

Review

Ancestral Selfies and Historical Traumas: Who Do You Feel You Are?

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Abstract: The potential for ‘historical trauma’ is deeply rooted within the evolved human mind, which constructs its reality through narrative in the shape of personally and culturally relevant stories. From its roots within psychoanalytic theory and practice and through its clear links with infant attachment, historical trauma can be theoretically linked with stress biology and the concept of Adverse Childhood Experiences. Via this trajectory, it has the potential to become more commonly drawn upon in the field of public health, despite inconclusive attempts to link it to social epigenetics. It is proposed that when the historical trauma narrative invades family histories via negative experiences that have deeply impacted upon the lives of ancestors, descendants may be drawn to ‘traumatic reenactment’ through fantasy. This is explored with reference to my own recently published novel, examining its content through the perspective of the ‘psychic work’ it represents with respect to reconciling the self to the traumatic experiences of ancestors.

Keywords: historical trauma; traumatic reenactment; psychoanalysis; psychology; infant attachment; stress biology; Adverse Childhood Experiences



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1. Introduction: The Story of the Story: Its Place in Human Lives

What place does storytelling hold in human life? This is a question I focused upon in a previous article for *Genealogy* “Not just *once* upon a time’ (Jarvis 2019). In it, I extended a focus on narrative and storytelling with which I initially engaged during my PhD studies, over 20 years ago. My research at that time focused on young children’s rough and tumble play, a phenomenon that had previously been overwhelmingly studied from a zoological and biological perspective. In my own investigations, the lens was turned towards ways in which young human beings bring storytelling into running, chasing, and play wrestling.

I found children adding comprehensive fantasies to chasing and catching play, drawn from concepts they had been introduced to both at home and at school, creatively translating underpinning narratives, such as fear, heroism, and salvation into original stories that were carried into their play, drawing upon a wide range of contemporary media heroes and events of the time (Jarvis 2007). This, I proposed, was because human beings have evolved as ‘storying animals’ living in a ‘story-shaped world’ (Lyle 2000, p. 55).

In my article for *Genealogy* I focused upon a sociological and cultural perspective.

‘While stories are not living organisms, they are the cultural equivalent, the flexible carriers of the archetypal narrative, endlessly transformed by human beings to inform the next generation of universal ‘truths’ of what it is to be human, but within a vehicle that is continually culturally crafted to fit the listener.’ Jarvis (2019, online)

At the time I was constructing ‘Not just *once* upon a time’ I was also starting to conceive a plan for a novel, drawn from ideas that had initially occurred to me during ancestry research on my own family. I had never seen or inherited any photographs or artefacts from my grandmother’s father’s family. The explanation she had given to me as a child was that of her father’s early death and consequent geographical separation from her paternal

grandparents. However, archival information I later retrieved indicated that this was not, in fact, the case.

When all the evidence was considered, it appeared that, following my great-grandfather's sudden death aged twenty-six, when my grandmother was only eighteen months old, there had been a disagreement between my grandmother's maternal and paternal grandparents and a consequent schism. I had previously idly mused when searching in historical archives for academic research that having a time portal would make the task much easier. I now had the same thought about the history of my own family.

Mulling over this issue brought a realization that, when the issue related to my own ancestors, it felt very different. A hypothetical question gradually emerged: so, what if I could travel in time to unravel the mystery, what would I do? The eventual product of this reflection was my first novel 'On Time' (Jarvis 2021) written over the 2020 pandemic lockdown. Creating this text involved drawing not only upon imagination to 'fill in the gaps' in the existing, incomplete family story that I had unearthed, but also upon my academic knowledge.

'On Time' focuses upon two women, both of whom, when suddenly confronted with the opportunity to travel in time, wrestle with temptation to 'fix' things in their ancestral past to prevent the occurrence of trauma that had impacted upon their ancestors. As I went through the process of exploring these ideas, particularly the trauma within 'Fran's' story, relating to oppressive religious and cultural beliefs that had impacted upon the lives of her grandmother and great-grandmother, I began to more deeply contemplate dynamics within my own ancestral family.

In building a cohesive story around this narrative, I became aware that I was now personally becoming involved in ancestral storytelling, an ancient pan-human activity I had previously explored in 'Not just once upon a time.' As I had also outlined in that article, I was engaging with this from my own cultural position within a media saturated, post-industrial society, framing the process in a contemporary, somewhat "mediated" manner, re-crafting Victorian events through my own twenty-first century lens, from the perspective of my own cultural 'truths' rather than those that had prevailed at the time.

