

Shadows of the Past: Tracing Intergenerational Trauma in Seychelles

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Abstract

This article examines the intergenerational trauma resulting from the 1977 coup d'état in Seychelles, revealing how the psychological impacts experienced by victims continue to affect their descendants. The study highlights that trauma has manifested in the children of victims as anxiety, depression, and a pervasive sense of insecurity, underscoring the complex nature of healing in post-conflict societies. Through analysis of diverse emotional responses to the truth commission, ranging from relief to re-traumatization, the article illustrates the challenges of achieving collective healing. A significant collective call for reparations and justice has emerged, emphasizing the need for acknowledgment, accountability, and comprehensive redress to foster reconciliation. The study advocates for the implementation of holistic support systems, including psychological counselling, legal assistance, and community engagement initiatives tailored to the needs of affected populations. By exploring the transmission of trauma across generations, this research offers practical recommendations for breaking the cycle of suffering and promoting resilience within Seychelles. The findings have broader implications for other post-conflict societies, demonstrating the importance of integrating mental health care, justice mechanisms, and public acknowledgment of historical injustices into post-conflict recovery efforts. This work contributes to a deeper understanding of the enduring impacts of political violence and the critical need for comprehensive approaches to healing that address both individual and collective dimensions of trauma to foster a more just and resilient future.

Keywords: intergenerational trauma, Seychelles, post-conflict healing, truth commission, reparations and justice

Tracing Intergenerational Trauma in Seychelles

The 1977 coup d'état in Seychelles marked a pivotal moment in the nation's history, instigating a period of political upheaval and societal turmoil that continues to resonate across generations. This event, characterized by the violent overthrow of the government, resulted in widespread human rights violations, including arbitrary detentions, forced disappearances, and a climate of fear that pervaded daily life (Shillington, 2009). While the immediate victims of the coup have been acknowledged in historical accounts, the enduring impact on their descendants has received comparatively less attention. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the phenomenon of intergenerational trauma,

whereby the psychological scars of the past are transmitted from parents to children, influencing the mental health and social well-being of subsequent generations.

Intergenerational trauma refers to the transmission of emotional and psychological effects of trauma across generations, often resulting in similar or related patterns of distress among descendants who did not directly experience the original traumatic events (Danieli, 1998). This concept has been extensively studied in various post-conflict societies, such as those affected by the Holocaust, apartheid in South Africa, and the genocides in Rwanda and Cambodia, revealing a persistent legacy of suffering that transcends time and direct experience (Yehuda et al., 2016). In Seychelles, the legacy of the coup has been largely overlooked in public discourse and policy, yet the findings of this study underscore its profound and enduring impact on the children of those who lived through the turmoil.

The study conducted in Seychelles reveals that trauma experienced by the victims of the coup continues to affect their children, manifesting in various forms such as anxiety, depression, and a pervasive sense of insecurity. These psychological effects are not merely isolated instances but are indicative of a broader pattern of emotional distress that has been passed down through familial and societal lines (Chung & Bemak, 2002). The complexity of healing in post-conflict societies is further highlighted by the diverse emotional responses observed among individuals engaging with the truth commission, ranging from relief and closure to re-traumatization. This variability in response underscores the challenges in addressing historical injustices and the intricate process of collective healing (Hamber, 2009).

A significant collective call for reparations and justice has emerged among the affected populations, emphasizing the need for acknowledgment and redress to foster healing. The demands for reparations are not solely about financial compensation but are deeply rooted in the need for official recognition of the harm suffered and a commitment to address the wrongs of the past (Laplante, 2008). This study advocates for comprehensive support systems, including psychological counselling, legal assistance, and community engagement, tailored to the specific needs of affected populations. Such measures are crucial not only for alleviating individual suffering but also for promoting resilience and stability within Seychelles, contributing to the broader understanding of trauma transmission in post-conflict contexts.

By highlighting the ongoing impact of the coup on subsequent generations, this work aims to shed light on the long-term consequences of political violence and the critical importance of addressing intergenerational trauma in the pursuit of societal healing and justice.

