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Book review: Children in genocide: Extreme traumatization and affect regulation

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Book Review: Kaplan, S. (2008). *Children in Genocide: Extreme traumatization and affect regulation*, London: International Psychoanalysis Library

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In *Children in Genocide: Extreme traumatization and affect regulation* (2008), Suzanne Kaplan explores the affects and memories of individuals who have survived extreme traumatization during their childhood, specifically Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and teenagers who survived the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. In the introduction, Kaplan explains that she has aimed to “write a text that can, to the greatest extent possible, convey a fraction of the feeling of what it meant to be a child during a genocide” (Kaplan, 2008, p.1). The majority of the book is devoted to presenting an analysis of the oral life histories of the survivors interviewed. The experiences are organized into three themes: 1) *perforating*, how the psychic shield is has been perforated by intense trauma; 2) *space creating*, the inner psychic processes through which the persecuted create mental space helps to survive the psychological damage and trauma; and 3) *age distorting*, a twisting of time that results in participants not feeling their actual chronological age. Age distorting is presented as containing aspects of perforating and space creating, and is linked to reproductive patterns of the survivors. A chronology of genocide events is used to organize these themes, through which the life histories of participants are presented in rich descriptive detail. Kaplan focuses both on the content of the interviews conducted as well as how the memories of the atrocities survived were recounted (the affects). The text provides readers with a glimpse into lived experience of these horrors in a manner that can only be achieved through narrative.

The analysis of the life histories is presented as a theory in the final chapter, *From conceptual models to a theory*. Here, concepts previously presented as life histories are reorganized into a table and then into a diagram. The diagram represents Kaplan’s theory, the *affect propellor*. The affect propeller is offered as an analytic tool for the affect regulating of extremely traumatized individuals. *Trauma linking*, an inner psychological

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consequence of perforating, is contrasted with *generational linking*, the result of successful space creating. These four concepts are associated with levels of affect regulation, from low to high integration. These levels include *affect invading*, *affect isolating*, *affect activating*, and *affect symbolizing*. Each level of affect regulation is assigned one blade of the affect propeller diagram. Each blade is subdivided into three levels of linking processes two levels of trauma linking (destructive) and one of generational linking (constructive). The blades rotate around the center of affect regulating.

Kaplan claims to have used grounded theory methodology for this research. Grounded theory is a complete package from collection, coding, analyzing, memoing, theoretical sampling, sorting, writing, and using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1998). The result is a set of carefully grounded, well integrated hypotheses organized around a core category. The theory helps to explain as much of the behavior within the substantive area as possible with as few concepts as possible (Glaser, 1978).

Kaplan's theory falls short of a classic grounded theory in a variety of ways, three of which I will address here. The goal of grounded theory is to uncover a main concern of individuals and how these individuals attempt to resolve or process this concern (Glaser, 1998). This contrasts with qualitative research methods where the goal is description. The author states that the aim of her research was to present the life histories of individuals who have survived genocide and to communicate what it means to be a child during genocide. This aim aligns with the goal of qualitative research rather than the goal of grounded theory.

Data collection within the current study reflects qualitative research methods rather than those of grounded theory. Interviews followed an in-depth open ended format: "For the majority it seemed to be the first time that they found themselves in an interview situation in which they were asked to talk about their whole life from the beginning to the present day, in the absence, generally speaking, of any time limit" (Kaplan, 2008, p.21). This contrasts with grounded theory data collection in which the research aims to move quickly away from descriptive details to abstract concepts and patterns within the data (Glaser, 1992). While initial interviews within grounded theory are unstructured, data collection becomes increasingly focused over

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time. Participants are sought out for theoretical sampling purposes so that the researcher can test out hypotheses as they emerge, and constantly compare incidents in incoming data with existing incidents, codes, categories and relationships between concepts in the emerging theory (Glaser 1978). Theoretical sampling focuses and delimits data collection. Theoretical sampling allows the researcher to move her research to higher conceptual levels and eventually recognize the emerging theory. Proceeding to collect data through open ended descriptive interviews limits the ability of the research to theoretically sample, take the study to a conceptual level, or to test out and develop hypotheses relevant to the core concern and its resolution.

A grounded theory study is delimited to a core concern of the participants and how the participants attempt to resolve or process this concern (Glaser, 1978). In contrast to qualitative research, a grounded theory does not aim for full coverage of participants' experiences. Kaplan acknowledges that she did not delimit her research, "I have tried to bring out as many ideas concerning phenomena as possible in order to arrive at broad picture of interviewee's memories... I have not have not stopped at the high-frequency responses which, as I see it, would not give a complete elucidation of the interviewees' life histories since the study is not based on a random sample. Moreover, information can be lost with such an approach" (Kaplan, 2008, p.55). Rather than full coverage or focusing on high frequency responses, the grounded theory researcher samples, codes, and employs constant comparison to until he finds that incidents in the data are interchangeable, they keep indicating the same concepts, and saturation is achieved (Glaser, 1998). The unwillingness to focus on a main concern can lead to the development of many interesting concepts, but is very difficult, if not impossible, for the relationships between these concepts to be explored and developed into a well integrated grounded theory.

A feature that distinguishes grounded theory from qualitative research is theoretical codes. Theoretical codes explain how the substantive codes relate to each other. Theoretical codes clarify the logic of the theory, remove non relevant variables, and integrate the theory (Glaser, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It may be argued that the propeller is the theoretical code of this study. The propeller, however, while serving as a diagrammatic aid, does not explain well the

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relationships between the various concepts in the study. The relationships between concepts are described as associations: “I perceive associative connections between perforating, space creating, and age distorting, which have led to a conceptual model” (Kaplan, 2008, p.57). These are not clear or well-established, suggesting that they have not been checked thoroughly using the constant comparative method. The result is a lack of integration and coherence.

Since Kaplan did not fully use the grounded theory package to conduct her research, the outcome is not a classic grounded theory. As Glaser warns, “grounded theory being laced with QDA procedures and descriptive capture lads to multiple blocks on conceptual grounded theory” (p.4, Glaser, 2003). Kaplan’s research, while not a grounded theory, is well-worth reading. The research contributes new concepts and understanding of the lived experiences of individuals who were children during the Holocaust and during the Rwanda genocide in 1994.

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