Children in genocide

Extreme traumatization and the ‘affect propeller’

SUZANNE KAPLAN
Tomtebogatan 17, S-113 39 Stockholm, Sweden — suzanne.kaplan@tele2.se
(Final version accepted 5 May 2005)

The author bases this paper on extensive research concerning children in genocide with a starting point in the Holocaust and in the genocide in Rwanda 1994. She demonstrates indicators for psychological phenomena concerning the child survivors’ affect regulating that appeared in life histories presented in videotaped in-depth interviews. The psychological phenomena concern experiences of persecution and ways of coming to terms with recurring memory images and affects. The interviews that have been analysed in detail form a basis for an emerging conceptual model about trauma- and generational-linking processes within each individual—the ‘affect propeller’. An overall conclusion from this study is that past traumatic experiences are recovered not as memories in the usual sense of the word, but as affects invading the present. Accordingly, affects seem to tell the story of the past traumatic experiences.

Keywords: extreme traumatization, child survivors, affect regulation, memory, space creating, revenge

Introduction

There is an accelerating interest in the interdisciplinary aspects of understanding the roots of genocide as well as the consequences for the traumatized. Studies of affect regulation of the victims and, specifically, the psychic experiences of children after genocide have, however, been under-represented until now in research.

Extensive videotaped interviews have been carried out by the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation [internet]. As a co-ordinator in Sweden for this project, I saw the archive as a unique research resource. My aim is to find indicators for, and to analyse, psychological phenomena that emerged in the life stories recalled by survivors who were themselves children during genocide. In psychoanalytical practice, and in research within an interdisciplinary university department, I hope to develop the knowledge about children and extreme traumatization.

My interest began when I conducted extensive interviews with two women who survived the Holocaust. They were both 8 years old when their native countries were occupied. The traumatization seems to have been a central factor in their attitude towards having children of their own. They actively abstained from giving birth.

---

2The Programme for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Uppsala University.
One of them, Anna, said with a loud voice, ‘I did abortions twice because I was a child myself’. This statement is the basis for posing an important question that has remained of great importance: What was the significance of a child’s own age and conception of age during and after the genocide when it came to the possibility of maintaining the feeling of having inner links to significant persons, and how might these inner links serve as a lifeline to allow the creation of links to the next generation? The theme of reproduction seems to be like a ‘focal point’, with links to different traumatic experiences during the persecutions resulting in the child survivors abstaining from giving birth—or, on the contrary, choosing to have many children, which I interpret as two sides of the same coin. This issue led me to study more life histories recounted by women and men who had survived the Holocaust as children (Kaplan, 2000, 2002) and, later, teenagers who survived the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. What I saw as a break in reproduction manifested itself later as being an important aspect of a ‘generational collapse’.

My point of departure is 40 videotaped interviews with child survivors from the Holocaust and 12 videotaped interviews with teenagers conducted in Rwanda. In analysing the interviews, an opportunity has arisen to be aware of psychological phenomena for which the survivors might not have ‘thought of’ seeking psychotherapeutic help (if they at all have had the opportunity), since their life history contains invading affects and memory images that they only want to forget. The interviews can thus be seen as a complement to experiences from psychoanalytic work. It is about situations that we cannot imagine experiencing ourselves, ‘unimaginable primitive affects’ in the words of Grubrich-Simitis (1984).

Children are persecuted

Children were afflicted particularly severely during the Holocaust. Only 11% of the Jewish children in the Nazi-occupied countries survived (Dwork, 1991). By the Holocaust, I mean the entire Nazi period of 1933–45, since the final persecutions were built up by earlier preparations.

Anna, who was 11 years old at the time, talks about the pushing into cattle cars:

‘…she [a woman] had a pillow with her. Everyone was very surprised. She asked me if I wanted to stand next to her. She came into the car with that pillow and stood there, you couldn’t sit down. We couldn’t really all stand next to each other. Everyone was shoving. It was horrible. You can’t imagine. Everyone tried to get some air. The only possibility was to get close to a little opening in the side.’

‘Do you remember what you thought in the wagon?’

‘You didn’t think, one was scared … Everyone wanted to get close to the opening, but you couldn’t …

‘And then when we got to Latvia, to Riga, the cars stopped and the big doors opened. Then Russians, Ukrainians started screaming, I can’t describe it … and they ran into all the cars. Get out, get out, like wild men. And can you imagine, a little girl [the pillow had, in fact, been a little girl] woke up. The woman had a daughter whom she was putting to sleep and she woke up and started to cry. Everyone was surprised. A small child! And then a Ukrainian

---

came and pushed and shoved and wanted to know where the crying was coming from and he trampled that little baby with his boots until she died. And when we got to Estonia, the mother took her life ... She took her life.4

In Rwanda, a genocide was orchestrated, led by Hutu extremists, which in many ways resembles the Nazi atrocities during the Holocaust. The central aim was extermination of a people (Melvern, 2000). Human Rights Watch (2003) reports that 400,000 children—more than 10% of Rwanda’s children—are estimated to be orphans today. This is because of the genocide and HIV/AIDS, resulting from rapes committed during the genocide. Seven Rwandan teenage boys who lived in the streets after the genocide were interviewed in depth twice with one year in between (Kaplan, 2005).5

Frédéric, 9 years old during the Rwanda genocide, talks about incidents at the roadblock:

There they stopped people and asked them if they were Hutu or Tutsi. When we got there, they asked us if we knew what ethnic group we belonged to. One of them told us to show our hands because they could tell from the palm of our hands. He said that Hutu do not have the middle line in the hands, while Tutsi have the middle line straight. As I bent to open my hands, one of them grabbed my sister’s child ... They turned to me, took the baby from my back ... grabbed me and threw me in burning coffee husks and I got burned everywhere while they were just laughing. After some time, they took me out of the fire and threw me in a pond that was near by, thinking that I would drown. It was good that the baby had been taken from me—I would not have been able to carry him as I had been burned all over. I cried loudly and one of them said, ‘Why don’t we finish that fool and stop having him making alarm for us?’ 6

The extreme cruelty of these actions—where the selections are the most painful acts—may have affected child survivors, both men and women, in their identification with the needy child. I have assumed that extreme traumatization at the occasion of the traumatic, unexpected abnormal event is experienced in similar ways, regardless of culture. Each individual’s vulnerability and personal life history nevertheless has bearing upon how one regulates anxiety in connection to the traumatic moment and afterwards. This view applies especially to manmade trauma and, to a lesser extent, natural catastrophies. Sgoifo et al. (1999, quoted in Schore, 2003a) write about how social stressors are far more detrimental than non-social aversive stimuli, and therefore attachment or ‘relational trauma’ from the social environment has more negative impact upon the infant brain than assaults from the non-human or inanimate, physical environment. Thus, the importance of obtaining a psychic space follows as a thread in this paper.