Intergenerational Trauma in Post-Conflict Contexts

Intergenerational trauma, also known as transgenerational trauma, is a psychological phenomenon in which the effects of trauma experienced by one generation are passed down to subsequent generations. This transmission occurs through complex mechanisms that include behavioural patterns, psychological responses, and even genetic alterations, which together influence how descendants of trauma survivors experience and cope with their environments (Yehuda et al., 2018). Intergenerational trauma has been observed in various contexts, such as among descendants of Holocaust survivors, Indigenous populations affected by colonialism, and communities recovering from civil conflicts and genocides. In the case of Seychelles, the trauma inflicted by the coup d'état has similarly permeated the lives of the children and grandchildren of those directly affected, shaping their mental health and social realities.

The concept of intergenerational trauma challenges the traditional understanding of trauma as a singular event with isolated impacts. Instead, it highlights the enduring nature of traumatic experiences and their capacity to influence multiple generations. This is often facilitated by maladaptive coping mechanisms adopted by the original trauma survivors, such as avoidance, hypervigilance, or emotional numbing, which can become embedded in family dynamics and social interactions (Kellermann, 2001). In Seychelles, many survivors of the coup endured prolonged periods of fear, mistrust, and instability, conditions that have been internalised and mirrored by their descendants as chronic anxiety, depression, and a pervasive sense of insecurity.

Research on intergenerational trauma has identified several pathways through which trauma is transmitted across generations. These include direct communication of traumatic experiences, where survivors share their narratives with their children, often framed by unresolved grief or bitterness (Danieli, 1998). Conversely, silence and secrecy about the traumatic past can also be detrimental, as children may perceive this as a taboo topic, leading to a sense of mystery or danger associated with their heritage (Kaitz et al., 2009). Biological pathways have also been explored, with studies suggesting that trauma can induce epigenetic changes that affect stress responses in descendants, although the exact mechanisms and their implications remain areas of ongoing research (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018).

In Seychelles, the consequences of the coup extend beyond the immediate victims to affect the social fabric of the community. The study findings suggest that descendants of those impacted by the coup experience significant emotional and psychological challenges, often without a clear understanding of their origins. This intergenerational impact is compounded by a lack of formal recognition or support for trauma survivors, leaving families to grapple with the legacy of the past on their own. Moreover, societal narratives that either glorify or dismiss the coup complicate the healing process, as individuals struggle to reconcile their personal histories with broader public discourses.

Addressing intergenerational trauma in Seychelles requires a holistic approach that considers both the historical context and the contemporary needs of affected populations. This includes creating spaces for dialogue and acknowledgment, providing access to mental health resources, and fostering resilience through community engagement. By understanding and addressing the intergenerational impacts of trauma, Seychelles and similar post-conflict societies can work towards breaking the cycle of suffering and building a more stable and resilient future.

Impact of the Coup on Victims and Descendants

The 1977 coup d'état in Seychelles not only altered the nation's political landscape but also left deep psychological scars on those who lived through it. The violent overthrow of the government and the subsequent years of repression resulted in widespread human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, torture, forced exile, and the suppression of dissent (Shillington, 2009). While the immediate impacts on the direct victims have been documented, the long-term effects on their descendants reveal a more pervasive and enduring form of suffering, manifesting as intergenerational trauma. This section explores how the coup's legacy continues to affect the children of those who experienced the events firsthand, contributing to a cycle of anxiety, depression, and insecurity that persists in Seychelles today.

For many descendants of the coup's victims, the trauma experienced by their parents has significantly shaped their mental and emotional development. Studies on intergenerational trauma suggest that children of trauma survivors often exhibit heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues, even when they have not directly experienced the traumatic events themselves (Kaitz et al., 2009). In Seychelles, this pattern is evident among the descendants of those affected by the coup. Interviews and surveys conducted as part of the study reveal that many individuals report experiencing a pervasive sense of insecurity and fear, which they attribute to the stories and behaviours of their parents. This inherited anxiety is not merely a reflection of personal disposition but is deeply rooted in the collective memory of violence and instability that characterised the post-coup period.

