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Childhood and the imposition of war: Self-blame, absolution/non-absolution, and vicarious growth in adult children of Vietnam veterans

Abstract

Little research explores the interpreted experiences of a childhood overshadowed by a parent's distress from war. Importantly, whether being parented by a combat veteran impacts psychological wellbeing positively as well as negatively is unknown. This phenomenological study sought positive and negative interpretations of childhood from the perspective of adult children of Vietnam veterans diagnosed with PTSD. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). One superordinate theme: *Making sense of the imposition of war*; overarches: a) *Tragic and turbulent young years*; and, b) *Knowing, absolution, and posttraumatic growth*. These themes encapsulate: 1) the interpersonal blame and shame that tenaciously undermined 'self' throughout childhood, and; 2) the slow emergence of 'self' as not responsible, able to absolve, and psychologically grow out of their adversity. Youthful ignorance of a complex war left these participants 'not knowing' why the heavy burden of responsibility became the child's remit for a father emotionally absent. The opportunity to re-examine childhood distress in adult life revealed harmful patterns of relational engagement learned in childhood that repetitively dogged their adult lives. This honest reappraisal of 'self' allowed non-judgemental self-regard to emerge. Forgiveness was offered to fathers when true reparation was sought. However, non-absolution did not preclude psychological growth with positive self-regard replacing misplaced responsibility and self-blame. Therapy can support the co-existence of distress and growth in the aftermath of a father/child relationship irrevocably impacted by combat-related trauma. In doing so the growthful domain of self-acceptance may facilitate respectful choice in future adult relationships.

Key words: *Children of Veterans; trauma; psychological growth; betrayal; reparation.*

Introduction

The children of combat veterans are a high-risk group for intergenerational transmission of traumatic distress particularly if a parent has been diagnosed with combat related posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Dekel & Goldblatt, 2008; Galovski & Lyons, 2004; McCormack & Sly, 2013). What is less well researched is the potential for positive impacts from living with a parent diagnosed with combat-related PTSD. Positive change in individuals in the aftermath of both direct and indirect exposure to traumatic events is a growing area of research (see Joseph, 2012). Therefore, this research explores both the *positive* and *negative* impacts of growing up with a father diagnosed with combat-related PTSD from the perspective of adult children.

The transfer of traumatic distress from one individual to another is known as *secondary traumatization* (Galovski & Lyons, 2004) and is often associated with the concepts of compassion fatigue, burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and vicarious traumatization (Figley, 1995; 1998; McCann & Pearlmann, 1990). In general, these concepts suggest that distress may arise through harmful cognitive changes when exposed vicariously to traumatic events, others' traumatic narratives (McCann & Pearlmann, 1990) and/or the emotional impact of caring for a traumatized individual (Figley, 1995). As such, these concepts suggest that intergenerational transmission of trauma to the children of combat veterans diagnosed with PTSD may occur through vicarious exposure to parents' responses to war related experiences.

Dysfunctional family environments involving impaired communication, hostility and lack of involvement by the traumatized parent (Dekel & Goldblatt, 2008; Galovski & Lyons, 2004), silence or over-disclosure about the trauma, identification with the trauma sufferer, and involvement in trauma re-enactments (Ancharoff, Munroe & Fisher, 1998; Dekel & Goldblatt, 2008) are also thought to be involved in the process of secondary traumatization. This is of relevance to children of combat veterans as large scale studies following the Vietnam War reveal that families where a member has been exposed to combat and has a diagnosis of

PTSD have higher levels of marital, parenting, cohesion, adaptability and violence problems compared to families of veterans without a diagnosis of PTSD (Jordan, Marmar, Fairbank, Schlenger, Kulka et al., 1992; Kulka, Schlenger, Fairbank, Hough, Jordan et al., 1988). More recent deficits in problem solving, communication, emotional involvement, and appropriate emotional responsiveness occurring in families of veterans diagnosed with PTSD have been identified compared to families of non-veterans or veterans without a diagnosis of PTSD (Davidson & Mellor, 2001; Marsanic, Margetic, Jukic, Matko & Grgic, 2014; Westerlink & Giarrantano, 1999). As such, intergenerational transmission of trauma to children of combat veterans diagnosed with PTSD can occur through vicarious exposure to parents' war related traumatic responses, or through being involved in caring for their veteran parent in some way.