Ancestry narratives are a fundamental example of the processes through which human brains create and recreate their reality through storying. But what 'psychic work' are we doing when we engage in this pursuit? The evidence suggests that motivations may be diverse, and emergent not only from conscious thought, but also from the unconscious.

2. My Ancestor, Myself: The Rise of the Historical Selfie

Nicholson (2018, p. 28) refers to ancestry research as a 'project of the self ... the story or narrative of who we are', comparing it to the social media 'selfie' photograph.

'Just as the selfie provides a self-portrait, possibly airbrushed, in the context of a person's temporal and geographical spaces, social networks and physical appearance, the genealogical project equally locates us in time, space, social status and physicality. They are both contemporary projects of the self—who we really think we are, aspire to be, and construct ourselves to be through the prism of how others act, exist, and have existed around us.' Nicholson (2018, p. 32).

While this may make ancestry research sound like a somewhat shallow and narcissistic pursuit, Lima (2019) posits that there are deeper psychological and sociological benefits in family history research for those who tell the stories, those who listen to them and the communities in which they are immersed. She proposes those who tell such stories are led to actively explore their identities and through so doing, may find increased psychic coherence; those who listen begin to realize that their story did not start from a blank slate at the beginning of their own life, and may become inspired by ancestors who have shown courage, particularly if they have survived against steep odds. Ancestral conversations lead people to engage in what Erikson (1950) referred to as 'generativity,' passing on wisdom to subsequent generations. Finally, communities may benefit from a sense of a shared past; a feeling that one is not such an isolated individual as it sometimes may seem. Kidron

(2003, p. 527) extends this agenda to a ‘filial responsibility’ to dead relatives, the process of keeping their voices alive: ‘if we transmit their memories, the tree lives and if we don’t it dies.’ In summary, the stories of our ancestors animate the narrative of human descent; those who have lived and died before us spring to life once again in our imaginations.

However, there is an inherent danger in this process. As traditional stories develop over time, changing with the prevailing culture (Jarvis 2019), so family stories may also become lost and distorted within the march of time. Lents (2018) considers the benefits and detriments of becoming over-immersed in family history, citing the mass media influenced quest for a heroic and highly relatable story. He proposes that this leads to a tendency to think of distant ancestors, particularly those who lived in other parts of the world, as more similar to the self than would have in fact been possible. He also raises the enormous number of direct ancestors we have as we move beyond our great-grandparents, a fact that is sometimes forgotten in the impetus to seek out an illustrious ancestor who “belongs” to us. This is particularly prominent in some of the celebrity ancestry stories featured in British/American versions of the light entertainment show ‘Who do you think you are,’ where the search for royal or aristocratic ancestors may dominate (Holton and MacDonald 2019).

So, some of what we find in contemporary ancestry research, as in many fields of modern story telling is the ‘commercializing and sanitizing’ I previously explored in ‘Not just *once* upon a time’ (Jarvis 2019, online). In popular culture, the ancestry narrative can too easily be slickly ‘storified’ with the aim of creating good ‘click-bait’; for example, a soap opera actor, a Prime Minister, an American film star, and a famous Olympian who have all descended from the same medieval king, without any mention of the fact that, by the law of statistics, a vast number of people with British ancestry will share the same ancient lineage (Lents 2018). However, there is an aspect of ancestry that underpins an arena of academic research and therapeutic methods within psychology: the devastating impact of historical trauma upon those whose ancestors’ lives were shattered by tragedy.

3. Historical Trauma: Dissonant Echoes from the Past

While ancestry storytellers in popular media may sometimes be tempted to focus on telling an entertaining story of ancient royal and aristocratic ancestors in an hour of light entertainment, Kidron (2003, p. 15) raises the more intricate issue of ‘trauma descendant identity,’ proposing that where ancestors have experienced traumatic events, particularly early in life, the result may be that ‘descendants . . . suffer from maladaptive behavioral patterns and a damaged sense of self.’ Her research explored psychological problems presented by people with ancestors who were survivors of tragic historical events such as the Holocaust and the Vietnam war, proposing that second and third generations can too easily become ‘wounded descendants of historical trauma’ (Kidron 2003, p. 532).