A single traumatic event, cumulative trauma, continuous trauma

This paper concerns manmade trauma, which especially evokes feelings of humiliation. I differentiate between a single traumatic event, for example, when a child is

---


5The interviews were conducted with the help of an interpreter. The boys’ answers in the local language Kinyarwanda were later translated in detail and transcribed into English by a Rwandan translator.

being attacked and humiliated in the schoolyard, where caring adults may be available and thereby help the child find words for what has happened, and prolonged, repeated trauma, where the victim has no access to such psychic space, as with genocide. In the first case it is possible to talk about what has happened, to work through the event. In the second case children only register what has happened as a panicky feeling in the body. ‘You didn’t think’ is an often-heard comment from the interviewees, as Anna said. An interruption of thinking occurred. A perceptual image or sound like the perpetrator’s voice can be imprinted in the body and the event cannot be left behind as a memory in the way we think about memories. Instead, it remains as an inexpressible discomfort in the body. A split in the self appears as a result of the difficulties in dealing with the anxiety. Individuals with experiences of early-childhood abuse may develop more dissociative responses to subsequent traumas (Bremner, 1999, quoted in Schore, 2003a). Dissociation refers to a compartmentalization of experience, which is stored in memory as isolated fragments, sensory perceptions, affective states or behavioural re-enactments (van der Kolk and Fisler, 1995). From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, the relationship between inner and outer reality should be stressed (Varvin, 2003). This might explain the fragmented narratives and sudden bodily reactions triggered by clues in everyday life. As Schore puts it, ‘the person would not be aware that his fear has any origin in space, place and time’ (2003a, p. 258). This could be described as a traumatic re-enactment encoded in implicit memory.

In many countries, there are ongoing continuous traumas. Children have no other experience than of living in political conflicts and being witnesses to violence and death, and this may add a new dimension to trauma theory. The history of the region is important and extreme poverty should be considered as the central factor in the start of a genocidal process (Staub, 1989).

**Method**

By applying psychoanalysis to the survivors’ life histories, we get a conception of how memories are a part of the survivors’ life world. Rubovits-Seitz (1998, p. 294) differentiates between two levels of psychoanalytic theory that facilitate the understanding of what is meant by applied psychoanalysis. The first level concerns basic methodological core concepts, such as the unconscious, defence, meaning and the importance of childhood, which form the basis for interpretations both clinically and non-clinically. This is the basic way of analytic listening. The second level concerns specific ‘clinical’ theories, which are tentative constructions that might be applied (e.g. Nachträglichkeit) clinically or in other applications as in interviews. Listening on this level seems to be more ‘applied’ with preconceived conclusions. However, these thought models might interfere with the individual’s construction of unique personal meanings. In this study, despite my preliminary preconceptions, I have made an effort to be open to the material in order to let myself become surprised by each interviewee. This also connects to my interest in cross-scientific viewpoints. Thus, I use hypotheses that are generated from the core concepts, as well as relevant thought models in relation to the interview material (Kaplan, 2000).
By using the method-grounded theory (Glaser, 1978), I have been inspired to ‘think conceptually’. This method aims to create theoretical models from the development of hypotheses well grounded in data and formulated in concepts, the relation between concepts and theories about social and psychological processes. There are similarities with psychoanalytic work. I have emphasized the interviewees’ ways of expression—both contents and affects. An analysis has been started about how these concepts relate hypothetically to each other within associative fields about what and how the interviewees present their life stories.

**Themes emerging in the interviews**

Especially notable phenomena in the interviews are based in sensory perceptions from the partly fragmented descriptions from persecutions and the affects that become visible in the room at the moment the interviewees talk about these experiences. Significant persons, as well as a number of meaningful linking objects that have been mentioned, have been of great importance for my understanding. Repeated statements have often been connected with ‘looking into the faces of adults’ and ‘looking out through windows’. These statements I have interpreted as significant borders for experiences between the inner psychic world and the outer world. These observations are in accordance with Schore’s (1994) extensive studies on the significance of the primary caregiver’s affective response—mutual gaze transactions and the mother’s facial expressions. Older children’s vulnerability to the mother’s gaze probably means they regain its immense importance during traumatic events. The expressions of affects in the interviews oscillated between sudden wordless crying to sometimes cohesive narratives with more relaxed eye contact.

**Generational collapse as a core process**

The major concern of the survivors, the core process to which most of the clues in the life histories seem to be linked, I have named the ‘generational collapse’. This process is built up by two core concepts, which I designate as ‘perforating’ and ‘space creating’, and the dynamics between these. Perforating comprises the inconceivable cruelties to which the Nazis subjected the Jews, and the Hutu extremists the Tutsis, in connection with their respectively systematic persecution. All forms of outward actions carried out by the perpetrators and described from the perspective of the persecuted belong to this category. Space creating is my term for the inner psychic processes through which the persecuted created their own space for thinking and acting in spite of conditions being minimal, and which they described in the interviews. By using the active form in the generated concepts below, I want to emphasize the ongoing process.