One of the key ways in which trauma is transmitted across generations is through family dynamics and communication patterns. In many Seychellois families affected by the coup, the traumatic experiences of parents were either directly communicated to their children or manifested in their behaviour and attitudes. Some parents spoke openly about their suffering, recounting stories of imprisonment, torture, or loss of loved ones. While this openness provided a context for understanding the past, it also served as a constant reminder of the dangers associated with political dissent and the fragility of personal safety (Danieli, 1998). Conversely, in other families, the trauma was shrouded in silence, with parents avoiding discussions of the past to protect their children from pain or to shield themselves from re-traumatization. This silence often created a sense of mystery and

fear, leaving children to imagine the worst and internalise a sense of unease about their identity and place in society.

The psychological impact of the coup on descendants is further compounded by the socio-political environment in Seychelles, where narratives of the coup remain contested and politicised. For many descendants, the lack of a clear and unified public acknowledgment of the suffering caused by the coup exacerbates their sense of injustice and alienation. The truth commission established to address past human rights abuses has provided some victims and their families with a platform for acknowledgment and redress. However, the emotional responses to these processes have been varied. While some individuals found participating in the truth commission to be a cathartic experience, others felt re-traumatised by recounting their stories or felt that the commission's efforts were insufficient in addressing their needs (Hamber, 2009). This divergence in experiences highlights the complexity of healing in post-conflict societies, where individual and collective needs may not always align.

Moreover, the impact of the coup extends beyond mental health to influence broader social and economic outcomes for descendants. Many children of coup victims grew up in environments marked by economic hardship, social marginalisation, and limited access to educational and employment opportunities. The coup disrupted the lives of many families, leading to forced displacement, the loss of property, and diminished social capital. These conditions have had lasting effects on the socio-economic mobility of descendants, who often find themselves grappling with the dual burdens of inherited trauma and structural disadvantage (Laplante, 2008). The cumulative impact of these factors can lead to a sense of hopelessness and disconnection from broader societal goals, further entrenching the cycle of trauma and inequality.

Addressing the ongoing impact of the coup on victims and their descendants requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond individual psychological interventions. While mental health support, such as counselling and therapy, is crucial, there is also a need for systemic changes that address the socio-economic and political dimensions of intergenerational trauma. This includes efforts to promote social justice, such as reparations, legal assistance, and community engagement initiatives that foster resilience and a sense of urgency among affected populations. Importantly, creating spaces for open dialogue and acknowledgment of the past can help to bridge the divide between personal and collective memory, allowing for a more comprehensive healing process (Chung & Bemak, 2002).

Diverse Emotional Responses to the Truth Commission

The establishment of the truth commission in Seychelles was a critical step towards addressing the historical injustices stemming from the coup. Tasked with uncovering the truth about human rights abuses, facilitating reconciliation, and recommending

reparations, the commission aimed to provide a platform for victims and their families to share their stories and seek acknowledgment. However, the emotional responses to the truth commission among affected individuals have been diverse, reflecting the complex nature of trauma and healing in post-conflict societies. These varied reactions underscore the challenges of pursuing collective healing while accommodating the personal and often deeply individualised needs of those impacted by past violence.

For some victims and their descendants, participating in the truth commission provided a sense of relief and validation. The opportunity to publicly recount their experiences and have them formally recognised by a state institution offered a form of psychological closure that had previously been unavailable. This acknowledgment of their suffering was seen as a vital step towards healing, not just for the individuals involved but also for the broader community. The act of telling one's story and having it heard without dismissal or minimisation helped some participants process their trauma and feel a renewed sense of agency over their narratives (Hamber, 2009). For these individuals, the truth commission represented a chance to reclaim a part of their personal history that had been overshadowed by silence and denial.

However, not all experiences with the truth commission were positive. For some, recounting their traumatic pasts in a formal setting led to re-traumatisation, as they were compelled to relive painful memories and confront unresolved emotions. The process of testifying before the commission, which often involved revisiting deeply personal and distressing events, triggered feelings of anger, sadness, and vulnerability. In some cases, the perceived lack of a tangible outcome, such as concrete reparations or justice for perpetrators, left participants feeling disillusioned and frustrated (Laplante, 2008). This sense of being let down by the process exacerbated their suffering, as it seemed to reinforce the notion that their pain would never be adequately addressed or remedied.