Sotero (2006) explores the origins of ‘historical trauma theory’, from its emergence in the 1960s, crafted from the notes of therapists working with families of Holocaust survivors, to its extension to other ethnic and national populations indirectly impacted by events that shattered the lives of ancestors. Examples include example war, slavery, and forced migrations, including those from Palestinian, African American, Vietnamese, Russian, Cambodian, Alaskan, and Native American heritages.

‘Offspring of parents affected by trauma also exhibited various symptoms of PTSD or “historical trauma response.” These symptoms included an array of psychological problems such as denial, depersonalization, isolation, memory loss, nightmares, psychic numbing, hypervigilance, substance abuse, fixation on trauma, identification with death, survivor guilt, and unresolved grief.’ Sotero (2006, p. 96).

She adds a reflection upon the likelihood that the degree of trauma would depend to some extent upon the intent of the oppressors; for example, were their actions intended to elicit obedience to a group norm, or to silence people who espoused an opposing point of

view, or at the most violent extreme, to murder whole populations from a particular nation or ethnicity?

Sotero (2006, p. 99) created an overview conceptual model of historical trauma. See Figure 1 below.

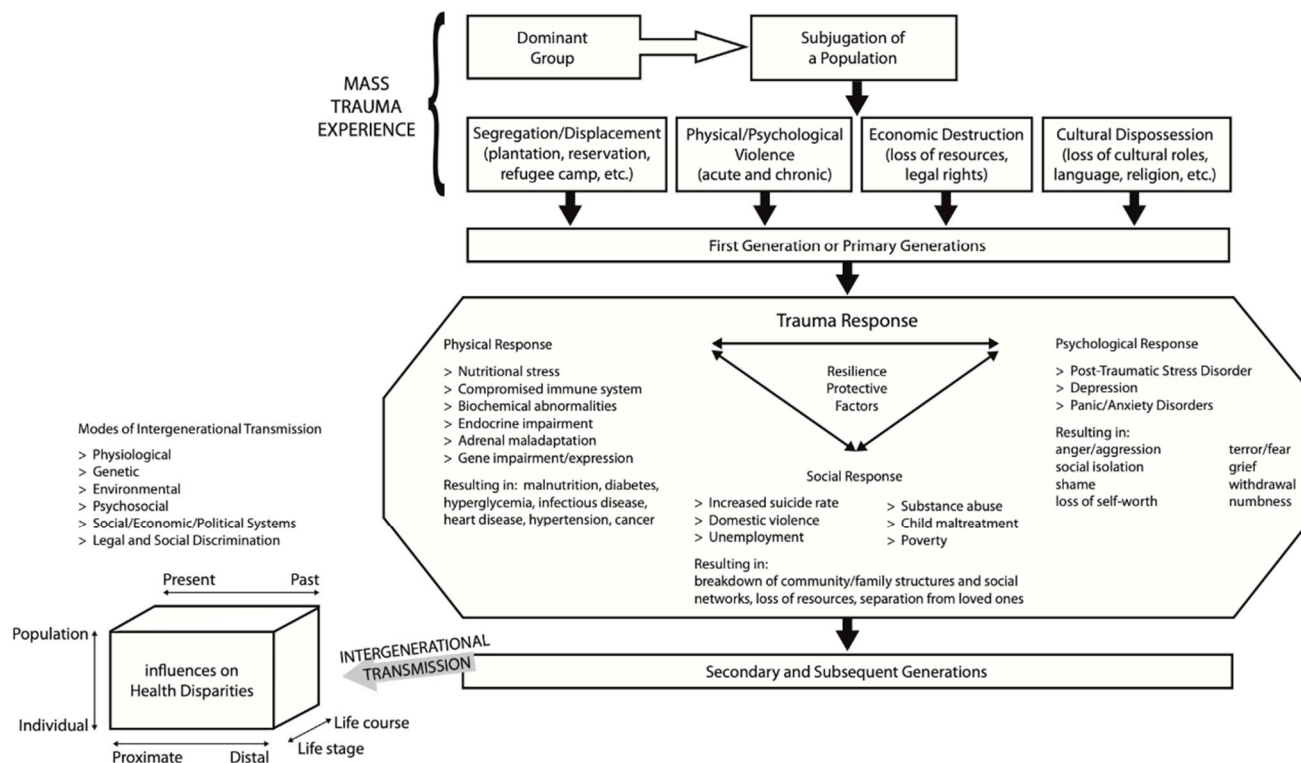


Figure 1. Conceptual model of historical trauma. Source: Sotero (2006, p. 99).