**Perforating**

The facial expressions of adults and the atmosphere in the home changed radically. Through parents’ ‘discussing’ or the opposite, ‘being silent’, the children understood that something was about to happen, but not what it was. Something
‘diffuse’ worried them. There was a feeling of ‘danger and vulnerability … the danger was creeping closer and closer to the skin’, said Sandor.7 Generations have been destroyed, dissolved, when the psychic shield has been perforated by sensory perceptions. The psychic membrane has figuratively and literally become ‘full of holes’ by invading the senses (something forces its way in and destroys, e.g. a frightening voice), tearing away (something is taken away and leaves a vacuum, such as family members, important objects and routines) and ‘body marking’ (both actual and symbolic, such as being abused and having to mark the clothes with the Star of David or ‘T’ for Tutsi in the identity card, or fabrication of a race difference, as with Frédéric’s hand). Sensory perceptions have made ‘imprints’ in the personality.

**Space creating**

The children’s preoccupation with the facial expressions of the adults probably constituted, as well as spatial orientation, a way of examining the possibility of creating a space and *recapturing life* as it was when it ‘was normal’. *Space creating* refers to a psychic room that an individual as a child creates according to his or her needs. This phenomenon can have a link to a real space where they, for instance, could hide for a short while. Despite minimal space in the living conditions that predominated during a genocide, glimpses of experiences from the children’s fantasizing in connection with the traumatic events were recounted associatively in the life stories. These experiences were probably a prerequisite for existing at all and constitute meaningful themes for human existence—a mending of the trauma. There could even be moments of ‘excitement’ in new situations, even though the situation was full of fear. Edith fantasized as a child about a tree that she saw far away through a little hole in the wall of the train wagon in which the victims were transported to the camps. She could thereby mentally ‘move herself’ out of the terrifying situation and for a moment feel ‘alive’. To highlight these moments gives us a sense of how the interviewees may have used mental strategies in creating links to inner pictures of important persons and events to fend off perforating and the fear of dying. Certain pieces of clothing, small things and dolls proved to serve as essential *linking objects*. Culture and religion may support this process. By strategy, I mean situations in which the strategic/creative process is something that first and foremost emerges on the spur of the moment based on existential needs. *Thinking/fantasizing* and *thinking/acting* are the phenomena that I see as the basis for space creating.

I asked Jean, a Rwandan teenage boy, what constantly comes back into his mind. His answer illustrates the dynamic between perforating and space creating.

> The thing that constantly comes back to my mind is the way my sister died … While I was in Kigali roaming about, sleeping anywhere, jumping over dead bodies and so on, and when I would think of my sister and how I could not find her, yet I was told that she was

---

alive, I felt very bad. She was not old when she died because we used to play together while going to church. They told me how she died. She was hit with a hammer on the head then put on a motorcycle and taken very far away and thrown there. What hurt me most was that the man who killed her used to be our neighbour, roasting meat near our home. I always think that, if I could only see him, I would also kill him—that is what disturbs my mind most. During those days, they were looking for young people to join the army, and, whenever I remember that man who killed my sister and was close to my father, I feel like joining the army so that I could also hunt him and kill him. I feel that, even if they found me out there and killed me, I would also have revenge for my sister. When I was still on the street, smoking bang, we used to go to a place ... and there they would try to stop me from thinking about the revenge, they would bathe me, feed me and I would start behaving like a normal child. I would then sit down and tell them all my plans, and if they tried to stop me I would run away and go back to the street. While I was still at this place, I met a certain lady who liked me and would take me to a place for prayers. She even gave me plastic bags to sell so that I could get some money to live on. She was very happy to see me afterwards off the street and to hear that I am now at school studying. I no longer think like I used to because those who are dead cannot come back to this life we are living in. I only hope for a better future with a wife and children. I will tell them the things that happened to me.”

The probability of surviving psychological damage/humiliation and abstaining from acts of revenge may increase if there is a support for developing mental space. Jean’s narrative is an example of this.

Age distorting

Age distorting contains aspects of both perforating and space creating, and can be seen as an aspect of the self-image. Distorting is used here in the sense of ‘reversal’ or ‘twisting’. The child survivors express a feeling of not being in their chronological age. To claim to be older than one’s biological age to pass the selection could give a psychic and real space, a hope for survival. But the need to lie is a strain for the self. Sam said, ‘I was 100 years old in my head and took care of both myself and my dad’. Anna, who was quoted above, gave a crying expression of the signal anxiety that was triggered when she thought of her pregnancies. This emotional statement may imply a traumatic link to her experiences in the cattle car next to the woman with a newborn baby, and may also show that child survivors in general lose their teens and became precociously adult. Thoughts of having children seem to create confusing links between different time dimensions. Fragmented life histories indicate a difficulty in experiencing the past as something one has left behind in order to then get on with life—lacking life continuity. Subordinated categories are depersonalization/emotional stunting and the opposite—taking responsibility/precocity. I perceive associative connections between perforating, space creating and age distorting, which has led to a conceptual model (Table 1) that functions as an analytic tool for the contents of life histories about trauma (Kaplan, 2002).

Table 1 — Analytic tool for the contents of life histories about trauma (Kaplan, 2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perforating</th>
<th>Space creating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Invading the senses</td>
<td>Thinking/fantasizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual impressions, sound experiences,</td>
<td>Wishful thinking, playing,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>absorbing of atmosphere, facial expression,</td>
<td>assigning meaning, maintaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>smell and taste</td>
<td>culture, creating excitement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tearing away</td>
<td>Thinking/taking action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father is taken away, school is closed,</td>
<td>Having one’s own activities,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>home is torn away, friends turn their backs,</td>
<td>resistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family is split up, hair is shaved off/cut</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>off</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body marking</td>
<td>Age distorting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star of David on the clothes for the Jews,</td>
<td>Depersonalizing/emotional stunting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>T</em> in identity card for Tutsi (i.e.</td>
<td>Becoming apathetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>marking on the skin), being abused</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is said and how it is told—Content and affects in the interviews

During the study, I became more and more attentive to the interviewees’ emotional expressions. The affects and also the lack of shown affects served as signals and guideposts. How something was said and the interviewees’ facial expressions came to be just as meaningful to me in my understanding of what the victims had been through as what was said. A web of memory fragments and affects came therefore to constitute the base for a number of hypotheses concerning affect regulating that seems to be the essential aspect of the core process generational collapse. These hypotheses form the base of a developing theory concerning the psychological phenomena that I call trauma linking and generational linking and which constitute one of the axes in Table 2, with a number of categories concerning affect regulating, constituting the other axis. In summary this means:

1) perforating and space creating constitute elements of the narratives;
2) trauma linking and generational linking constitute associative connections to these elements, respectively; and
3) these connections are based on affects regulated by the individual.

