

Children in Genocide: Extreme Traumatic and Affect Regulation

Cristina Andriani, Robert Weil Fellow in the Psychology of Genocide, warmly introduced Suzanne Kaplan to Center faculty, staff, and students.

Kaplan's visit, likewise funded by a generous gift from Robert Weil, also allowed for her participation in the *Psychology of Genocide and its Aftermath* conference organized by Psychology Professor Johanna Vollhardt at Clark University (14-16 October 2010).

A researcher at the Hugo Valentin Centre at Uppsala University in Sweden, Kaplan studies the long-term effects of extreme trauma on children.

Her background as a psychotherapist in clinical practice, prepared her well for her work in the late 1990's overseeing 330 interviews with Holocaust survivors in Sweden for the Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History. She was one of the first scholars to utilize the archive for research. Her study, *Children in the Holocaust: Dealing with Affects and Memory Images in Trauma and Generational Linking*, was published in 2002.

Deeply interested in how people survive genocide and go on living, Kaplan discussed the theories she has developed on trauma-related affects and memory images after genocide.

In her lecture, "Children in Genocide: Extreme Traumatic and Affect Regulation," Kaplan discussed her interviews with child survivors of the Holocaust and Rwandan teenagers orphaned in the genocide. Noting that the experience of trauma is consistent across cultures and periods, Kaplan explained that these interviews shaped her analytic model for



Mikal Brotnov photo

Suzanne Kaplan spoke 14 Oct. 2010.

interpreting how children deal with traumatic experiences.

The first concept of the model, *generational collapse*, focuses on the survivor's struggle to present

an orderly story in light of the destructive acts of perpetrators.

Perforation describes how children register sensory perceptions in threatening situations without being able to conceptualize them; thus, child survivors appear reluctant to use existing vocabulary to describe trauma.

Space creating highlights a strategy children use to distance themselves from an ongoing threat by means of thoughts and actions. In discussing this idea, Kaplan acknowledged the conclusion drawn by Debórah Dwork, the Center's Director and Rose Professor, in *Children With A Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (1991) that pure luck and not a special strategy was foremost in survival.

The final aspect of the model, *age distortion*, illustrates the reversal many child survivors experience – they feel old as children and child-like as adults. These four factors, according to Kaplan, explain the *how* and *what* survivors present in their life stories. A complementary concept is the *affect propeller* model which explains how "past traumatic experiences are recovered

not as memories in the usual sense of the word, but as affects invading the present.”

The ideas Kaplan explored in her lecture at the Center and in the conference following were thought-provoking. Her analysis of interviews in the Shoah archive generated great interest, especially as the testimonies (accessible in the Rose Library) are used extensively by the Center community. Kaplan’s approach to analyzing life histories recounted by child survivors offers important tools to Center students who employ testimonies in their research. Demonstrating the absence of cultural differences in how genocide-related trauma is experienced, Kaplan’s results are applicable to a range of research pursued at the Center and beyond.

In my dissertation, *Jewish Children in Nazi-Occupied Kraków*, I analyze child survival by examining the whole register of individual and communal responses to their plight. Oral testimonies given by child survivors are essential to my research. Examining war experiences from the child’s perspective, Kaplan sheds light on how children evaluate the behavior of their

parents and other adults and she deepens how we understand the broader context for the children’s traumatic circumstances. In my study, I focus on issues relevant to young people, such as having friends, attending school, relationships with nannies, possession of toys, bikes, and pets. These elements illustrate how children managed their daily lives. Kaplan’s model demonstrates how these factors function in the memories of child survivors and how they emerge in oral testimonies. Assessing how children cope with and interpret traumatic events, Kaplan’s work is a singularly important contribution to Holocaust and genocide studies.

~Joanna Sliwa

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