This issue is explored in ‘On Time’ (Jarvis 2021) in what is shared and not shared by three female protagonists of different ethnic heritage, ‘Fran’, ‘Annamarie’, and ‘Suzi.’ While Fran is convinced that her great-grandfather’s early death condemned her grandmother to an unhappy childhood in a household immersed in oppressive religious and cultural beliefs, Annamarie becomes increasingly obsessed with the deep trauma her grandmother has suffered from the loss of her mother in the Holocaust, eventually seeking a way that this might be assuaged in the present, via the illicit use of a time portal.

When the characters discover Annamarie’s actions, it falls to Suzi to explain, from her perspective as a second generation Vietnamese American, why Annamarie’s situation is different to Fran’s:

‘Do you remember when you showed me your great-grandmother’s china tea set, Fran? My family has nothing like that, nor will Annamarie’s Grandma Rachel. All of these things left behind in the place they had to run from Neither Annamarie nor I even share a common first language with our great-grandparents . . . So, Fran was tempted to rescue her great-grandfather because he died from what is now an easily curable illness. That’s eminently understandable. But how tempted do you think you might be to pull your ancestor out of the inferno of the twentieth century, if you had that chance?’ Jarvis (2021, pp. 90–91).

While Fran’s ancestors have experienced the death of a young father and subsequently been oppressed by other family members who wish to force them to comply with punitive religious and cultural beliefs, part of Annamarie’s ancestral family has been systematically murdered by a genocidal state. The opportunity to travel through time to rescue ancestral relatives is of course where fact ends and fantasy begins. However, the process of subsequent generations like Fran and Annamarie still seeking resolution for the suffering of their

ancestors (Wardi 1992) is a very real phenomenon that has been extensively explored by psychological researchers and psychoanalysts.

'On Time' depicts Annamarie's mother, Linda, as being of a nervous disposition. It also transpires she has named Annamarie for her lost great-grandmother, Anna. Annamarie's grandmother Rachel frequently comments upon her resemblance to Anna: 'Sometimes, I think you get more and more like her, and other times, I think I am just telling a story; one that brings her back, somehow. I can't really remember her face or her voice anymore' (Jarvis 2021, p. 38). Children placed in such a position are forced into a role of 'memorial candle' (Wardi 1992).

The story of a family dominated by historical trauma is one that contains empty places that it yearns to fill; hence the temptation to construct the child as the member with the duty to fill it. But because the child can never be the same person as the lost relative, the process cannot create a satisfactory resolution for those who have been so traumatically bereaved.

Wardi (1992) describes a therapeutic interaction in which her client tells her that, while it might appear to others that her family has honored her by naming her for her father's sister, murdered in the Holocaust, in the end this occludes her relationship with her father.

'The father thus sees his sister in his daughter . . . and unconsciously transmits to her all the complexity of his unsolved feelings for her. But he doesn't see his daughter or any of what she feels, what she needs . . . the ambivalent position of the "memorial candles" in their parents' consciousness. In the face of the images of perished objects, who were idealized after death in the survivors' psyche, the "memorial candles" have no chance.' Wardi (1992, p. 37).

Wardi (1992, p. 11) also considers the fragmentary emotions of the survivors towards dead relatives that may then be projected onto the 'substitute.' One of her patients, a woman who, as a teenager, experienced her mother's murder on a Nazi death march, has unresolved feelings of abandonment and guilt. On the one hand, the mother abandoned the daughter by dying, but on the other, the daughter feels that she abandoned the mother: 'she allowed her to die alone at the side of the road and thus lost her own self as well.' Wardi concludes that 'memorial candles' are trapped in relationships where they are unable to claim an identity that is truly separate from the existing one that they have been allocated by the family; they become completely enmeshed in their family's tragedy.

The theme of enmeshment is picked up in 'On Time', where on being presented with the opportunity to travel in time, Fran initially intends to impartially observe her ancestral family's Victorian Presbyterianism, with a view to an increased understanding of the lives of her grandmother and great-grandmother. Once she enters their world, however, she becomes sorely tempted to interfere in the timeline to prevent what she sees as the trigger for the cascade of traumatic events that blighted her grandmother's childhood: the premature death of her great-grandfather. Annamarie becomes determined to orchestrate a macabre reunion between her grandmother and great-grandmother to assuage their loss of one another in events leading up to the Holocaust. Both women have over-identified with the abandonment their grandmothers experienced and both therefore set out to atone for this as 'wounded healers' (Benziman et al. 2012) on an impossible mission to mend lives that were shattered before they were born.