Not-surprisingly, war-related posttraumatic stress symptoms can negatively impact the parent-child relationship and psychological functioning of veteran children. Veteran parents with posttraumatic stress symptoms, particularly avoidance and hyperarousal symptoms, have reported reduced parental functioning, poorer quality of the parent-child relationship, less satisfaction, interest, and enjoyment with parenting (Berz, Taft, Watkins & Monson, 2008; Ruscio, Weathers, King & King, 2002; Samper, Taft, King & King, 2004; Solomon, Debby-Aharon & Horesh, 2011), and more emotional, social, behavioural and developmental problems in their children (Jordan et al., 1992; Harkness, 1993; Klarić, Frančišković, Klarić, Kvesić, Kaštelan et al., 2008; Caselli & Motta, 1995). Though only minimal research has sought first hand perspective of veteran children, those studies report lower levels of parent care, impaired parental bonds, more anxiety, somatic complaints, aggression, feelings of hostility, thought and attention problems, and involvement in delinquent behaviour compared to children in various control groups (Ahmadzadeh & Malekian, 2004; Glenn, Beckham, Feldman, Kirby, Hertzberg et al., 2002; Marsanic et al., 2014).

The emotional, psychological or physical distress of children exposed vicariously to trauma through their primary caretaker is encapsulated in *betrayal trauma theory* (Freyd,

1996). The theory proposes that when an individual is dependent on a caregiver, they must maintain this relationship to ensure survival, even when harm or breach of care occurs. To do this, they must ignore, accept, or remain 'blind' to their traumatic experiences within the relationship (DePrince & Freyd, 2002; Freyd, Klest & Allard, 2005). This type of trauma is argued to be particularly detrimental as it can distort assumptions regarding social relationships and hinder the development of trusting relationships impacting negatively on future adult relationships (Birrell & Freyd, 2006; DePrince & Freyd, 2002).

In contrast to the reported negative psychological changes arising from exposure to adversity, a growing body of research has established that positive psychological changes can also occur (Joseph, 2012; McCormack & Joseph, 2013; 2014; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The positive changes following adversity, or posttraumatic growth, can result in positive change in relationships, self-perception, and life outlook (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Rather than eliminating distress, posttraumatic growth appears to have a curvilinear relationship with distress for co-existence of growth and appropriate distress over time (Helgeson, Reynolds & Tomich, 2006; Joseph, 2012). Accounts of posttraumatic growth have not gone unchallenged. Some have argued that self-perceived growth may at times reflect 'motivated illusions' designed to assist coping, rather than actual positive change (McFarland & Alvaro, 2000). Indeed, a 'Janus-face model' of posttraumatic growth has been proposed whereby self-perceptions of posttrauma growth may reflect a functional, constructive response to trauma or an illusory coping response that may be adaptive in the short-term, and contribute to adaptive, maladaptive, or no determined benefit in the long-term (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). This picture is further complicated by measurement of posttraumatic growth, which often measures retrospective self-perceived growth, rather than objective growth (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). Though growth may be illusory at times, the extant literature, at times employing multiple measures, supports the existence of growth beyond illusion following a range of

traumas (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2008; Calhoun, Tedeschi & Cann, 2007; Joseph, 2012; Linley & Joseph, 2004).

Recent studies have increased awareness about the possibility of growth in family members of war veterans with posttraumatic stress symptomology (Dekel, 2007; McCormack, Hagger & Joseph, 2011; McCormack & Sly, 2013). However, to our knowledge only one qualitative study has focused specifically on the subjective lived experiences of siblings whose father was diagnosed with combat-related PTSD from the Vietnam War (McCormack & Sly, 2013). Though betrayal, neglect, and fragility of self-worth were core negative responses, participants were able to redefine ‘self’ positively as adults, allowing for positive change in psychological wellbeing, adult relationships and life choices.

This study seeks to further increase awareness and understanding of the experiences of children of veterans from the adult child perspective. It sought rich descriptions, both positive and negative, of the subjectively lived experiences of childhood in which a parent was a combat veteran diagnosed with PTSD. As sustained psychological wellbeing or growth is generally seen to manifest over time (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006), the narratives of adult children can offer a window into childhood experiences and individual perceptions of distress and growth following the passage of time. By seeking an homogenous group experiencing the same phenomenon from different families, this interpretative, qualitative enquiry considers the subjective lived experiences of adult children of Vietnam veterans diagnosed with PTSD adding to the extant nomothetic literature.

