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Theory buried under heavy description

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In journalism when a reporter puts the main news or point of the story deep down in the text, we say she's buried the lead, the lead being the main point of the story and usually the first paragraph. In *Children in Genocide: extreme traumatization and affect regulation*, psychoanalyst Suzanne Kaplan buries her theory. Her study of the after effects of trauma among Holocaust survivors who were children during their persecution and survivors of atrocities during the Rwandan atrocities of the 1990s, is filled with highly descriptive material from the many interviews that serve as data. An interesting grounded theory is peeking out from under all the disciplinary discourse and historical background one must read through to get to what grounded theory readers will consider the juicy parts: concepts on affect regulation in trauma survivors.

Published by the International Psychoanalysis Library, it's clear that the author's work was necessarily grounded in psychoanalytic assumptions and theory for the main audience. Kaplan drew on psychoanalytic theory to help her understand what is going on in the interviews. But the procedures of classic grounded theory helped the author take the mounds of data and create theory. Kaplan did some of the grounded theory analysis as part of a dissertation, later extending the work. Kaplan makes reference to grounded theory's influence in just a few words on two pages in this book (pg. 13, 206), so grounded theory's impact is never explicated here. The presentation of her theory suffers for this. Nevertheless, the book provides an opportunity for some discussion of the role of theoretical sensitivity in grounded theory and the challenge of navigating the preconceptions of received theories and models.

The book deals with the memories of elderly Holocaust survivors who were children in hiding or concentration camps. Kaplan makes use of visual archival material as well as interviews she conducted. As a comparison group, she draws on

interviews people whose trauma is still relatively recent: survivors of the Rwandan crises. By comparing the immense childhood suffering of groups whose persecution is separated by time and culture, Kaplan was able to identify recurring patterns that led to her eventual theoretical model. She states that *generational collapse* as the “core process.” (As will be noted shortly, she also names other concepts as core processes, making aspects of her presentation unclear). Genocides wipe out families, leaving the survivors with broken links. Kaplan introduces the concept of *perforating* to describe the tearing away experience, which has many indicators and invades physical and psychic space. The realization that a number of the interviewees chose to forgo reproduction (“because I was a child myself” with the disruption occurred) alerted Kaplan to a continued pattern of generational collapse. The concept of *space creating* signifies the mental strategies for survival. She writes that space creating is an attempt to recapture a normal time: “Space creating refers to a psychic room that an individual, as a child, creates according to his or her needs” (p.56). The mental link may be to a hiding place or other space associated with a safer time. In much the same way that classic works such as Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946) outlines the everyday mental strategies people used to survive life in concentration camps, Kaplan presents space creating as a survival strategy that helps people hold on to their humanity and spirit. Space creating is necessary to avoid falling back into perforating. *Age distorting*, another concept introduced with generational collapse, speaks to the distortions in time dimensions, the fragmentation of life, that is expressed in some decision not to reproduce. Kaplan describes perforating, space creating and age distorting as collective concepts, an attempt to identify these as historical experiences.

It would appear that Kaplan’s attempt is to identify the collective concepts as more macro level influences, as she also identifies another “core process.” She writes that “The core processes turned out to be affect regulating as an essential aspect of the generational collapse” (p. 13). Experienced grounded theorists know that we can identify a core process, have co varying cores, as well as identify a core and sub categories that drive it (and even treat those sub categories as core for different research papers!). But in a fully explicated classic grounded theory one should fully integrate them. It’s not completely clear how Kaplan is interpreting the relationship of core processes. She

writes that generational collapse is the result of two core processes, perforating and space creating. But she is also treating affect regulation as a core process. The structure of the book, with heavily descriptive and background chapters, makes no room for a good methods chapter or section that pulls it all together as one would hope for a grounded theory. Apart from a section where the affect regulation is diagrammed, there isn't a smooth integration of all the concepts introduced.

Kaplan gives special attention to her conception of an *affect propeller*, which she uses to describe the interplay of certain types of affect(invading, isolating, symbolizing, and activating), trauma responses, including revenge, and generational linking(her word for phenomena such as cries for help, creativity recapturing normal life, and controlling trauma). It's intriguing and plausible, and I suspect there is material here that psychoanalysts and others who work with trauma can use to intervene when working with survivors of extreme trauma. However, Kaplan falls into the trap, which Glaser often warns against, of relying on a diagram to do work that she should have explicated more completely in text.

Although not an ideal classic grounded theory, Kaplan's work provides useful methodological instruction. It is intriguing that the sole grounded theory book she cites is Glaser's *Theoretical Sensitivity*. Theoretical sensitivity demands much of a researcher throughout the process. She needs to be free of preconceived notions and open to what is going on in the data; yet theoretical sensitivity requires that the analyst be familiar with the ways variables are constructed and the ideas for which those variables are used. Glaser writes that "an analyst may imbue his theory in a multivariate fashion that touches many fields" (p. 3). Some of this acumen is on display in Kaplan's study, though I want to call some attention to the challenges of received professional theory, which one must be sensitive to and aware of but also must distance from during stages of theory generation.

The study is saturated in psychoanalytic theory. The work seems to begin and end with it. Kaplan tells the reader that she worked to remain open, but it is not clear what her strategies were for this. It would have been interesting to read memos, even if in the Appendix, on how Kaplan, a practicing psychoanalyst, suspended that mindset to give the emerging theory room. In some ways Kaplan's quite literal interpretation of staying close to

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the data features the worrisome accuracy that can slow conceptualizations. It's apparent she was doing some GT-like analysis at various points, but I don't get the sense it was a soup-to-nuts adherence of protocols for sorting and extensive memo-writing.

Readers do gain from Kaplan's psychoanalytic expertise. One particularly useful discussion, part of the presentation on the affect propeller, is headlined "What is said and how it is told: content and affects in the interview" (p.210). As her interviews progressed, Kaplan became more aware of the importance of emotional expressions (or lack of) as indicators of how the memory fragments were indicators of trauma affects. She was able to get a better handle on the perforating and space creating that is part of her theory. This section is a reminder that everything is data. Often, newcomers to grounded theory get stumped by phrases like "proper lining" or they feel they did not get any data because the interview went "party line" on them. Such responses and related affect are data to be coded and analyzed with the mix. What is said and how it is told is important.

From a grounded theory standpoint, Kaplan's lack of discussion of the method is frustrating. The need to speak to the target audience is understandable, though adjustments in the methodological and theoretical presentation might have made the book a better read for some psychoanalysts as well. A chapter treating the work as a grounded theory, if that is what she claims this to be, should have been included, even if just in the Appendix. But this might have been rejected for any number of reasons; the author says so little about her work's relationship to grounded theory that it's difficult for a reviewer to situate it. The book's not an exemplary example of classic grounded theory, but it wouldn't be a waste of time to read it.

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