At this point, however, fiction leaves fact behind, because in real life those experiencing such trauma do not have access to a time portal! The typical trajectory of historical trauma therefore creates a build-up of repressed emotion within the unconscious minds of descendants, which seeps into consciousness as an unresolvable feeling of separation anxiety. Wolynn (2016) suggests that release may then be unconsciously pursued through a 'traumatic re-enactment' defense bubbling up into the subconscious which hangs stories upon the separation narrative via dreams and fantasies (Freud 1961).

It is interesting to speculate whether this process may lie at the heart of many novels, the unconscious of the author harnessing imagination and creativity to process feelings through the crafting of a story to hang upon the trauma narrative that stalks the dark corridors of their mind. Perhaps then, my own unconscious may have motivated me to

create imaginary characters with historical traumas, thence to work further on this through a fantasy where they gain access to a time portal.

This was not a situation of which I was consciously aware in the planning or early writing stages. I had started the novel from the perspective of working through the loose ends in my ancestry story in a way that would allow me to tie them together more neatly; in this, I drew upon the historian parts of my mind, not initially realizing that a psychodynamic process was involved. It was only in retrospect that this emerged. My first reflection on my own psychological perspective as the author came from the fact that, when the story arc curtailed 'Fran's' travels in time, the theme did not feel fully closed to me until the character was depicted as writing her own novel, telling the anonymous story of her family, drawing upon her experience of meeting them via her journeys into the past. Even in this fiction then, my unconscious compelled me to tell not only the granddaughter's story, but also the grandmother's. It was from this thought that an inkling arose that historical trauma within my own psyche was playing a part in the authoring, not least because my grandmother had played such a significant and direct role in my childhood. For 'Annamarie', while the grandmother's story is told, the granddaughter's is as yet unfinished, and still bound up with the fate of the great-grandmother. This will be further worked upon in a sequel, with the author far more aware of the psychodynamic forces at play within the process.

In 2006, the actor Stephen Fry explored a historical trauma within his own family, in one of the most compelling and poignant episodes of the British 'Who do you think you are' series (BBC 2006), which engages with a story of historic trauma. When he began his research by talking to his parents about their family memories, he discovered that his mother, though born and raised in England, had an Austrian aunt and cousins, murdered in the Holocaust, whose 'ghosts' had deeply impacted upon her childhood. She recalled that her parents had been 'so upset' when they realized that she had discovered a photograph of these relatives, only reluctantly disclosing to her that 'they had all been killed', then refusing to discuss the matter further. The main trajectory of the program is Fry's quest to discover what happened to these lost relatives, in particular exactly when and where they had died.

This, then, is a less overt familial response to historical trauma than the creation of 'memorial candles', but one that may equally create emotional dysfunction in descendants. As Bar-On et al. (1998, p. 331) comment, a 'conspiracy of silence' cannot be total. Sooner or later, someone in the family will raise the issue, and then the imagination of the descendant may fill in the gaps, a situation in which I found myself when I realized that my grandmother had hidden part of her childhood from me.

In this sense then, the 'Fran' character in 'On Time' finds herself in the position of discovering a family-located trauma that has been hidden from her, whilst 'Annamarie' has been cast in the role of 'memorial candle' for a great-grandmother destroyed by genocide, which the story draws upon to explain her greater impetus to follow her 'rescue mission' to completion. It is unclear where 'Suzi' finds herself in this respect, but she demonstrates that she can access the overarching narrative of historical trauma, and consequently empathize with the feelings of both, clearly articulating the difference between the historical trauma stories that Fran and Annamarie's ancestors have bequeathed to them.

In summary, it is evident that those whose ancestors experienced traumatic events cannot easily avoid secondary impacts; both knowing and not knowing may equally become a source of historical trauma. 'Small details of the Holocaust experience may affect the second generation pervasively, just because only part of the story is being told and much is left to the imagination' Bar-On et al. (1998, p. 332). Historical trauma demonstrates the human reliance upon stories to shape our existence and provides evidence to indicate that this process can sometimes work against our well-being.