Trauma linking is thus an inner psychological consequence of perforating and means that traumatic experiences are ‘easily awakened’ associatively in the interview and in conjunction with events in everyday life. The survivors appear to live with a sort of ‘doubling’, a ‘vertical split’ in the self. The past and the present are in different compartments with no associative connection, that is, the trauma is constantly kept present in one part of the self while the person lives his ordinary life and seemingly appears untouched.
Generational linking, the parallel to space creating, means that the interviewees have their attention directed towards significant persons and objects in the past and in the present that strengthen the feeling of living in a context, and that also can be seen as an aspect of resilience. Through the analyst’s containing function, the capacity for space creating and generational linking increases. The analysand is less afraid of ‘opening the channels’ between trauma experiences and the ‘normal’ course of life. These different tendencies, trauma linking and generational linking, respectively, can dominate in different stages of life as well as in different stages of an analysis for each individual.

**Table 2 — Affect diagram — Hypotheses about affect regulating in trauma- and generational-linking processes within each individual** [Reproduced, with permission, from Kaplan, 2005, p. 176 ©latros]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linking</th>
<th>Affect evacuating</th>
<th>Affect invading</th>
<th>Affect isolating</th>
<th>Affect activating</th>
<th>Affect symbolizing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trauma linking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Perforating)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of trauma—may lead to revenge</td>
<td>Transported link</td>
<td>A1 Affect as link</td>
<td>Perception of trauma—retraumatization, which may be shown in body language and repetition</td>
<td>B1 Encapsulated link</td>
<td>C1 Representation of trauma/verbally expressed—perforating to small extent—may lead to (optimal) anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D1 Representation of trauma/verbally expressed—perforating to small extent—may lead to (bearable) pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generational linking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Space creating)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illusory space creating. Demand on personal rehabilitation. Pseudonormalizing</td>
<td>A2 Minimum of space creating. A cry for help</td>
<td>B2 Partial space creating. Maintaining control of the trauma</td>
<td>C2 Normalizing as link</td>
<td>D2 Metaphor as link</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The affect diagram (Table 2) shows the process in trauma linking and generational linking within each individual. That means that the diagram says something about the time perspective and something about the process between different categories of affects constantly going on within the individual. In certain persons, some categories of affects will dominate over others. The transition between trauma linking and generational linking is, hence, buoyant. Hopefully, generational linking will have developed over time, so that this process, decades after the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda, dominates over trauma linking.

**Trauma linking dominates**

*Affect invading (A)* was observable when the interviewees openly expressed feelings by, for example, crying or laughing in a panic-stricken way. The memory images seemed to be interwoven with strong expressions of emotion, and were characterized by a repetition compulsion. This can be exemplified with Anna’s desperate
crying as an answer (cry for help) when she came to think of her abortions, affects that may have associative connections with earlier traumas. The affect is the link, which may be compared to Klein’s (1975) concept of ‘memories in feeling’. If the individual is overwhelmed by affects that go beyond the threshold for psychic pain, the risk of psychosis increases through an affect imploding with ‘attacks on linking’ (Bion, 1959). Memories are ‘erased’ (Laub, 2005, personal communication).

Affect isolating (B) is characterized by a distanced narration, with which the majority began their interviews. The interviewees tell the ‘known story’, the one usually told when someone asks. This may seem to be a completely locked position, but might also, in generational linking, mean a maintained control of the trauma, and thus establish a certain acting space. One may, however, reflect on what happens with the affects when they are totally encapsulated—what the consequences may be, for example, in chronic states. Perhaps the affects are manifested as physical symptoms.

**Generational linking dominates**

Agreeing to being interviewed can be seen as aspects both of affect activating (C) and affect symbolizing (D). One exposes oneself to the risk of becoming moved and possibly feeling anxiety and pain when talking about traumatic experiences. The effort of regaining a ‘normal’ life, leaving a main identity as a ‘survivor’ and instead feeling creative, is dominating. The interviewee may, at these moments, *feel more free in relation to the past*. One could say that the trauma no longer exists only beside, contained in a closed part of the self, but also to a certain degree conformed in a time perspective in one’s course of life.

**Affect evacuating**

Table 2 is illustrative of an ideal development from a lower to a higher integration level (from A to D), but in reality the regulation of affects probably occurs as an oscillation between affect invading and affect symbolizing during different stages of an interview and in an analytical process as well as situations in everyday life. One may imagine a movement between, for instance, bodily stiffness with an ‘empty’ gaze during the interview and ‘lively’ eye contact and bodily/metaphorical descriptions and back again to possible somatization. In summary, affect invading and affect isolating are more primitive defences that distort and are inefficient. Affect activating and affect symbolizing are more adaptive defences and thereby more efficient.

