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Distress and Growth: The subjective 'lived' experiences of being the child of a Vietnam veteran

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Abstract

There is a paucity of research into the positive and negative intergenerational psychological effects of war-related trauma, particularly from a child's perspective. Therefore, this study aimed to shed light on both positive and negative experiences of growing up in a family where one parent is traumatised by war. It explored the subjective 'lived' experience of three sisters whose father, a Vietnam War veteran, was diagnosed with combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) data from semi-structured interviews were analysed. One overarching theme emerged: *making meaning of dual complex trauma*. This encapsulated four super-ordinate themes: *betrayal and neglect; like father, like daughter; fragile intimate self; and growthful forgiveness* and *self-care.* Implications for therapeutic intervention with intergenerational trauma are discussed.

Keywords: complex trauma, vicarious trauma, betrayal trauma, children of veterans, combat related PTSD, interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Introduction

There is an abundance of literature demonstrating the harmful effects of war-related trauma on veterans (Kulka, et al., 1990a, 1990b; Shay, 1994, 2002). However little is known about the experience of growing up in a family where one parent is traumatised by combat experienced in war. This qualitative study explored the perspective of three sisters whose father, a Vietnam War veteran, was diagnosed with combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and co-morbid alcohol abuse. It aims to shed light on both the positive and negative intergenerational psychological effects of war.

Combat-related posttraumatic distress has been shown to have significant negative family effects including marital, parental, and family adjustment problems; increased violence; and behavioural problems among children (Jordan et al., 1992; Samper, Taft, King, & King, 2004; Solomon, Debby-Aharon, Zerach, & Horesh, 2011). All three PTSD symptom clusters: avoidance, hyper-arousal, and emotional numbing, can impact negatively on parenting satisfaction (Berz, Taft, Watkins, & Monson, 2008; Samper et al., 2004) leaving veterans feeling detached and emotionless (Samper et al., 2004) and struggling to seek out, engage in, and enjoy interactions with their children (Ruscio, Weathers, King, & King, 2002). In particular, hyper-arousal appears to influence both veterans and their partners' view of themself as parents, their relationship with their children and leave them more critical of their children's behaviour (Berz et al., 2008; Hendrix, Erdmann, & Briggs, 1998; Samper et al., 2004).

Living with veterans suffering the effects of PTSD can result in partners exhibiting high and chronic rates of psychological distress (Solomon & Dekel, 2006) felt and expressed in much the same way as the traumatised veteran (Figley, 1998). Susceptibility to emotional contagion is variously known as secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, or vicarious traumatisation (Figley, 1995, 1998; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Pearlman & Saakvitne,

1995). It is particularly likely to occur when partners or carers offer repeated empathetic and emotional support for a traumatised loved one (Figley, 1996). Often the partner will describe nonspecific distress (Jordan et al., 1992; Samper et al., 2004), higher levels of somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, social dysfunction, and depression (Westerink & Giarratano, 1999).

However, such distress is not restricted to supportive adults. Children living with a veteran with PTSD are also at risk and more likely to display developmental, emotional (Klarić, et al., 2008) and behaviour problems (Dansby & Marinelli, 1999; Jordan et al., 1992). For example, they may develop poor attitudes towards school, have elevated scores when screening for depression, tension, apprehension and anxiety, and lower levels of creativity (Dansby & Marinelli, 1999). As a consequence of these complex family dynamics, family life can become dysfunctional and problem solving ineffectual (Davidson & Mellor, 2001). Difficult parent-child relationships are often a consequence with high levels of conflict contributing to poor family cohesion (Westerink & Giarratano, 1999). Many children suffer extreme distress from feelings of loss and betrayal with consequent negative impact on self-care and future adult relational attachment patterns (see Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Freyd, 1996; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). For a review of the literature on intergenerational transmission of war trauma see Dekel and Goldblatt (2008).

