the sample size was relatively small and specific to certain post-conflict regions, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. The study's qualitative nature, while providing rich, in-depth insights, does not allow for statistical generalization or the establishment of causal relationships between variables. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design of the study does not capture the long-term evolution of intergenerational trauma and coping mechanisms over time.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by incorporating larger and more diverse samples from various post-conflict settings to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in tracking the long-term effects of intergenerational trauma and the effectiveness of different coping mechanisms and interventions over time. Quantitative research methods, including the use of standardized measures of trauma and psychological health, could complement qualitative approaches and provide a more comprehensive understanding of intergenerational trauma. Exploring the biological mechanisms of trauma transmission, such as epigenetic changes, would also be a fruitful area for future research, offering insights into the interplay between genetic and environmental factors in the perpetuation of trauma.

The findings of this study have significant implications for practice, particularly in the fields of mental health and social work. Practitioners should adopt a holistic and culturally sensitive approach to supporting families affected by intergenerational trauma. This includes integrating traditional healing practices with conventional therapeutic interventions to address the cultural and spiritual needs of individuals. Providing access to community resources and support networks is essential in facilitating recovery and resilience. Programs aimed at promoting secure attachment, enhancing parental mental health, and offering trauma-informed care can help break the cycle of trauma transmission. Policymakers should prioritize the development and implementation of educational and outreach programs that raise awareness about intergenerational trauma and provide practical tools and resources for affected families.

In conclusion, this study underscores the profound and enduring impact of intergenerational trauma on family dynamics in post-conflict societies. By highlighting the complex interplay of psychological, social, and cultural factors, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how trauma is transmitted across generations and inform the development of effective strategies for support and intervention. Continued research and practice efforts are essential in addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by intergenerational trauma and fostering healing and resilience in post-conflict communities.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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### Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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