To what degree is it possible to achieve lasting ‘open channels’ between trauma experiences and later ‘normal’ experiences? It is probably favourable to talk about experienced traumas early, which it would be possible to carry through in Rwanda today. At the same time, fantasies of revenge may be more open, as in Jean’s case, and the risk of projective identification is large, i.e. projecting the feeling of humiliation on the perpetrators in order to create a ‘pseudonormal condition’. Affect evacuating—projections—the most primitive level in the integration process (i.e. no integration) is shaded in Table 2 and appears in the first column (without a letter designation). However, this destructive form of affect regulating should probably be placed *behind* each of the other categories of affects, as aspects of these, which will be illustrated in the next step of the affect diagram, the ‘affect propeller’.
Via a continued theorizing and development of the affect diagram (Table 2), I want to show the possibility of further understanding the trauma-related affects. I have chosen the shape of a propeller (Figure 1) to further emphasize the dynamic process within each individual (Kaplan, 2005). The blades of the propeller pivot around the central point: ‘affect regulating’. Each blade consists of three different levels of linking processes based on my earlier categorization. On each blade, there are two levels of trauma-related processes: one deals with more destructive processes, called trauma-affect evacuating (the revenge); another the trauma linking (repetition and distancing); and the third level is the more constructive generational linking. The blades rotate around their pivot and may cover each other or lie separately from each other, similar to how emotions fluctuate. Sometimes one affect category is dominating, sometimes another and sometimes there are mixed forms. Some modes of expression may have been abandoned since they are no longer used because of other more adaptive modes. A consultation may start at any level or blade. The trauma-affect evacuating, which I discuss more in detail here, is marked to show the different roads that the revenge may take.

Figure 1 — The ‘affect propeller’ as an analytic tool for affect regulating within each individual [Reproduced, with permission, from Kaplan, 2005, p. 229 ©latros]
In affect invading there is, for instance, a risk of being overwhelmed by unbearable feelings, and actions of revenge may be the result. By thinking of revenge, one may feel as if one gets a ‘personal restoration’ (Igra, 2001)—a pseudospace for a ‘normal’ life. But, in fact, the victim turns into a perpetrator. Within the category affect isolating there is, for example, a risk of indirect action of revenge—‘elimination’ of trauma by flight into exile, or psychologically. There might be a risk of self-destructive behaviour.

Further, within affect activating there is a risk of revenge fantasies, such as when one looks for (negative) ‘satisfaction’, for example, by letting an audience listen to traumatic life histories without space for reflection and maybe with an accompanying thought—‘they won’t escape’, as one survivor expressed it. In affect symbolizing, we may suppose that there is a revengeful wish to reach a larger audience, by, for example, writing a book about one’s experiences and, in one’s mind, directing it at the perpetrators. At the same time, such acts may have another side. It may be a way to ‘share the pain’ with the emphasis that ‘all people are involved’ in the genocide that is carried out—that is to say, genocide is a global problem. However, it is, on this level, essential to underline that there may at the same time be a healthy relief in the survivor—that there are people who want to listen and be witnesses to one’s experiences—to share the feelings. I interpret this as the contrary to revenge, as a step in the effort to live in a context, generational linking. Herman (1992) expresses this phenomenon as the victim asking the bystander to share the burden of pain.

While we remind ourselves that a conceptual model is always a simplification of reality, it may also be seen as an analytic tool for the temporary present focus of the affect regulating of an individual as part of the trauma process. The affect propeller, as a whole, may also be seen with different expressions of affect regulating in trauma, that is, as an illustration to show how complex the affect regulating is for traumatized individuals. Hopefully, in the long run, trauma linkings will be ‘covered’, conformed behind generational-linking processes that become the dominating ones.

Revenge and revenge phantasies are phenomena that seem to be taken for granted and therefore are comparatively rarely studied and described psychoanalytically, especially since they are very much present psychologically and widespread in acted-out violence. There is thus also a great need to study the conditions of refraining from revenge (Böhm and Kaplan, in press).

The generated concepts in relation to contemporary theory formation

It is necessary to integrate the perspective of closely connected disciplines in the study of human emotion (Schore, 1994) and it might also be useful to compare concepts generated in this study with established concepts.

‘Perforating’ in relation to established concepts

Anzieu (1989) notes how intense chronic pain may bring the psychic apparatus into disorder, threaten the integration of the psyche into the body, and disturb the ability to wish and to think. The perforating concept connects to theories by Anzieu, who
stresses Freud’s (1920) fruitful metaphors of a wound, a puncture in the *psychic shield*, that is, internal bleeding resulting from psychic trauma. There is an agreement today that the concept of trauma does not have a clear and well-defined meaning. The concept is used for different experiences of psychic strain. Krystal (1978) emphasizes after-effects regarding both affective and symbolic functions. There is an increasingly accepted view of memories as something not stored statically, but as something changeable. Central concepts within current research are *symbolizing* and *mentalizing*, understood as mental processes that transform bodily/affective experiences into mental representations (Varvin, 2003). Children’s vulnerability to a changed atmosphere included confrontation with a frightened and aggressive expression in the mother’s face, which is imprinted and later appears as a *flashbulb memory*, extensively investigated by Schore (2003a). He also refers to clinical research emphasizing a possible link between childhood traumatic experiences and somatoform dissociation in chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (2003b).

The relevance for the PTSD-diagnosis, though, is increasingly questioned. Children affected by war must not be stigmatized as permanently damaged, says Summerfield (1998). There has, however, become a shift in the key focus of defining PTSD. The label is today best understood in terms of what an individual brings to the traumatic event as well as experiences afterwards—not just the traumatic event itself (Schore, 2003a). This coincides with results of an extensive study of child survivors by Keilson (1992).

### ‘Space creating’ in relation to established concepts

An increasing interest has been shown in developing thought models about *mental space*—how to transform sensory perceptions into psychical content. Theorists have, from various perspectives, addressed the development of thinking and its connection to the child’s active seeking after a containing object (Bion, 1967), to the focusing upon the significance of the transition phenomenon (Winnicott, 1971) and to the skin as the starting point for theory formation about thinking (Bick, 1968; Anzieu, 1989), as well as the importance of the child’s possibility to bond with a caretaker, attachment theory, which is highly relevant in this context (Bowlby, 1988; Schore, 1994; Fonagy et al., 2002). Winnicott (1971) describes how the transitional object constitutes a defence against anxiety, which can be compared with Segal’s (1957) and Modell’s (1993) view of the anxiety as a background in symbolizing. The use of objects may be significant out of the need to have something to ‘hold on to’ (Bick, 1968). This ‘something to hold on to’ is unconsciously constructed so as to strengthen the feeling of being an integrated, ‘contained’ person (Bion, 1967), of not ‘falling apart’ when confronted with the persecution or memory images from the trauma. It seems to be a phenomenon with significant survival value. The links are created to connect everything that supports the self with the feeling of one’s own existence, and are thus a central aspect of space creating and generational linking.