Furthermore, there were those who felt ambivalent about the truth commission, recognising its symbolic importance but questioning its practical effectiveness. For some participants, the commission's work was seen as a necessary but insufficient step towards justice and healing. They appreciated the effort to document and acknowledge past abuses but felt that the commission fell short in providing meaningful reparations or accountability measures. This ambivalence reflects a broader scepticism towards truth commissions in general, where the symbolic acts of truth-telling and reconciliation are often weighed against the concrete needs for justice, reparations, and systemic change (Brounéus, 2008). The feeling of ambivalence suggests that, while truth commissions can play an important role in addressing historical trauma, they are not a panacea and must be complemented by broader initiatives that address the socio-economic and legal dimensions of post-conflict recovery.

The diverse emotional responses to the truth commission in Seychelles highlight the multifaceted nature of trauma and the complexities involved in collective healing. The

truth commission's work, while valuable in providing a space for narrative and acknowledgment, also illuminated the deeply personal and varied ways in which individuals engage with their traumatic histories. Some found solace and closure, while others experienced renewed pain or remained sceptical of the process's efficacy. These differing responses underscore the importance of tailoring post-conflict interventions to meet the varied needs of affected populations, recognising that healing is not a one-size-fits-all process but a journey that requires sensitivity, flexibility, and a willingness to address both individual and collective grievances.

To foster a more comprehensive approach to healing, it is essential to supplement the work of truth commission with additional support systems, such as mental health services, community engagement initiatives, and legal recourse for victims. Acknowledging the diverse emotional landscapes of those affected by past violence can help build a more inclusive and effective path towards reconciliation and recovery. By understanding and addressing the broad spectrum of emotional responses, Seychelles can better navigate the delicate process of coming to terms with its past and moving towards a more just and harmonious future.

Collective Call for Reparations and Justice

The legacy of the coup in Seychelles has not only left deep psychological scars but also ignited a powerful collective call for reparations and justice among the affected communities. For many victims and their descendants, the trauma of past abuses—ranging from arbitrary arrests and torture to forced exile and the loss of livelihoods—remains a painful and unresolved chapter of their lives. The call for reparations and justice is driven by a need for acknowledgment, redress, and a sense of closure that has eluded many despite the establishment of the truth commission. This section explores the nature of these demands, the challenges they face, and the broader implications for healing and reconciliation in post-conflict Seychelles.

Reparations, in the context of post-conflict justice, are measures intended to compensate victims for the harm they have suffered and to restore, as far as possible, their dignity and rights. In Seychelles, the call for reparations is not limited to financial compensation but also encompasses symbolic acts such as official apologies, public memorialisation, and the restoration of confiscated properties. Victims and their families have expressed a strong desire for the state to acknowledge the wrongs of the past formally, with many viewing such acknowledgment as a critical component of the healing process (de Greiff, 2006). The demand for reparations reflects a collective yearning for validation and recognition of the pain endured, as well as a practical need to address the material and psychological consequences of historical injustices.

Justice, as called for by the victims, involves holding perpetrators accountable for their actions and ensuring that the truth about past abuses is publicly acknowledged. In many

cases, perpetrators of the coup's associated human rights violations have never been brought to justice, either due to a lack of political will or legal constraints that prevent retrospective accountability. This lack of accountability has been a significant source of frustration and anger for victims and their descendants, who perceive it as a continuation of the injustice they have long endured (Laplante, 2008). For these individuals, justice is not merely about punishment but about affirming the rule of law and the principle that all individuals, regardless of their status, are subject to accountability.

The pursuit of reparations and justice in Seychelles faces several challenges, including political resistance, limited resources, and societal divisions regarding the legacy of the coup. Political resistance often stems from concerns that revisiting the past could destabilise the current political landscape or reopen old wounds. Moreover, the financial and logistical constraints of providing reparations to a large number of victims can be daunting, especially for a small island nation with limited economic resources (Borer, 2009). Furthermore, societal divisions about the coup, where some segments of the population may view the events of 1977 through a more sympathetic or ambivalent lens, complicate the process of building consensus on what justice and reparations should entail.