Method

Participants

Participants of this study were five adult children of Vietnam veterans between the ages of 28 and 38 years of age. Throughout childhood, each participant’s father exhibited combat-related psychological distress eventually attracting a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder. All participants were born after their father returned from the Vietnam War. Each

lived with their family for the duration of their childhood. The four female participants had completed either a university degree or a professional academic course. The male participant was currently working in middle management without any formal training. Except for one female participant, all participants were married or living in a long-term relationship. Three of the participants were parents of small children. Participants were recruited through veteran support services following University Human Ethics approval. Though participants were required to have had exposure to a parent with combat-related distress during their childhood, they were not required to currently or previously meet any specific psychological diagnostic category or symptom level for inclusion. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Data Collection

Participants were provided with study information, consent forms, and interview schedule prior to their involvement in a semi-structured interview to allow them to reflect on the topics under investigation (Smith, 1996). The interview schedule elicited detailed discussion of growing up with a father traumatized by war and their interpretation of these subjective experiences. It was particularly interested in both positive and negative interpretations of experience. As a semi-structured interview, the schedule allowed for flexibility around the topic under investigation. The interview followed a funnelling technique designed to move the interview from general to more specific interpretations. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the first author. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Validity and reliability

Rigor in qualitative inquiry is sought through trustworthiness, verification, credibility, and dependability. The seminal and still pertinent work of Guba and Lincoln (1981; 1982; 1989), promoted trustworthiness as a post hoc evaluation. Though trustworthiness is demanded, a continual process of verification for addressing rigor in qualitative research is now promoted with Morse (2008; 2011) advocating a continual need for “checking,

confirming, making sure, and being certain” (p.447). Irrespective of terminology, rigor in qualitative research is verified through protocols of reliability and validity that are to found in rigorous steps that are underpinned by the philosophies of the chosen methodology (Smith, 1996). As such design quality is assured to promote within-design uniformity and analytic expertise (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009.) These step by step processes affirm transparency and further rigor in qualitative research.

Importantly, an external reality (a primary concern of validity) is not relevant when conducting interpretative qualitative research which seeks subjective interpretations of a phenomenon and therefore a representation of human sense making (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Similarly, saturation, often argued as a necessary component of rigor in qualitative research is obsolete in IPA which seeks rich thematic data from both convergent (across all transcripts) and divergent (within one transcript) themes. In IPA, rigor is dependent on adherence to methodological steps and the unique richness of the data (Smith, 2011).

When conducting IPA, investigator responsiveness adds to the rigor through purposive sampling of a small homogenous group, funnelling down to the research question, and the use of a double hermeneutic reiterative investigative style of interviewing (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Inter-rater reliability is also contentious in qualitative research with researchers variably arguing its importance or not (Armstrong, Gosling, Weissman, Marteau, 1997). In IPA rigor is assured through strict adherence to independent auditing prior to any discussion concerning thematic findings supported by data. Robust discussion and final consensus by all researchers is a continual process of arguing and debating the themes for uniqueness, and richness substantiated by the data. Therefore, at every level of an IPA investigation, theoretical consideration allows new ideas to develop, analysis to be paced, and iterative interactive debate to ensure reliability and validity (Glaser, 1978; Morse, 1997; Smith, 1996). (IPA steps: see Table 1).

Analytic Strategy and Procedures

IPA is informed by phenomenology, hermeneutics, and symbolic interactionism (Smith, 1996, 2004) therefore it seeks the idiographic interpretations of human experience for detailed analysis bringing to light the ‘lived’ experiences of particular phenomena in particular contexts (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). As such, it employs a reiterative double hermeneutic i.e. the researcher strives to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their experiences (Smith, 1996, 2004). This approach is employed to encourage interpretative data beyond a simple narrative account seeking both divergent and convergent themes. By recognising that different levels of interpretation are possible, interpretations must be grounded in the data and reveal interpretations beyond individual participant’s explicit reports. To encourage a comprehensive account of the phenomenon, IPA encourage the researcher to adopt both a questioning and empathic ‘insider perspective’ to data analysis (Smith, 1996, 2004; Smith et al., 2009).

Credibility

In the current study, each author simultaneously conducted an independent audit of the data creating their own audit trails (e.g. notes, annotated transcripts, diagrams: see Table 1). These audit trails were then reviewed to assess whether the themes arrived at by each author were credible, logical and grounded in the data. Following review of the audit trails, the authors engaged in robust discussion to concur on themes rich with supporting evidence to provide a singular interpretative account of the data.

Furthermore, when searching for thematic convergence and divergence across cases, attention was paid to ‘disconfirming instances’ or data that did not immediately fit emergent patterns (Yardley, 2008). This ensured these participant perspectives were not disregarded and highlighted nuances, subtle distinctions and important exceptions to commonalities identified in participants’ interpretations.

Author Perspective

The double hermeneutic stance of IPA recognizes that second order sense making efforts may be impacted by biases and preconceptions arising from researchers' personal and professional experiences (Smith & Eatough, 2007). The first author has worked as a researcher and clinical psychologist in field of complex trauma for the past two decades. The second author has worked primarily with adults experiencing comorbid mental health difficulties, often related to trauma exposure. However, whilst the authors were mindful to prevent negative influence from preconceptions, they also reflexively engaged with preconceptions, a necessary benefit of the double hermeneutic, reiterative engagement of IPA (Finlay, 2008; Smith et al., 2009).