Traumatic Growth

Despite distress, there is a small body of research showing that both primary and vicarious trauma can facilitate significant personal growth and development (see Joseph, 2011; McCormack, Hagger & Joseph, 2011; McCormack & Joseph, 2012). By combining the theories of growth and trauma we can begin to understanding why some individuals and not others are able to achieve high levels of psychological well-being in the aftermath of adversity (Joseph, 2011; Joseph & Linley, 2005). For example, despite distress, those who

are able to accommodate trauma-related information positively have found an increase in value of personal relationships, self-perceptions, and life philosophy (see Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006; Joseph & Linley, 2008; Prati & Pietrantoni, 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004). As such, growth is not the absence of distress and the rise of feelings of happiness, but a recognition that sadness and depressive reactions may be realistic and appropriate leaving individuals sadder, but inevitably wiser (Joseph & Linley, 2005).

A recent study exploring the phenomenological experiences of wives of Vietnam veterans vicariously exposed to combat trauma demonstrated evidence of growth over time (McCormack, et al., 2011). These veterans' wives brought meaning to their distress and self-blame by embracing humility, love, gratitude, and empathy. However, there is a paucity of research into combat trauma, family functioning, and vicarious trauma from the child's perspective.

This study explores the subjective 'lived' experience over time of three sisters, daughters of a Vietnam War veteran with PTSD and co-morbid alcohol abuse. It aims to understand both positive and negative interpretations of their experiences, and thereby contribute to the growing body of research into growth and trauma. By choosing a qualitative method this study aims to compliment positivist investigations by contributing to the theoretical questions around both primary and secondary exposure to combat traumatic distress in families.

Method

Participants

The participants, Josephine 37, Lucinda 34, and Prudence 28 years of age (pseudonyms) are sisters. They are also daughters of a combat Vietnam War veteran who had a long-standing diagnosis of combat-related PTSD with co-morbid alcohol abuse and met the government criteria for totally and permanently disabled from war service. Josephine,

Lucinda, and Prudence were all born after their father's return from Vietnam and lived at home with their parents until they left to attend university. Josephine is married with two children. All three are professional women living independently.

Data Collection

Following university human ethics approval, adult children of Vietnam veterans were sought to participant in a study seeking to understand the positive and negative experiences of living with combat trauma. Participants were recruited through veteran support organisations and the three women in this study were amongst the adult children cohort who volunteered. Semi-structured interview schedules were developed using a funnelling technique. The schedule (see Appendix 1) along with the study information and consent form were provided to each participant the day prior to interview to allow them time to reflect on the phenomenon being explored (Smith, 2004).

The unique and individual perspectives of these three women offered diverse insights into the world of a child and family where one parent is traumatised by war. Each participant was invited to offer a rich and detailed account of their personal experiences growing up in a family with a Vietnam veteran father with posttraumatic responses to his combat experiences, and how that had impacted their own development and relationships. The one-on-one interviews sought to elicit stories, thoughts, and feelings about the participants' personal experience as a daughter of a war veteran who had experienced both active duty and antagonism from society on return home from an unpopular war. The interview aimed to provide a dialogue between the interviewer and the participant whereby questions could be modified in light of the participants' responses and allow for the interviewer to explore interesting and pertinent narrative which arose. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, providing the data set for analysis. The double hermeneutic/reflexive approach of IPA, i.e. the researcher making sense of the participant making sense of personal

rather than shared experiences, allowed for individual interpretation and exploration of meaning making by each participant during the interview eliminating simply story telling that may have been shared by the sisters.

Analytic Strategy

A qualitative approach offered the opportunity to understand an alternative interpretation of vicarious distress embedded within the family context in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. As such, a qualitative methodology can go beyond the positivist model to reveal useful insights into meanings from the individual's perspective, yield clinically useful information, and challenge existing meta-theoretical frameworks such as the medical model (Joseph et al., 2009).

As an idiographic qualitative study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, Smith, 1996) was selected as the analytic strategy due to its interpretative approach to a phenomena previously unexplored. This approach is not concerned with verifying or negating specific hypotheses, but in illuminating new interpretations of in-depth, in-case, and cross-case analysis (Smith, 2004). IPA emphasises a double hermeneutic approach, that is, the researcher and participant in a reiterative dance of understanding or meaning making. As such, each case is a single data set on its own and is examined in detail until some degree of closure or gestalt has been achieved. This is repeated for each interview data before attempting cross-case analysis (Smith,1996; 2004). IPA offers the researcher-practitioner the opportunity to learn from the insights of the experts – the research participants themselves (see reviews Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005).