Winnicott (1971) writes about a potential psychic area that constitutes a bridge between isolation from and closeness to the mother. He distinguishes between the use of the object as comforter (strong bond with the mother) and as provider of calm (transitional object). Space creating and the child’s use of linking objects may
include both symbolizing (with a creative link to the object/the mother) and different fetish processes (anxious clinging to the object). The objects may be used in an oscillating movement characterized by, on the one hand, experiences of a secure infant period and, on the other hand, the trauma situation with a long separation from the mother. Fantasies of objects seen at a distance, as in Edith’s thought game of the tree, may—from a dimension of connectedness—create a space from the function of symbolizing to connect and unite contradictions, which is Winnicott’s contribution. The fetish may also be seen as space creating because it diminishes anxiety in the clinging, the control of the object, for example, when the victim holds the object hard in his hand or in the mouth and sometimes even swallows it. The interviewees seem to have had good early relationships with their parents and thereby most probably have been able to create symbolizing (transitional) objects. Good symbolizing objects may, though, be destroyed and deteriorate to fetishlike objects if the mother doesn’t return in time before the longing turns into trauma. The only function of the object is then to provide the child with a certain amount of protection against frustrating anxiety. Whether the symbolizing object leads to one or the other psychological phenomena depends on the time the mother has been absent (Deri, 1978).

Elias, 13 years old at the time, remembers

…the gathering of the things that we considered to be the most important … I had a … little piece of jewellery or whatever you might call it. It was not really jewellery either; it was a calendar on a chain to be worn around the neck. It looked like a necklace. That was the only thing I took with me. I dragged that with me all the way to Auschwitz. But that is the only thing that I have a clear memory of having.10

This ‘jewellery’ may have functioned as a fetish with possible symbolic value (Winnicott, 1971), and thereby a connection to his own body, the neck (Ferrari, 2004), and to his previous life. Ferrari’s hypothesis stresses the fundamental role of the body for the development and realization of mental functions.

Fonagy (1998) asserts that an alienated self exists in us all as the consequence of normal caretaking with its inevitable deficiencies. This self is normally covered by other self-images that we can create from good new experiences. The alienated self becomes most dangerous when later traumatic events in the family or the close surroundings force the child to dissociate, split off a part of the experienced pain by identification with the aggressor. In these cases the covered deficiencies in caretaking—the empty spaces—will be filled by images of the aggressor and the child will experience itself as destructive and, in extreme cases, as monstrous. Brutal behaviour from attachment objects generates intense shame and I imagine that this applies also to close neighbours, as an extension of one’s network as shown in Jean’s narrative. Early parenting deficiencies might create a vulnerability in the child that can be very destructive if later experiences are unfavourable, either as failed mentalizing or in order not to feel the powerlessness (Fonagy et al., 2002).

‘Age distorting’ in relation to established concepts

After extreme traumatization, the time concept and the time-related memory function are hurt. It is as if the trauma did not happen a long time ago, but again and again every day. Laub and Auerhahn describe this phenomenon by showing how fragments

...are recalled without the individual knowing that the ‘I’, or the subject who experienced the event is different from the one who recalls it ... there is a collapse of the two at the moment of recall, with no reflective self present. (1993, p. 291)

The past and the present exist simultaneously within the experienced self, which coincides with my impressions in this study. Winnicott’s studies (1984) show that child survivors preserve those qualities that belong to the so-called latency period, or return to these values after an imperceptible attempt to attain a more mature developmental level. Grubrich-Simitis (1984) focuses on the ability of the ego to use metaphors, as well as the related ability to structure time in the past, present and future. A number of the life histories include memories of the mother’s vulnerability to the shock, which the home raids and the deportations brought with them. ‘My mother became …’ ‘paralysed’, ‘speechless’, ‘totally at a loss’, ‘blind’, said four of the interviewees. Psychic development may have become complicated, particularly because children were the target of persecution, especially if early attachment bonds were weak (Bowlby, 1988). In addition, parents who were child survivors themselves in areas with continuous political conflicts are more at risk of transferring trauma from one generation to the next via sudden interruptions in their natural web of emotions towards the infant. This corresponds to Faimberg’s (1988) discussion. Schore (2003a) stresses the effects of the caregiver’s stress regulating and dysregulating interactions on the infant’s maturing coping systems. Both in Nazism during World War II and during Hutu power in Rwanda, reproduction was attacked through rape, experiments and torture. The phenomena presented seem to go together into an anxiety about childbearing and being a parent.

‘Affect regulating’ and ‘memory’ in cross-scientific light

‘All descriptions of the phenomenology of trauma include a disturbance in affectivity, but the precise role of affect ... is not clear’, stresses Krystal (1988). Affects may metaphorically be seen as ‘glue’ or as something that ‘brings energy’ by binding together and facilitating the formation of connecting links. Our earliest psychic world is created by this process, as affective processes can be said to be in the core of the self. Clinical practice has shown that people who do not have access to their affects do not seem capable of integrating their experiences to a cohesive experience of their own life history and the self. The ability to symbolize may be seen as the base for thinking and creating. Segal (1957) underlines the symbol formation as a process in which the inner is brought together and integrated with the outer, like a self with significant others, and earlier experiences with later ones. She says that the formation of symbols is an activity in which the ego tries to deal with the anxiety arising in its relationship to the object. Specific categories of affects are awakened, according to Modell, who develops ideas about affect categories:
Split-off aspects of the self are centered on specific affective memories of the traumatic interaction between the self and the other ... Both the self as a victim and the self as aggressor are internalized as split-off aspects of the self. (1990, p. 46)

Like Segal, Modell (1993) states that symbolization means that a person has been able to work through his or her experiences and, through a recategorization of traumatic memories, has been able to deal with the anxiety. Emde (1999) describes the early-childhood transitions and illuminates particularly the processes in which affects promote integrative connections. The degree of integration of the trauma determines which way the memory traces go—to bodily expressions or to thought contents, stresses Matthis (2000).