Results

The adult participants of this study reflect on both positive and negative 'lived' experiences of growing up with a father diagnosed with combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder. One superordinate theme: *Childhood and the imposition of war* defines the shadow of war as ever present for these participants'. This superordinate theme overarches two themes: a) *Tragic and turbulent young years*, and, b) *Knowing, absolution, and posttraumatic growth* (see Table 2). *Tragic and turbulent young years* encapsulates disappointment, uncertainty, self-blame, self-doubt, and interpersonal struggles arising from a childhood overshadowed by parental combat distress. *Knowing, absolution, and posttraumatic growth*, defines a narrative of 'not knowing' the historical content impacting on their childhood, and the slow emergence of 'self' as not responsible when this content is revealed. 'Knowing' assists redefinition of childhood distress as adults, and paths to psychological growth in self-regard, connection to others, and forgiveness. Non-absolution is also consistent with psychological growth when inappropriate responsibility and self-blame is abandoned. As adults, growth allows acceptance of a father/child relationship irrevocably impacted by combat-related trauma and empowers participants to define their relationships and engagement in the world. (see Notations).

Tragic and turbulent young years

Each participant describes and reflects on their experience of an uncertain childhood. Self-doubt, disappointment, and self-blame intertwine their relationship with what they describe as emotionally disconnected veteran fathers. Experiencing father's intermittently unavailable through substance abuse, hostility, avoidance and withdrawal behavior, they speak of a childhood overshadowed by parental combat distress.

A father unavailable.

Disappointment and loneliness are strong emotional memories of these adult children who grieve lost opportunities in childhood for connection with their father:

There was just nothing for so many years. (Rosalind)

Participants' recall a distant father as emotionally and physically unavailable:

If we were having emotional problems or things it was always Mum – it was never Dad.

Never Dad. (Kellie)

And not able to connect with them:

He was just so caught up in ... this hole that he was in that he was oblivious to everything around him. (Luisa)

As a father he is described as hostile, hard, or unavailable to fulfill the role of 'Dad':

All the way growing up... I just thought he was a hard Dad... I saw my friends' Dads - I seen the fun they had ... I never got that with Dad, and when I did have him he was just a hard, cranky, negative, pointless man. (Keiran)

As adults they muse on possibilities and improbabilities:

I think it's a shame now. We could have had – we could have been really close with Dad but yeah – I don't know – I don't know if he could have expressed that or shown that then
(Kellie)

A sense of disappointment about a father unavailable is a common thread. Some view his unavailability in childhood as a “*shame*”, whilst others feel “*shattered*” and experience intense grief. So intense is their grief that “*bring up anything to do with Dad and I start*

crying". When remembering the immense disappointment experienced in childhood, they also remember the resentment that followed:

I couldn't stand the man, I hated him, I resented him. (Keiran)

Participants see others as having possessed the fatherly love and connection they longed for "*I didn't get that love – when everybody else was getting it...*". Reflecting on the perceived closeness of other father-child relationships brings up acute grief:

It saddens me cause I had a mate, and him and his Dad were like that

(indicates two close fingers), like it was just they done everything together and I always wanted that. (Keiran)

And loss:

I think yeah – it's probably – yeah, a grief for that loss that I didn't get that love when – when everybody else was getting it... from their Dad's. (Rosalind)

Blame, self-doubt and inadequacy.

Participants feel that it was impossible to please their fathers or help them escape their traumatic distress. They recall this sense of personal failure in childhood as feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, even self-blame and helplessness:

I used to think that like "why wasn't I good enough to save Dad, like maybe we can make him better, why can't we make him better". (Luisa)

An uncertainty about 'self' remains from a childhood where sense could not be made of a father's behavior:

I experience small amounts of paranoia about the way people look at me, the way they perceive me... when I was younger I wasn't sure why he [Dad] was doing that or why he didn't touch me, or why he said some of the things he did...and maybe that's sort of the same thing as today. (Rosalind)

For one participant, pervasive feelings of inadequacy are linked to memories of a hostile and critical father struggling with his own combat trauma symptomology:

It was always "you're hopeless, you're no good, you're useless"... so I guess I've carried that all through my life. (Keiran)

Whilst the other participants did not identify the origins of their sense of inadequacy, they describe “*never*” feeling confident or liking themselves particularly in their younger years.

Distorted love, neediness and invalidation.