Analytic steps were as follows (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009):

Step 1: Listening, reading and re-reading. After listening to the audio recording several times, the transcript was read and re-read by the second author to immerse the author in the data. First impressions of the data were recorded.

Step 2: Initial noting. The semantic content and language was examined. Descriptive notes were made on the face value of the content as they provided an understanding of the things that mattered to the participant. Linguistic notes were made reflecting the way in which the content and meaning were presented. Conceptual notes were made which interrogated the data and interpreted the participant's overarching understanding of the matters discussed.

Step 3: Developing emergent themes. Emergent themes were developed and noted in the right hand column of the hardcopy transcript. The emergent themes mapped the interrelationship, connections, and patterns between the initial notes on discrete chunks of the transcript to produce a concise and pithy statement of what was important. .

Step 4: Validity. Simultaneously and independently, auditing was conducted by the first author, creating a validity check. Quality control thus occurred through this independent audit of themes in which the narration was checked for authenticity and thematic representation (for more details on this approach, see Smith, 1996). Final emergent themes reflected a synergistic process of description and interpretation and captured and reflected an understanding achieved through robust discussion between the authors ensuring that themes were evidenced by supportive data. It also aimed to lessen the invasion of biases and presuppositions. Although multiple and legitimate themes are possible from the data, the authors arrived at a credible, and logical step-by-step path of 'rich' evidence around the phenomenon under investigation producing a detailed audit trail (Smith, 1996). The audit trail encompassed the complete set of recordings, transcripts, preliminary notes, diagrams, early interpretations and pathways to final choice of convergent and divergent themes.

Step 5: Searching for connections across emergent themes. Brainstorming emergent themes led to the charting and grouping of related themes. Clusters of related themes were then used to develop a sense of super-ordinate themes graphically presented in a table.

Step 6: Moving to the next case. The above steps were repeated for each transcript, treating each on its own terms to do justice to its own individuality.

Step 7: Looking for patterns across cases. The tables of super-ordinate themes, and their respective emergent themes, for each transcript were then compared to determine whether there were any connections or patterns across the transcripts. The connections for the three participants as a whole were then presented in a table of themes to show how the themes were nested within super-ordinate themes illustrating the theme for each participant and capturing the most important things about each participant's transcript.

Results

Participants reflected on the negative and positive experiences of being a child of a Vietnam veteran. The overarching theme that emerged from the narratives was: *Making meaning of dual complex trauma* encapsulating both a sense of betrayal in childhood and the vicarious contamination of living with trauma. It overarched four super-ordinate themes: 1) betrayal and neglect; 2) like father, like daughter; 3) fragile intimate self; and 4) growthful forgiveness and self care. Themes represented the continuum from negative to positive felt emotions through early childhood and adulthood. These themes are presented in Table 1 and are described below with the extracts that best demonstrate them.

-Insert Table 1 here -

Betrayal and Neglect

This theme describes the feelings of neglect felt by these participants due to an *absent father* and the engendered belief that they were *not good enough*. It reflects the uncertainty and internal conflict oscillating between *good dad/bad dad*.

Absent father. All three participants related an absent father, physically present yet emotionally absent and related this to personal feelings of being unworthy, undeserving, even

invisible. They described him as distant and grieved the lack of their father's love and affection. The older two participants recalled two different fathers, an earlier "active" and "sociable" dad, and later an "isolated ... recluse":

> He was this active sociable guy and – um – then – and then he changed and ... he was isolated and distant ... nearly twenty years where he just – I mean he was still part of our you know, part of the family and everything like that but he just – he almost became a recluse, he just – he just – he was there, but he wasn't there, he was so distant. (Lucinda)

The youngest participant, Prudence, only ever knew the distant father and described him as a stranger stating that she "didn't know the man" and at home "he would pass you like a stranger on the street". For her "there was no show of love" and like the other participants, her emotional needs went unmet, she felt ignored, and deeply grieved the intimacy of a lost father-daughter relationship:

> I don't think I felt anything – I just got nothing from him. I wanted something and I got nothing. It was just an emotionless – you know – I wanted him to pat me on the back – I wanted him to do that (crying) and he just didn't do anything, and I don't think it was be-because – that he didn't, I just think that he was just – just emotionless. That's the way he was ... I don't want anyone to feel the sadness of not having like, a father hold you and love you. He's still there which I guess made it worse like – that he was there. But he just wouldn't give it. (Prudence)

Not good enough. Constant attempts to please their father and gain his love, affection, and approval failed leaving them feeling worthless, undeserving, inadequate, and *not good enough*. Prudence only managed to recall one occasion where she pleased her father and felt that she existed in front of him:

> I never felt that I did anything to please dad until I made it through the academy. Yeah. Yeah. Nothing. Nothing to this day, until that day, didn't think, did never think I accomplished anything for him (very emotional)... I remember the day I passed out of the academy and I

> remember the relief when dad hugged me – just the relief – the relief and – and the acknowledgement...that – oh I don't know – relief that I could do something and that, that, relief that he gave me that hug and that he acknowledged what I did, you know ... almost validation of existence even. (Prudence)

Lucinda also spoke of her enduring pain and worthlessness, never able to please her father, feel loved, acknowledged, or good enough:

> Well – I – we never knew and that's the thing I guess we – a lot of the things I used to beat myself up with because I used to be always looking at dad going (crying) 'how can you be like this when you've got three daughters – we do nothing wrong, we're educated, we – we do everything right and you've got a beautiful wife who does – does everything for you and for her children and (crying still) how can you be this unhappy because you've got this (crying still) – I think why are we not good enough to make you happy' – and I think that's just one of the things that yeah – just – I just could never understand and I think we were just always trying to do right and we just couldn't understand why he wouldn't be happy. It wasn't enough. (Lucinda)

Good dad/bad dad. The participants struggled with the juxtapositioning of love and contempt oscillating between *good dad/bad dad*. At other times, a sense of survival caused them to suppress judgement on their father's neglect and look to self as *not good enough*. This gave rise to a conflict between their childhood experience and their adult perspective as they tried to downplay the significance and impact of their *absent father* to protect themselves from further psychological pain:

> Dad was never out rightly horrible ... he wasn't really that bad, he was just a little bit bad. (Prudence)

Like Father, Like Daughter

There was evidence that dysfunctional attachment resulted in mimicking their father's high risk coping behaviours and responses to distress: *self-medicating, learning to be on alert,* and *denied the right to feel.*

Self-medicating. Lucinda felt genetically linked to her father's maladaptive coping behaviours: "I've known that I've had a problem with alcohol for ... about six-seven years now... I'm very similar to dad in that way where I do drink and I do have to be careful – I'm easily addicted to things". She reflected on adopting similar patterns for coping with stress as her father: "I'll have a week where something happens or – I find when I'm anxious I drink more too". This behaviour association with her father, though high risk, seemed to allow a sense of belonging and attachment to her father:

> I tend to binge drink when I drink. I'm like dad – like the same things as dad as well – when I'm on the wine – I'm fine on spirits and beer but on wine, and that's the same thing with dad on wine, they just – I get trashed and that's what he did ... I find that once I have one glass, I can't stop. (Lucinda)

Learning to be on alert. Prudence was troubled by hyper-vigilance, difficulty sleeping, and issues with trust and like Lucinda almost embraced them as links to her father: "dad was always a bit – bit untrusting of people and I'm not very trusting of people" and "I don't sleep much at all. Things constantly run over in my head and I know dad doesn't sleep". Again, Prudence saw her heightened state of alert as a connection to her father:

> Dad doesn't like sitting with his back to anything but a wall, and whenever I walk in a place, it doesn't matter where it is I scan and look for a place to sit with my back to the wall. (Prudence)

Denied the right to feel. Other vicariously learned behaviours in all three participants' included the conscious and unconscious suppression of emotions. They denied their emotions, believing them to be a sign of weakness, a personal flaw, undignified, and 'girly'. Josephine admitted to hiding her feelings and used phrases like "you're a girl if you cried" and "you're weak if you cried" and having to be "strong and brave and put up a front and not show any emotions and people wouldn't think less of me". Lucinda also hid her emotions associating this with masculine strength:

> I don't want anyone to know that I'm sad or if I'm lonely or anything like that ... Um – I guess I always feel that I should be the strong one of the family like I was in a way, I sort of feel like I was the boy of the family. (Lucinda)

Craving their father's approval, they learned from an early age that silence and avoidance of difficult issues, including Vietnam, meant avoiding trouble:

> We knew it was never – it was never – it was never talked about ... Mum would often come up and say 'oh don't talk to dad about that – just leave it be' and you know if there was a silence for anything you know don't ask your father. (Josephine)

This legacy of avoidance was common to all three daughters but left Prudence unable to confront meaningfully the trauma material she witnessed in her profession:

> Um – I guess sometimes – what – which I guess is a negative thing is – um – I just don't deal with it – I don't want to talk about it, don't want to deal with it – um – I don't want to play it through in my mind and I don't want to play through what I've been to or – just down play it sometimes and ignore it – like – create that haze (laugh). (Prudence)

Lucinda avoided by creating distance:

> I think I've always wanted to travel so but I then started using the travelling as a form – to escape ... as soon as I got sad about anything, I'd just take off again. (Lucinda)

Fragile Intimate Self

As a childhood sense of betrayal and grief overshadowed their sense of secure attachment and positive self-regard, and the vicarious exposure imprinted disabling behaviours, engaging in meaningful, reciprocal adult intimate relationships left them feeling vulnerable and fragile. As a consequence the transition from child to adult led to attachments that reaffirmed a belief in each daughter that they were *not good enough.* Thoughts of inadequacy resulted in a *weak sense of self* plagued by *shame and self-blame,* berating the child within for feeling embarrassed by their father and for lacking a more tolerant understanding of his war trauma. *Abusive adult relationships* reinforced their victimhood and

a heavy *burden of responsibility* led them to believe themselves liable for the lives and actions of others.

Weak sense of self. All three participants struggled with a weak sense of self as a result of enduring feelings of being *not good enough*. Lucinda described herself as having “insecurities” and “that self-doubt weakness”, Josephine confessed to “never had a lot of confidence in myself”, and Prudence admitted to “low self-esteem”. Prudence saw approval as a “massive thing” so she would “search and constantly ... do things until I get someone’s approval”. She would “often put myself down” and second guess herself. She would “keep pushing” until she got “that smile” or “approval” that fed her desperate need for acceptance and validation:

> I’m quite needy emotionally. Um I need people’s approval, I need people to – um – to acknowledge me ... I have to be acknowledged and know that I exist. (Prudence)

Shame and self-blame. Shame and self-blame saw each of these participants oscillate between a child “embarrassed” by their father and wanting “to hide my father from everyone” and contempt for and resentment toward their father. Though Prudence describes him as “arrogant” and a “pig”, she is left remorseful:

> I feel bad for feeling that – like – yeah – guilt ... I should have given him more of a chance but I was only a child ... I didn’t understand. (Prudence)

Abusive adult relationships. All three participants struggled with romantic relationships and identified this as the area most impacted by their experience. Josephine described it as a “ripple effect” keeping the peace as her mother had because she “saw how mum was around dad ... mum was my role model”:

> With partners I would always then try to smooth things over and make it peaceful and then for them, try to put the blame onto myself. (Josephine)

The participants felt ill equipped to form healthy adult relationships with males. Again, childhood beliefs of being *not good enough* was carried into adulthood, attracting them to

abusive and invalidating partners and perpetuating their feelings of inadequacy and non-existence. For Prudence romantic relationships would "rekindle those feelings" and if her partner didn't fulfil her constant craving for acknowledgement and affection she would go into "absolute despair". So desperate to feel loved she tolerated abuse and hid it from her family:

> I – sometimes allow myself to be treated less than what I should be treated ... and that's when I start hiding things – I hide from my family. My relationships with males or what happened and things like that, I hide it. (Prudence)

Desperate to please, Lucinda also stayed in abusive relationships believing she might succeed where she had failed with her father:

> I should have got out in those relationships but I didn't but I stuck around because ... I wanted to help them and wanted to be the one to bring them out of it. (Lucinda)