When the 'storying' concept is considered, it becomes clear that specific stories that are woven around the underlying narrative of human trauma by second generation survivors are typically underpinned by feelings of abandonment and loss. Wolynn (2016, p. 3) refers

to the familial transmission of a ‘personal language of fear’, proposing that his family’s trauma had been transmitted as a feeling of helplessness to him, where being stripped of identity and alone ‘echoed traumas that took place in my family history before I was born.’ To further explore this process, the theory of infant attachment and its extension into stress response biology must be explored.

4. The Role of Attachment in Historical Trauma

The concept of human infant attachment was created by the British psychologist John Bowlby over the period directly following World War II (1939–1945). Bowlby had a long-standing interest in the ethology of imprinting in avian species, and subsequently created his theory by mixing concepts from this research with insights gathered in his psychoanalytic work with children who had been evacuated or otherwise separated from their families during the war ([Jarvis 2020](#)). His central proposal was that, based on their earliest relationships, infants construct an ‘Internal Working Model’ (IWM) of what to expect from other people, and consequently of their own level of ‘lovability’. He proposed that this was the basis of all subsequent emotional interactions with others, both in childhood and in later life: “No concept within the attachment framework is more central to developmental psychiatry than that of the secure base” ([Bowlby 1988](#), pp. 163–64).

Bowlby’s associate Mary Ainsworth subsequently explored the quality of attachment that 18-month-old babies had to their mothers ([Ainsworth 1967](#)), finding that where infants experience their mothers as being emotionally available to them, they develop social and emotional confidence. But if an infant intuits that their mother is never or only conditionally emotionally available, they became socially and emotionally anxious. [Wolynn \(2016, p. 3\)](#) evokes how this has translated to adulthood for him; a constant underlying fear that he will be left alone to cope with his problems.

[Bar-On et al. \(1998, p. 318\)](#) describe a ‘secondary traumatising’ effect in the offspring of trauma survivors, which ‘presents some systematic evidence for transmission affects across two generations . . . attachment theory and its recent research advances provide an appropriate conceptual framework.’ They cite the work of [Van IJzendoorn \(1995\)](#) who found that where parents of infants reported childhood experiences that had negatively impacted upon their emotional security and insecure attachment with their parents, this was highly correlated with insecure attachment patterns in their own young children.

Clearly, this process has the potential to become a generational cascade, and where grandparents are closely involved in the care of grandchildren there may also be the potential for direct transmission to two subsequent generations.

‘Being left by a close attachment figure aroused feelings of anger even if the separation was caused by death. Many survivors still seem to maintain anger toward their parents because they were left alone. However, they have difficulty in overtly expressing this anger because of the tragic circumstances under which separation took place and they run the risk of being left with an unresolved mourning process . . . This orientation significantly deviates from what Bowlby believed to be so critical to the healthy development of infants . . . emotional accessibility which would lead to “felt security” on the part of the infant.’ [Bar-On et al. \(1998, pp. 320–21\)](#).

Attachment theory is still very much a ‘live’ entity in the twenty first century, with the Internal Working Model at its heart. Over the past twenty years, it has been further validated by biological evidence, in which researchers have correlated variations in stress biology against levels of emotional security in infants. Patterns of abnormally raised levels of the stress hormone cortisol in young children can be reliably detected in situations where the care that they are receiving is fragmented and, from the child’s perspective, uncertain.

‘The core empirical evidence from nearly two decades of cortisol studies indicates that when children experience ongoing stress due to early insecure relationships with adults that destabilize their emotional equilibrium, this sets in train

a problem with stress management that may eventually become ‘toxic’ to that individual.’ (Jarvis 2020, online).

This would seem to fit the emergence of historical trauma in families in which parents are impacted by traumatic events before the children were born. The anxiety created by these events does not evaporate but remains within the individual’s psychological functioning, later impacting upon the relationships that they build with their own children, an effect Bar-On et al. (1998, p. 318) refer to as ‘secondary traumatisation.’ Furthermore, as insecure attachment patterns are highly likely to be passed from one generation to the next, it has the extended potential to create a cascade, in which subsequent generations of the family are impacted in turn.