As participants remember desperately seeking emotional attachment, approval and acknowledgement from others, they recognize this as attempts to validate self in the void of their father’s absence:

I was obsessed with him ... it was like something I’d cling to... I remember just having this impulse – I had to see him. (Therese)

They recall distorted intimate adult relationships involving enmeshment, obsessional attachment, and desperation for love:

With every relationship I had – um at one point meant the guy and I would love each other but then the guy would go distant and the more the guy went distant the more I would try and make it work. (Luisa)

For one participant, the compulsion for validation remains, despite her recognition of its futility and desperation:

I need that acknowledgement; I need somebody to hug me even if they’ve been horrible to me. (Rosalind)

For another participant, interactions with others still trigger his childhood sense of incompetence and inadequacy:

When I get in conversations with men ... I feel like the dunce. (Keiran)

Vicarious Trauma.

A veil of silence regarding their father's war history is connected to memories of participants' younger years. Despite this, they recall a sense of potential harm hovering over all encounters:

I was very guarded ... I didn't trust a lot of people. (Kellie)

Likewise, participants recognize the use of emotion suppression, avoidance, and hostility to manage threats to personal integrity as connected to their fathers' modelling of responses to problems and emotions:

I hide things like Dad does. (Rosalind)

They speak of how they can "*go off at the deep end*", "*hide*" difficulties, not "*deal*" with problems, or use substances in a way similar to their father. Others comments are felt as cruel threats of worse to come:

"You're just your Father" (Keiran)/"You're just like Dad" (Luisa)

Transgenerational legacy.

Relationship patterns, seen as stemming from the relationship with their father, are difficult to extinguish in adult life. Sensing betrayal, the child's conclusion, "*all men cheat*", becomes a mantra for the future:

I just had it in my head that you had a boyfriend but they cheat ... that's just what they do.
(Therese)

Saving others also becomes the norm at a cost to self:

Any normal person would have got out of it but because I had that history...I thought I had to save them. (Luisa)

Entering potentially traumatizing relationships provides a way to be validated, despite the risks:

I guess in terms of relationships I went down the path of trying to save the world sort of thing – um – and that made me feel worthwhile in doing that. (Kellie)

Some participants view their mothers as having being complicit and without true insight into the impacts of vicarious trauma. For the female participants, involvement in dysfunctional and dependant intimate relationships is something to be unlearned:

I think it carries over because I think Mum puts up with – put up with so much shit and I think I let myself put up with so much shit and I think I shouldn't be doing that. (Rosalind)

Desperate to unravel mirrored behaviors they recognize as destructive, harmful patterns of family interaction present in childhood, they are aware of the insidious nature of learned patterns of functioning sabotaging later family life:

I know growing up I said "I'd never do this to my kids. I'll never ever do this to my kids and wife" and you find yourself doing it. (Keiran)

Knowing, absolution, and posttraumatic growth

Looking back on a childhood exposed to a father traumatized by war, participants also show indicators of growth, despite continuing distress. Over time, becoming aware of the consequences of the Vietnam War on fathers, 'self' is freed from responsibility of the father/child relationship. As adults, this supports the development of positive self-regard, empathy, forgiveness, and enhanced connection to others.

A father explained.

As children, participants were unaware of the historical content impacting their childhood. Therefore, and not surprisingly, participants describe how they were unable to link the actions and attributes of their fathers to his wartime experiences.

I guess growing up I never associated Dad - the way Dad was with combat - it wasn't until I was seeking counselling...that I could put two and two together. (Keiran)

There wasn't enough support for Dad when he came home and I think that had Over time, "*a huge, huge ripple effect*" led to help seeking through various means such as counselling, self-education, and family discussion.

I've really looked into it and really educated myself about it so I can have a better

understanding of it. (Luisa)

Additionally, societal rituals such as commemorative days, and pivotal family events allows a narrative to emerge whereby they come to 'know' of their fathers' war experiences and the psychosocial aspects of the Vietnam War: Slowly sense making unravels:

And then he actually spoke about it in – in detail and you could see the emotions that it brought out in him, and then that's when it actually really hit home and how huge it was and how big it still is in his life. (Therese)

Soldiering and the emotional constraints of war now offer a possible explanation for the emotionally barren experiences of childhood:

You can't show an emotion ... you gotta keep going. You're in a war... that's when I understood...he doesn't know how to show emotions. (Keiran)

and unpredictable behavior of fathers:

I know he's really calm but when he snaps, he snaps... I don't know if he's been like that forever, or maybe that was something that he learned when he was at the war that you just got to deal with stuff and you've just got to be resilient and you know, take in on the chin - (but) you can only be pushed so far. (Therese)

Forgiveness/non-absolution of others.