Burden of responsibility. The participants struggled with an unreasonable sense of responsibility for the lives and actions of their abusers born of their feelings of inadequacy in childhood. As an adolescent Lucinda felt so responsible for her father that she feared the repercussions of her every action:

> I always had that fear that – um if anything happened to him while I was away that I hadn't done enough to help him (crying) ... I tried every way I could from every angle to stop him ... I said to him you know if you are not going to do it for yourself, can you at least do it for me because if I leave and go (overseas) and something happens to you, I'll never forgive myself for not making you stop ... I was always scared that everything I said to him would make him commit suicide. (Lucinda)

Lucinda continued to struggle with a heavy sense of responsibility in adulthood; preoccupied with ideas about those she loved committing suicide. She believed herself responsible for her abusive partners' lives and that her actions alone would make the difference:

> If they did anything to themselves I could never forgive myself and I'm scared that if I leave them at that point what if they go and commit suicide or do something really bad or they spiral into a worse hole than – it'd be my fault. (Lucinda)

Growthful Forgiveness and Self-Care

During the interviews each of the participants began to reflect on the positive as well as the negative outcomes of their experiences and how these had shaped them into the women they had become through *meaning making and acceptance* and *forgiveness*. Despite their sense of loss and betrayal, and heavy burden of responsibility felt as children and young adults, they were striving to redefine their adult lives more meaningfully and with self-validation. They were beginning to focus on self-care by *rejecting rejection*, leaving abusive partners and pasts they no longer wanted, and actively *doing it differently* as they strived for better lives for themselves.

Meaning making and acceptance. As adults the participants all experienced guilt for feeling shamed by their father, and blamed their childhood selves for not being more understanding. This reinforced the cycle of betrayal trauma allowing further abuse in adult life: "I feel the guilt for being embarrassed at my own father" (Prudence). However, self-forgiveness seemed to open them up to a journey toward understanding and acceptance of their father and the complexity of combat trauma. Their ruminations began to be more purposeful recognising that the child self was not to blame for such complex adult issues. As such, understanding emerged and they began to accept that their *absent father* was not due to any unworthiness on their part but the result of his experience in Vietnam:

> I think definitely his alcoholism was related to him being in Vietnam and that I – when I was younger I didn't really understand that. It's only now that I understand that ... he obviously went through a lot but I didn't realise that as a child. (Prudence)

Through understanding and acceptance the participants came to the recognition that their father didn't deliberately set out to hurt and neglect them:

> I didn't fully understand it and it's taken growing years and being more exposed to everyone's experiences, not only my own little world, to understand that, that um, dad didn't go out there to purposely not – um – pat me on the back or to not give me a hug or not tell me he loved me, it was just that – he had nothing. He just had nothing to give at that stage. (Prudence)

The participant's acceptance of their experience assisted them to make sense of it in their life context as the foundation for the women they became:

> With everything I've gone through – it's made me a better person. I have a bit more of an understanding of life. (Lucinda)

Their experience was a source of motivation. For Lucinda it was motivation to "live life to the fullest" and "tell people how I feel about them". For Josephine it was motivation to be a more emotionally responsive and communicative parent, and for Prudence it became a source of drive and determination, and an appreciation for life's blessings:

> Whenever I start getting low or start getting – feeling sorry for myself, I kind of kick myself in the butt and think about all the wonderful things I've got in my life and how fortunate I am, you know, think about all the good things that I have and that sort of you know, drives me to go a bit further. (Prudence)

Forgiveness. With empathy, each of the participants forgave their father and showed him love and support:

> I'm much more – today I'm much more forgiving of – of him and the way things were. (Prudence)

Very recently, the participants' father stopped drinking and sought counselling which resulted in what Josephine described as "getting him back – getting a glimpse of him". This step by their father allowed them to take a chance at forgiveness and give their father a second chance and an opportunity to finally reciprocate caring:

> It's like we've got a second chance with him. Mm. Mm. And I value it so much mm. (Josephine)

Rejecting rejection. All three participants had a history of *abusive adult relationships* and were now embracing *rejecting rejection*:

> I guess a very traumatic experience happened then I realised he's never going change, he's going to take me down with him, he was getting into really heavy drugs and very abusive and I could see that I'd either go with him or I'd get out of there. I chose to get out of there. (Josephine)

Over time, Josephine was deliberate and considered in choosing her next partner. She looked for the signs to break the cycle of victimisation and rejection:

> The next partner I had was the total opposite, total like – that's – that's my husband now. The total opposite to what my previous partners had been so I've obviously in some way me breaking free I'd um – I'd – I'd gained confidence in what I didn't want – cause I knew I didn't want – cause I even made a conscious effort when I did meet someone, I was looking for those signs so I guess, yeah I was actually trying to get away from that. (Josephine)

Lucinda also *rejected rejection* leaving relationships with emotionally distant and abusive partners. At the time of the interview she was considered and cautious about entering another relationship:

> I guess that if I do find someone I'm going to have to sort of take it easy and just sort of – um – try and get to know them before it gets – um – too involved. (Lucinda)

Prudence also *rejected rejection*, ending a relationship with an unfaithful partner just months before they were to wed:

> My ex-fiancé was cheating on me – and when I ... got the confirmation that he was and it took everything in me to walk out of there and not ever go back. Everything in me ... strength to be able to walk away and keep going not to keep turning back again, like I've done constantly in life. (Prudence)

Doing it differently. All three participants were actively trying to live their lives differently from the emotional distress they had grown up with. Josephine wanted to raise

her children in a way that promoted emotional expression, open communication, and a strong emotional connection with both parents which contrasted her own upbringing:

> I don't want to be like it for my (children). I want them to have a really, really close relationship with (my husband) and always feel they can come to (my husband) no matter what and we do promote that and if they get upset of cry we don't say, 'stop crying' or things like that ... we want them to be open and honest (children) that can come and talk to us about anything no matter how terrible or horrible that they feel it is. (Josephine)

Prudence also wanted to do things differently. She described a desire to be different to her father and others in her profession that have been harmed by trauma, by emotionally confronting, not avoiding the traumatic events related to her choice of career:

> I do try to talk about – not actually talk about the experiences but just debrief with other people just by telling them what happened kind of debriefs me – just hearing the words come out rather than just seeing it – um – which is – which is – yeah – I guess that's how I do it and hopefully I'll continue to do that. I don't want to do or become like dad or other (people in the same profession) I've seen who just shut down. I don't ever want to be that. And you know what? I can't really envisage myself being like that. (Prudence)

Lucinda also talked of the decision to change and respond differently. She described the point where she commenced her journey:

> I started feeling like I was really like – something was missing in my life ... I felt very lonely and sad and ar – um the travelling was – it wasn't helping anymore ... and then I thought ... 'I'm going to do this course and start doing something towards my career and no more escaping'... I had to do something cause I knew it was you know, it wasn't heading in the right direction. (Lucinda)

Discussion

This study has highlighted the impact of intergenerational war trauma distress from the child's perspective. As siblings, they are able to shed light on various points in time and the changing face of the impact of combat-related PTSD on relationships. The study also shows

how qualitative approaches such as IPA (Smith, 1996) can make a valuable contribution to research by exploring the subjective 'lived' experiences of children traumatised vicariously by war. By illuminating phenomena previously unexplored, current trauma and growth theories can be further informed and hypotheses for future nomothetic research can be generated.

The women of this study experienced a deep sense of loss and emotional isolation from their father: "I just got nothing from him ... he was just – just emotionless". Their father's distance and unavailability, unable and unwilling to meet his children's emotional needs, interfered with healthy attachment and self-regard. Instead they incorporated his dysfunctional ways of coping, even inviting further abuse as they entered adult intimate relationships.

In accordance with betrayal trauma theory (Freyd, 1996), the participants' primary male caretaker was not able to be trusted and relied upon for emotional survival. This emotional neglect juxtaposed with guilt and doubt led to enduring feelings of being *not good enough*. Feeling unworthy and undeserving like many victims of betrayal trauma, these women exhibited signs of betrayal blindness (Freyd, 1996), excusing their father and emulating many of his behaviours. Their emotional neglect along with their secondary traumatic behaviours highlights the dual risks of betrayal and vicarious trauma to children of traumatised parents.