The regulating of affects is thus a central organizing principle of human development and motivation. Loss of ability to regulate the intensity of feelings and impulses is possibly the most far-reaching effect of trauma and neglect (van der Kolk and Fisler, 1994). The concern is to see how early patterns of individual adaptation evolve into later patterns, that is, the individual’s coping system (Cicchetti, 1994, quoted in Schore, 2003a). The right brain is centrally involved and in control of vital functions supporting survival and coping with stress (Wittling and Schweiger, 1993, quoted in Schore, 2003a; Schore, 1994). According to Tutté (2004), the most useful recent findings come from neuroscience on encephalic structures that are linked to emotion and memory. He emphasizes the current view on memory in terms of separate multiple systems—the difference between declarative and non-declarative or procedural memory—and stresses that ‘there is no disputing today that there is a sharp difference between what can be thought of, represented in images or put into words and what is inscribed in terms of affect-charged procedures, or affect-motor schemes’ (Davis, 2001 quoted in Tutté, 2004, p. 912). Nathanson emphasizes that we all have innate, relatively similar affect mechanisms, and we also have our ‘unique’ ways of understanding or ‘remembering’ our experiences of the innate affects: ‘Very quickly, as the growing child accumulates experience, affects become intertwined with memory’ (1994, p. 50). He points out that an outside listener therefore needs to know about the history of our affective experiences but also we need to know how memory influences perception of current emotions. Pally (1997, 2000, quoting Tulving and Thompson, 1973), who describes the encoding of an event and subsequent factors that facilitate the activation of the memory of this, even states that the impact of emotional arousal on encoding is mediated by stress hormone activation of the amygdala (cortisol, etc.). She says that what enhances memory retrieval is the degree of similarity between the retrieval situation and the encoding situation. This is why memory is state-dependent. You are more likely to remember an event that was encoded during a sad mood if you are feeling sad.

Modell (1990) regards Freud’s concept of Nachträglichkeit in a more universal sense. Memory is not any permanent tape recording in the brain that imitates the real event, but rather a dynamic reconstruction that starts out from the context and is created with the help of categories, which is confirmed by a neurobiological interpretation of this concept.

If one is unable to remember a specific event, this may be because one has not perceived a retrieval cue that awakens this specific memory to life (Schacter, 1996).
If one cannot translate traumatic experiences to the developmental phase in which one finds oneself, they remain unassimilated (Emde, 1999). The experiences cannot be given a meaning and thereby cannot be contained by the individual. The probable consequence is a repetition in the next developmental phase.

In summary, there is, on the one hand, the repetition of intrusive memory fragments associated with bodily sensations/affects that may be triggered by clues in the present and, on the other hand, the remembering process built on the traumatized having had a possibility to verbalize in connection to the traumatic event (symbolize) and put it behind him or her. This should be compared to aspects of the implicit procedural memory and declarative explicit semantic memory, respectively (see Tutté above). The established term of ‘invading memory’ thus becomes a contradiction. It must rather be a matter of ‘invading affects’.

Clinical vignette that illustrates the ‘affect propeller’

Max, a latency boy, was adopted at the age of 3. He was referred to psychoanalysis four times a week because of sudden major outbursts. He had been deeply traumatized during his first years of life at several orphanages, where he had been repeatedly abused. When the adopting parents came to see him he was ‘black and blue all over his back’. During his first sessions Max showed affect isolating by stressing, ‘I don’t want to remember—I want to forget’, and he simultaneously repeatedly communicated his psychic state by bodily movements and comments on his sensory perceptions. He said, ‘I am overheated’, an expression of affect invading probably evoked by the analytic frame. During one session, Max wore a sweater with a hood. He took it off and put it on back to front with the hood over his face. He turned around on the couch frantically and said in a loud voice, ‘I have a problem coming out of this beehive … I like bees but not their sound’. I hear ‘over-sounds’, he continued. I asked him what these sounds felt like. It ‘makes the neck hurt’, he said. Max most probably enacted his despair at being locked in, like being blind, sensitive to every noise from the outer and inner world (bees in the hood), enveloped sound memories from early traumas stored in the body. He tries, but does not manage to, fend off trauma-related affects. Moreover, he says he likes bees, and it may mean some linking object in his inner world that makes him feel creative.

In the following session, Max was more explicit and showed tendencies of affect symbolizing. He told me in detail an event from school the day before. It was ‘the worst that ever happened to me’, he said. He had met with his friend, A, and his worst enemy, B. B had said that A ‘had normal intelligence’ but that Max had ‘an intelligence like a seagull’. Max became more and more upset while talking about this statement of B and exclaimed, ‘I hate him, I will kill him’. On the one hand, a positive transference, a generational-linking process, seems to develop—a trustful attitude towards the possibilities of the analysis, which I designate as affect activating. He verbalizes his concern and shows his vulnerability. And, on the other hand, he wants to ‘kill’ his enemy, an expression of affect evacuating.

During the sessions that followed Max brought two plastic figures, which he placed on the couch. He hit the cover of the couch and the figures fell down, and
he laughed with mockery in his voice. He repeated this sequence during the next two weeks. An acting out of fantasies of revenge in the trauma linking seemed to occur.

At the end of one session before a weekend break Max did not want to leave. I told him that the 45 minutes had passed. He said, ‘Forty-five minutes! Can’t I order a full hour?’ The concern for the analysis had grown and he was upset that I had limits. I perceived his statement as a ‘cry for help’. Now, Max started a period of repeatedly and concretely investigating the consulting room. He stood on the couch and felt the structure of the walls with his hand hour after hour. He was upset when feeling uneven spots in the wall. He returned to certain spots once more to feel if the unevenness was still there. During one session, he suggested that I should have walls that are even and sound-isolated. I wonder what that would be like. Max exclaimed in a seemingly ambivalent way that ‘then I could hear noises in my head and that would not be so nice’.