Again, over time, with growing insight into their fathers' war experiences and the psychosocial aspects of the Vietnam War, participants feel increasingly able to forgive fathers for past transgressions and not "*blame him completely*". However, the emotional abuse, loneliness, self-doubt, and traumatic loss of a betrayed childhood, complicates forgiveness for some participants. As such, while the soldier can be forgiven, difficulty remains in absolving the man who had failed to be the caring father:

I think I've forgiven Dad over the years but I still have issues. (Keiran)

Still struggling in the aftermath of childhood, these participants reflect on the incomplete exoneration of their father:

There's still times I think I'm like this because of you ... You don't like to blame people for it, but you've got to wonder if I didn't go through it would I be a different person today.

(Keiran)

Despite this, when fathers acknowledge harm caused and attempt reparation through honesty, openness, and changed behavior, establishing or restoring parent/child bonds becomes possible:

He's acknowledged a lot and like I said it's like this second chance ... he's making up for what he didn't give. (Kellie)

But tentative:

I wouldn't say I know him still... when I talk to him, sometimes it's like meeting a new person – like sometimes I'm not really sure what to say. But that's better than not saying anything at all. (Rosalind)

Reinvention of relationships.

Growing self-regard, together with an improved ability to evaluate and apportion responsibility for behavior within relationships, transform expectations for interpersonal relationships for these participants. Furthermore, coming to recognize the detrimental effects of repeating relationship patterns and roles from childhood they associate with their father, participants seek to reinvent their relationships and “*take another road*” as adults:

I've got to just make sure that if I do see the signs this time of someone whose emotionally not stable and isn't getting help ... don't think that I can fix it. (Luisa)

Harmful intergenerational patterns of parenting are also confronted. One participant speaks of ‘*breaking*’ the pattern of hostile and critical parenting in his own childhood with his children so he does not “*bring them up to be hopeless*”. Unlike the ‘*hard*’ father he experienced, he views his new ‘*softer*’ and ‘*more emotional*’ adult self as supporting change:

I still go off at the deep end at the kids at times, but I will now go back and apologize to them. "I was wrong in doing that ... I want to apologize to you and do it better." (Keiran)

Valued connection.

These participants speak of being conscious of reaching out more empathically to others as adults. For some, an increase in interest and empathy toward others is directly attributed to ‘knowing’ a father adversely impacted by war:

If I didn’t have my Dad ... and know his stories, if a show came on TV I’d probably say ‘oh yeah’, but now you’ve got such a deep understanding ... you listen to people’s stories and ... you feel for what they went through. (Therese)

For others, growth in care, concern and intention to help others is linked to a reduced self-focus and a developing sense of being a “*better person*”:

Before I couldn’t care about other people but now I want to help other people - I’m for the knocker – I don’t like to see people hurt and suffering and down. (Keiran)

Looking back, participants view their father’s struggles, and their own, as exacerbated or prolonged by a lack of openness, support and emotional closeness within relationships. Determined to prevent future suffering, so “*the same thing doesn’t happen to others*”, importance is now placed on meaningful connection that promotes the externalization of problems:

I’m trying now to get the boys to be open and supportive with each other... so that if anything happens to them that’s traumatic - that they know to share that... I don’t know that I’d be so adamant ... only for the fact that I went through the things that I did and Dad. (Kellie)

Redefining self-regard.

No longer sensing responsibility, participants describe engaging in new paths that allow them to redefine self-regard. They give themselves permission to embrace experience, self-compassion, self-forgiveness and reinterpretation of childhood distress. For one participant, finding religious meaning for existence is strongly connected to personal changes in perceived self-worth:

I believe that God made everyone for a purpose and I'm created for a purpose. (Keiran)

This is a challenge to his father's words, '*hopeless*', '*useless*' and '*no good*' that had continually plagued his developing identity in childhood:

I'm not a useless person. (Keiran)

For other participants, self-blame is dissolving over time as the adult becomes more able to show compassion toward the child. Personal responsibility, however, is not totally extinguished:

I didn't have the capacity to feel sympathy and empathy for my father ... I do feel some guilt ... but then again I was only a teenager and child ... life revolved around me. (Rosalind)

Disappointment, regret and a desire to sever all ties is often juxtaposed with choosing a more forgiving path:

I would like to wipe them (years) off the slate you know, but I can't ... I just have to put that in the past and that's obviously what Dad's done. (Therese)

In some cases, improving self-regard is an ongoing goal for personal growth that has not quite shaken the cloak of sadness associated with a childhood experience of an emotionally absent father:

I can only get stronger. (Rosalind)

Discussion

This study highlights the tragedy and turbulence of a childhood spent in the shadow of a father's combat experience, and the related psychological distress and interpersonal difficulties that arose for these participants. Without knowledge of the historical content of their father's war experiences, a heavy burden of loss persisted throughout childhood and entangled their lives with webs of self-doubt, misplaced blame, an excessive sense of responsibility, and unworthiness in relationships. Unfortunately, this study emphasizes the complexity of transgenerational psychological damage that is a legacy of war for these participants.