Felitti et al. (1998) carried out research into physical and mental health impacts emergent from ‘Adverse Childhood Experiences’, exploring the long-term consequences of family dysfunction in the stress biology of a large sample of adults based in the US. They found overwhelming evidence of a strong correlation between traumatic childhood experiences, poor stress coping, cortisol dysfunction, and ongoing mental and physical health problems. What is now termed ‘ACEs’ research has extended across the world, making concordant findings.

Large-scale studies in England (Bellis et al. 2014), Wales (Bellis et al. 2015), and Scotland (Coupar and Mackie 2016) have linked cortisol disturbance, dysfunctional stress response, and poor mental/physical health in adulthood to childhood ACEs. Steele et al. (2016) extended the focus to an exploration of environmental stressors upon parents, and the markers that this creates in offspring stress biology. Historical trauma is a phenomenon that has clear potential to be added to this theoretical arena.

NHS Highland use the following figure (Figure 2) to illustrate the range of ACEs currently being explored by researchers, dividing them into Adverse Childhood Experiences and Adverse Community Experiences:

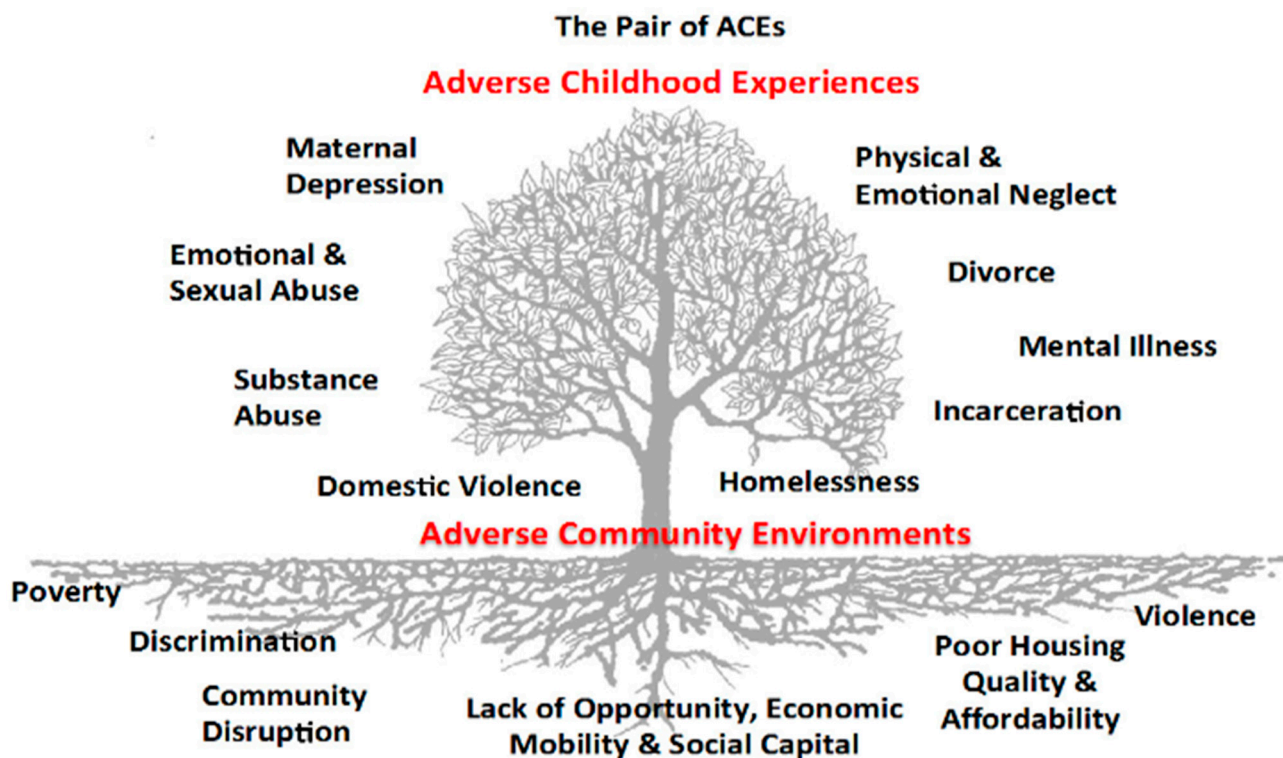


Figure 2. The Pair of ‘ACEs’. Source: NHS Highland (2018, p. 15).