Previous research has linked betrayal trauma and re-victimisation (Gobin & Freyd, 2009; Gobin, 2012). This study supports this link and highlights the longevity of its influence with both the betrayal and vicarious traumatisation experienced by these sisters during childhood influencing significant developmental deficits particularly secure attachment and expectations of males in relationship. As such, each sister exhibited vulnerability to re-victimisation by repeatedly entering abusive adult relationships.

Despite extreme distress from feelings of loss and betrayal and the subsequent risks to self-care and adult relational attachment (see Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), the participants described a growthful redefining of self. Making sense of their individual experiences and how these had shaped their lives led each of these women to express new-found acceptance and forgiveness and increased self-care by rejecting abusive partners and the cycle of victimisation. Furthermore, acceptance and forgiveness allowed these women to distance themselves from the cause of their father's distress. Lifelong feelings of being not good enough in response to their father's emotional neglect began to recede as they started to connect their father's distress to his combat experiences. It was as if in relocating the blame external to themselves, a growthful redefining of self was unleashed: rejecting thoughts of their worthlessness, and rejecting abusive adult relationships by consciously doing it differently to break the cycle of victimisation.

Through the emergence of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and a growing interest in posttraumatic growth (Joseph, William,& Yule, 1993; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), helping professionals and therapists are as concerned with the facilitation of positive emotional states as with the alleviation of negative emotional states (Joseph, Murphy, & Regel, 2012). Although more research is required to better understand the factors that make the biggest contribution to psychological growth and the therapeutic models that most effectively facilitate it, a modified psycho-social framework (Joseph et al., 2012) provides a new affective-cognitive processing model for use in clinical settings. By providing a social environment supportive of continuous processing to resolution of pre and post-trauma discrepancies, growth following complex trauma is possible.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. As an interpretative endeavour it is open to the subjective interpretation and biases of the researcher's own experiences and understandings.

Both the first and second authors have had exposure to military families through their work and life experiences which brings with it likely biases and presuppositions. However, every attempt has been made to externalise these biases through robust discussion, collegial input, and completely independent audits.

Unlike nomethetic research, a qualitative study does not aim to generalise nor offer cause and effect but strives for an in-depth exploration of the individual subjective interpretation of experiencing a unique event previously unexplored. This study offers the extant quantitative literature future direction and contributes to the literature on betrayal and vicarious trauma.

Conclusions

These findings offer insight into the potential intergenerational psychological distress of combat trauma for helping professionals and therapists working with veteran family members. Importantly, vicarious exposure to combat trauma in childhood may risk long term psycho-social consequences suggesting the therapeutic importance of taking time to elicit full narrative histories from children of combat veterans. However, there is also hope from this study that despite the distress of complex trauma stretching across decades from childhood to adult life, positive and growthful revaluing of self is possible through forgiveness, rejecting rejection and mindfully developing respectful intimate adult relationships.

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Notations:

[...] indicates editorial elision where non-relevant material has been omitted

[–] indicates pauses in speech by participant

Table 1

Themes Encapsulated Under Overarching Theme: Making Meaning of Dual Complex Trauma

Super-ordinate Theme	Sub-ordinate Theme
Betrayal and neglect	Absent father Not good enough Good dad/bad dad
Like father like daughter	Self-Medication Learning to be on alert Denied the right to feel
Fragile intimate self	Weak sense of self Shame and self-blame Abusive adult relationships Burden of responsibility
Growthful forgiveness and self-care	Meaning making and acceptance Forgiveness Rejecting rejection Doing it differently

Appendix 1

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

- How your experiences in life have impacted on you over your lifetime so far
- How your exposure to the Vietnam experience through your parent/s has impacted on your life
- How you feel you as a person may have changed because of this experience
- What about this experience in particular has impacted on you either positively or negatively
- How you make sense of the human dynamics that you have been caught up in
- Any psychological, philosophical, existential thoughts that have altered or become part of your thinking as a part of this experience
- How your future will be influenced from this experience
- How has it influenced your feelings, thoughts, relationships and goals