More positively, this study also highlights that redefining childhood distress in adult life can facilitate growth. For these participants, gaining knowledge of the psychosocial aspects of the Vietnam War and their father's war experiences provided an alternative explanation for their father's distress and their subjectively experienced negation of childhood. This permitted the re-evaluation of negative self-attributions and self-reparation from the heavy burden of responsibility, self-blame, and self-doubt that had plagued their young lives. As adults, these participants, positive redefinition of childhood experiences, allowed greater empathy, self-regard, forgiveness, and connection to others, which benefitted personal psychological wellbeing.

Negative interpretations in this study are consistent with previous reports of negative emotional, psychological, and behavioral outcomes following exposure to a parent with a diagnosis of combat-related PTSD from the Vietnam war (e.g. Jordan et al., 1992; Kulka et al., 1988; McCormack & Sly, 2013). Similar to other studies reporting negative outcomes, the participants in this study experienced the anguish of an unavailable father, questioned their worthiness to be loved, and desperately sought validation in adult relationships that often exposed them to further harm and psychological abuse.

Previous research has also reported on the difficulties in parent functioning and parent-child relationships of veterans who experience posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms, particularly hyperarousal or emotional numbing (Berz et al., 2008; Hendrix et al., 1998; Marsanic et al., 2014; Ruscio et al., 2002; Samper et al., 2004; Solomon et al., 2011). Consistent with this research, participants described impoverished relationships with veteran fathers, revealing his emotional absence or hostility, and their disappointment, resentment, grief, and sense of betrayal in response.

An undercurrent of being betrayed in childhood through their father's emotional neglect, physical and emotional abuse, belittlement, or marriage infidelity, left these participants experiencing traumatic responses. Subjectively, participants' interpreted their

childhood experience of betrayal trauma as connected to their vulnerability for subsequent intimate betrayal in early adult life. Of relevance to this finding, the literature has linked betrayal by a significant other in childhood with intimate betrayal in adolescence and adulthood (Gobin & Freyd, 2009; Riggs, 2010). Specifically, it suggests that early experiences of betrayal engender beliefs that others will not meet basic emotional needs, weakening the individual's ability to detect future betrayal and thus implement self-protection behaviors (DePrince, 2005; Gay, Harding, Jackson, Burns & Baker, 2013; Gobin, 2012; Gobin & Freyd, 2009).

Similar to the findings of this study, previous research has suggested that silence regarding parent trauma can be a source of problematic emotions within families and a mechanism of trauma transmission (Ancharoff et al., 1998; Wiseman et al., 2002; Wiseman, Metzl, Barber, 2006). However, following a deeper reiterative exploration of participants' subjective interpretations, this study also has shown a unique connection between the acquisition of knowledge regarding the psychosocial factors of parental trauma from combat experiences, and re-interpretation of childhood beliefs. With scant knowledge in childhood of their fathers' experiences of war and the psychosocial implications surrounding the homecoming of the Vietnam War, participants' initial sense making attempts were impeded, festering self-blame, self-doubt and inadequacy as children. As adults, knowledge allowed participants to externalize their narratives, exonerate guilt, and redirect negative self-attributions towards opportunities for positive personal change over several domains of growth: self, others, relationships, and spiritual/existential.

From this more informed perspective, participants were able to re-examine their experience of fathering more honestly and critically. They increasingly were able to forgive the 'soldier' in the father, particularly when fathers sought reparation. However, non-exoneration of the 'father' occurred when there was perceived neglect and emotional cruelty. Non-absolution of others, often regarded as a maladaptive response, was a realistic and

rational stance for these participants, reflecting wellbeing rather than distorted thinking. Seen in this light it became a facilitator for appropriate allocation of blame and responsibility. In separating the soldier/father role, these participants tapped into their intrinsic drive to positively accommodate trauma related material in order to experience psychological wellbeing (Joseph, 2012). Moreover, evaluating and apportioning responsibility for behavior within the father/child relationship became a strength that transitioned other interpersonal relationships. Participants' expectations of self and others took on clarity. Harmful relational patterns were no longer excused. These adaptive and positive changes signified a positive psychological shift towards wellbeing (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Joseph, 2012; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004),

These findings have implications for clinicians working with children and families of traumatized combat veterans. They suggest the importance of supporting considered disclosure to children concerning parent histories and responses to war. A war narrative that promotes understanding and tolerance, even support, is not designed to excuse neglectful parenting but apportion blame and responsibility appropriately, protecting the developing psyche of the child. This disclosure is most likely to be of benefit when it occurs in a supportive environment and considers the timing, method, and cognitive and emotional needs of the child (Ancharoff et al., 1998; Dalgaard & Montgomery, 2015; Matsakis, 1996; Nash & Litz, 2013).