In my understanding, Max shows initially that generational linkings are cut off—no drawings, no playing and hardly any narratives. Simultaneously, he shows longing for space creating and being ‘contained’ within a safe frame, and taking the risk of feeling the anxiety that is connected with the noises in his head, finding a language for his affects—affect symbolizing. Max’s way of presenting himself actualizes Ferrari’s (2004) hypothesis that the body has a fundamental role in realization of mental functions. Frightening noises and faces have been imprinted. To quote Klein, ‘In taking the analysis back to earliest infancy, we enable the patient to revive fundamental situations’ (1975, p. 234). It is a revival which is spoken of as ‘memories in feeling’. The pendulum of affects is clear. There is a lack of sufficient capacity for emotional self-regulation (Toth and Cicchetti, 1998). Max fights against his sense of being ‘overheated’ associated with feelings of being humiliated and, simultaneously, longs for the presence of an attachment figure, which creates hope for future dominance of generational-linking processes.

**Concluding remarks**

With the background of the increasing traumatization of children in different war zones—where we know that the civilian population are not only victims but also are used for strategic purposes—there is great reason to refine the theorizing about the after-effects of the victims when it comes to affect regulating. I want to emphasize the importance of not stopping at the listening to single cases, which are themselves unique, but also of lifting oneself above (theorizing) what we may hear and feel when encountering the traumatized individual, to create a possibility for one’s own thought space in order to refine our own concepts and approach.

With the help of the method-grounded theory, I have been inspired to ‘think conceptually’ about these psychological phenomena. I have reached an opinion of how different phenomena of the affect regulating in the individual are related to each other—how one concept may be built on another within the frame of an emerging theory about trauma-related affects. Variations have existed within each individual between affect invading, affect isolating, affect activating and affect symbolizing,
and in the different roads revenge may take within the more destructive form of trauma linking—trauma-affect evacuation. Thus, there are variations in the ability to symbolize in different phases of an interview or clinical sessions. The affect propeller is intended to illustrate the dynamics of these trauma-related processes. This model may be seen as an analytic tool for the temporary present focus of the affect regulating of an individual as part of the trauma process. It may also, as a whole, be seen with the different expressions of affect regulating in trauma as an illustration of how complex the psychological processes are for every traumatized individual.

I especially want to underline the importance of ‘space creating’ for the traumatized children—to create a psychic space for all kinds of thoughts. To work through feelings of revenge may change the self-image of the victim and also his attitude to the world around him. To reach a state where you feel more free in relation to the past demands that you put words to your rage and your fantasies of revenge, in order to develop the image of what you have experienced, to symbolize the events. Early life experiences and the experiences right after the traumas seem to have greater importance for recovery than the kind of traumatization the individual has endured (Keilson, 1992).

The process of mentalizing may change one’s self-image and attitudes. Symbolizing is needed to diminish anxiety-driven behaviour. This psychological work can be done in a lay context (out of necessity in poor countries) but may have to be done within a professional framework. Both kinds of work are necessary. To create space for expressing all sorts of thoughts is also important in eliminating the breeding grounds for political extremism. Moreover, it is important to identify acts of manipulation from activists towards groups of young vulnerable, traumatized victims in order to avoid the risk of escalation of a destructive spiral of revenge. From this perspective, we have to be aware of what humiliating feelings will be transported from one generation to the next, and what the consequences may be.

An overall conclusion from this study is that past traumatic experiences are recovered not as memories in the usual sense of the word, but as affects invading the present. Accordingly, affects seem to tell the story of the past traumatic experiences. The emerging theory presented here constitutes a unit that can serve as an analytic tool and may provide a foundation for an increased understanding of young people who have been affected by extreme traumatizing processes.

Transliterations of summary

Niños víctimas de genocidio: traumatismo extremo y el “afecto propulsor”. Este artículo se basa en una amplia investigación sobre niños víctimas de genocidio, a partir del Holocausto y del genocidio en Rwanda de 1994. El objetivo es poner en evidencia indicadores de fenómenos psicológicos relacionados con la regulación del afecto de niños supervivientes tal como aparecen en historias que han sido profundamente documentadas a través de entrevistas grabadas en video. Los fenómenos psicológicos se refieren a experiencias de persecución y los medios a través de los cuales han aprendido a vivir con imágenes y afectos mnemicos recurrentes. Las entrevistas analizadas en detalle forman la base para la emergencia de un modelo conceptual sobre el traumatismo—y de los procesos de vínculos generacionales dentro de cada individuo—que se denomina: el ‘afecto propulsor’. Una conclusión general de este estudio es que las experiencias traumáticas pasadas no son recuperadas como recuerdos en el sentido habitual del término, sino como afectos que invaden el presente. Por consiguiente, los afectos parecen contar la historia de experiencias traumáticas vividas en el pasado.


Bambini vittime del genocidio: Traumatizzazione estrema e propulsione degli affetti. Questo articolo si fonda su di un’ampia ricerca su bambini vittime della persecuzione, a partire dall’Olocausto e dal genocidio in Ruanda nel 1994. Si propone di dimostrare indicatori di fenomeni psicologici sulla regolazione degli affetti nei bambini sopravvissuti le cui storie sono state documentate con approfondite interviste videoregistrate. I fenomeni psicologici riguardano le esperienze di persecuzione di questi soggetti e il modo in cui hanno imparato a vivere con immagini e affetti mnemici ricorrenti. Dall’analisi dettagliata delle interviste, affiora un nuovo modello concettuale del trauma - e dei processi di connessione realizzati fra generazione e generazione - basato sulla nozione di propulsione degli affetti. La conclusione generale di questo studio è che le esperienze traumatiche del passato non vengono ricordate come memorie vere e proprie ma come affetti che pervadono il presente. In modo analogo, gli affetti raccontrebbero la storia delle esperienze traumatiche vissute nel passato.

References