The concept of ‘historical trauma’ can therefore draw upon a wide body of research for future theoretical and empirical progression. As Sotero (2006, p. 102) proposes, it

is becoming increasingly well placed to integrate into initiatives that ‘help public health practitioners and researchers gain a broader perspective of health disparities and aid in the development of new approaches’.

However, one branch of historical trauma research has recently been immersed in controversy: a contested attempt to link it into the newly forged arena of Social Epigenetics.

5. Social Epigenetics: A Bridge Too Far?

Epigenetics is a relatively new branch of biology that explores the interaction of gene expression and environment. ‘Gene expression refers to how often or when proteins are created from the instructions within your genes. While genetic changes can alter which protein is made, epigenetic changes affect gene expression to turn genes “on” and “off”’. ([Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2020](#), online).

In the first decade of the 21st century, it was discovered that people who were fetuses in utero during the Dutch Hunger Winter of 1944–1945, but who were not significantly deprived of nourishment after birth carried specific epigenetic markers that they shared with one another, but not with their biological relatives. ‘These data are the first to contribute empirical support for the hypothesis that early-life environmental conditions can cause epigenetic changes in humans that persist throughout life’ ([Heijmans et al. 2008](#), p. 17046).

Two years earlier, [Sotero \(2006\)](#) had raised the need to strengthen the validity of historical trauma theory with quantitative, empirical evidence. Historical trauma theory therefore enthusiastically picked up upon the prospect of epigenetic alteration in fetuses in utero, created by trauma previously experienced by their parents:

‘Alteration(s) in offspring may be mediated by mental health symptoms during gestation, and certainly extend to the postnatal environment. In studies of Holocaust offspring, perhaps the most salient observation has been that most differences in offspring phenotype were associated with persistent psychological effects of parents.’ [Yehuda and Lehrner \(2018\)](#), online).

What the authors are doing here is speculating that epigenetic changes might be a response not only to a physical trauma like starvation, but also to neurological changes in the parent created by stress, impacting upon the genetic heritage of the child. However, this is clearly difficult to support retrospectively as there is no clear beginning and end to anxiety in the way that there is to starvation. Any epigenetic changes in the second generation may therefore have occurred at any stage of life; it cannot be neatly tracked back to the gestational period.

The ‘gestational effects’ proposal was therefore swiftly refuted by the wider biological community, as an ‘attractive but poorly-founded idea’ ([Center for Epigenomics at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine 2015](#), online). In an extensive literature review on epigenetics, [Deichmann \(2020\)](#), online) urges caution: ‘since the idea of transgenerational inheritance of epigenetic marks has become fashionable, the temptation of epigenetic hype and the danger of lowering critical standards is prevalent.’

The proposal that historical trauma may be transmissible during gestation by gene altering environmental stress continues to intrigue, but is currently insufficiently supported by empirical research. However, research that has overwhelmingly supported the existence of biological impacts created by childhood stressors does indicate that there may be clear links with historical trauma. Historical trauma theory also has concordance with classical attachment theory and with the findings of the ACEs researchers. It is therefore highly likely that the concept of historical trauma could find a secure place within the theory and practice of ‘ACEs,’ and subsequently become a feature within mainstream public health initiatives.

6. Conclusions: The Future for Historical Trauma Theory

The links between ancestry research and child development may seem tenuous from a populist ‘ancestry as selfie’ perspective. However, viewed from the perspective of human beings as a ‘storying animal’ sharing abstract thoughts shaped by overarching narratives

recounted within culturally relevant story forms, the links become more obvious. My own experience of drawing upon the historical trauma narrative through the crafting of a novel based on ancestral events serves as a useful example of ‘traumatic reenactment’ though fantasy, a phenomenon which may be a commonplace mechanism in creative human storytelling.

The concept of historical trauma is now well poised to move into mainstream psychology through its links to attachment theory and the swiftly developing theory and practice arena that explores the devastating effects of ‘Adverse Childhood Experiences.’ It also has the potential to further secure its place within this arena through ongoing biological research relating to the impacts of poorly calibrated stress biology upon mental and physical health. The fact that attempts to link historical trauma to social epigenetics have not currently been successful should not create a barrier to this progression.

In conclusion, the concept of historical trauma has a promising future as a theoretical lens that can deepen understanding of how it feels to inhabit a human, storying mind. Our emotional memories clearly encompass a past and a future that extends beyond the physical existence of the self, into the experiences of ancestors who are now dead, and those that will eventually unfold for descendants who are yet to be.

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