To promote positive psychological change in adult children affected by parental combat distress in childhood, therapists can follow recommendations to facilitate posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999, 2008; Joseph, Murphy, & Regel, 2012). Specific interventions targeting growth are still in development and await empirical evaluation. However, THRIVE (see Joseph, 2012), is one that promotes moving forward positively once trauma responses are stabilized.

Limitations

This investigation has limitations. IPA does not seek to provide findings that generalize to other populations. Thus, further research is required before these findings can be generalized. In addition, IPA does not seek to uncover cause and effect. Instead, it seeks to provide an indepth account of phenomena, which have been previously underexplored. By expanding understanding of phenomena from a subjective perspective, researchers uncover potential avenues for further research, and may provide useful theoretical insights.

This study did not seek participants' interpretations of the influence of mothers within this context and this is an important consideration for future studies. The non-veteran parent may act as a buffer between the veteran and child or expose them to further distress if experiencing secondary traumatization themselves (Ancharoff et al., 1998; Dinshtein, Dekel & Polliack, 2011; Herzog, Everson & Whitworth, 2011; McCormack et al., 2011; Westerlink & Giarratano, 1999). With the continued deployment of mothers and fathers to war, and noted diversity within military families (Lester & Flake, 2013), future research may also wish to explore the positive and negative impacts on children when mothers, or both parents, are exposed to combat.

Conclusions

This study provides insight into the positive and negative impacts of a childhood overshadowed by combat-related traumatic responses in a father from the perspective of adult children. These participants experienced tragic and turbulent younger years, involving psychological distress and interpersonal difficulties both in childhood and young adulthood. Over time, and with unfolding information about the psychosocial aspects of the Vietnam War and their father's war experiences, insight and understanding emerged allowing participants to redefine their childhood distress and determinedly embrace positive personal change inclusive of increased empathy, positive self-regard, enhanced connection to others, and reparative forgiveness. Importantly, this study reveals the need for post-deployment family education and age-appropriate support for children of traumatized veterans. Without

early support it is likely that many children will carry a burden of self-blame, self-doubt, and primary and vicarious traumatic responses related to their parent's war exposure. Importantly, therapists should consider any personal bias towards *non-absolution* that may cloud the therapeutic environment. For some, non-absolution may be an appropriate facilitator of psychological wellbeing and growth when the father/child relationship has been severely impacted by a father's inability to separate father-from-soldier, and seek reparation.

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Transcript Extract Notations

- A pause in speech.
- ... Removal of nonessential material.

Table 1. Stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Process

Stage	Process
1	Listening to recorded interview.
2	Initial reading of transcript and noting of first impressions. Listening to audio recording.
3	Repetitive reading of transcript. Development of a comprehensive set of initial notes attempting to capture phenomenological and hermeneutic qualities of the transcript.
4	Review of transcript and initial notes to identify emergent themes. Highlighting of transcript excerpts reflecting themes. Clustering of themes. Creation of a list of themes with corresponding transcript excerpts.
5	Collaborative discussions between researchers (who conducted independent audits) to verify representation of emergent themes in the data. Development of a written summary of themes with relevant excerpts and hermeneutic insights.
6	Repetition of steps 1 – 5 for each following transcript.
7	Search for convergent and divergent themes across transcripts. Clustering of themes and arrangement of themes to reflect their connectedness. A superordinate theme, 'The imposition of war', overarched two subordinate themes, 'Tragic and turbulent young years' and 'Knowing, absolution, and posttraumatic growth' and their corresponding subthemes. Themes lacking supporting evidence or fit with the emerging analysis were discarded.
8	Exploration, development, and review of themes and their connections through collaborative discussion and review of transcripts and audit trails. Themes with the richest thematic evidence, also representing important and interesting aspects of participants' accounts, were retained and graphically depicted.
9	A narrative account was created and reviewed by researchers to verify trustworthiness of interpretations and use of supporting transcript excerpts.
10	Final amendments made to analysis following robust discussion, detailed consideration of alternative interpretations, and continued reflection and review of transcripts.

Table 2. Subordinate and Subthemes of Overarching Theme: Childhood and the Imposition of War

Subordinate Themes	Subthemes
Tragic and turbulent young years:	A father unavailable Blame, self-doubt, and inadequacy Distorted love, neediness and invalidation Vicarious trauma Transgenerational legacy
Knowing, absolution, and posttraumatic growth:	A father explained Reinvention of relationships Valued connection Forgiveness/non-absolution of others Redefining self-regard