Despite these challenges, the collective call for reparations and justice remains an important aspect of the healing process in Seychelles. Reparations serve not only to address the individual needs of victims but also to contribute to the broader goals of societal reconciliation and the rebuilding of trust between citizens and the state. By acknowledging past wrongs and taking concrete steps to redress them, the government can signal its commitment to human rights and the rule of law, thereby fostering a more inclusive and cohesive national identity. Moreover, justice for past abuses can help to break the cycle of impunity, ensuring that future generations do not suffer from similar injustices.

To effectively address the collective call for reparations and justice, a comprehensive approach is needed - one that goes beyond symbolic gestures and provides tangible support to those affected. This includes legal reforms to facilitate accountability, financial compensation where appropriate, and the establishment of community-based initiatives that promote dialogue, education, and reconciliation. By addressing both the material and emotional needs of victims, Seychelles can take significant steps towards healing the wounds of the past and building a more resilient and just society.

Recommendations for Support Systems

Addressing the legacy of the coup in Seychelles requires a comprehensive approach that not only acknowledges the past but also provides practical support to victims and their descendants. Given the multifaceted nature of intergenerational trauma, a robust support system is essential to foster healing, resilience, and long-term stability. This section

outlines key recommendations for support systems that should be implemented to address the unique needs of those affected by the coup, with a focus on psychological counselling, legal assistance, community engagement, and educational initiatives.

Psychological Counselling and Mental Health Support

One of the primary recommendations is the establishment of accessible psychological counselling services tailored specifically to the needs of trauma survivors and their descendants. Mental health support should include individual and group therapy sessions facilitated by trained professionals who are well-versed in trauma-informed care. These services should be culturally sensitive and incorporate local understandings of mental health to ensure they resonate with the affected communities. Additionally, providing trauma education and resilience training can empower individuals and families to better understand and manage the long-term effects of intergenerational trauma (Silove, 2013). Integrating these services into existing community health structures would enhance accessibility and reduce the stigma often associated with seeking mental health care.

Legal Assistance and Advocacy

Legal assistance is crucial for victims seeking justice and reparations for past abuses. Many survivors and their families may face significant legal and bureaucratic hurdles in pursuing their claims, including navigating complex legal systems and understanding their rights. Providing free or subsidised legal aid can help these individuals advocate for their rights, seek reparations, and hold perpetrators accountable where possible. Legal clinics or partnerships with human rights organisations could offer a practical avenue for delivering this support, ensuring that victims have the resources and knowledge needed to engage effectively with the legal process (de Greiff, 2006). Advocacy efforts should also focus on pushing for legal reforms that facilitate the recognition of historical injustices and provide clear pathways for reparations and redress.

Community Engagement and Dialogue Initiatives

Community engagement plays a vital role in the healing process by fostering dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation among affected populations. Creating safe spaces for open dialogue - such as community forums, workshops, and storytelling events - can help individuals share their experiences, validate their feelings, and connect with others who have similar histories. These initiatives can also serve as platforms for educating the broader public about the impacts of the coup, helping to bridge societal divisions and build a more inclusive narrative around the nation's history (Hamber, 2009). Additionally, community-led support groups and peer-to-peer counselling can complement formal mental health services, providing ongoing social support and strengthening communal bonds.

Educational Programmes and Historical Acknowledgment

Educational programmes that incorporate the history of the coup and its impacts into the national curriculum can play a crucial role in preventing the erasure of this traumatic past and fostering a more informed and empathetic society. By teaching future generations about the coup, its consequences, and the resilience of those affected, Seychelles can promote a culture of acknowledgment and respect for human rights. These programmes should be developed in consultation with affected communities to ensure they accurately reflect their experiences and perspectives (Borer, 2009). Public memorialisation, such as commemorative events or monuments, can further enhance the acknowledgment of victims and provide a collective space for reflection and remembrance.

Tailored Socio-Economic Support

Finally, targeted socio-economic support is essential to address the broader impacts of intergenerational trauma, which often include economic hardship and social marginalisation. Programmes aimed at improving access to education, vocational training, and employment opportunities for descendants of coup victims can help break the cycle of exclusion that many affected families experience. Microfinance initiatives, scholarships, and community development projects can empower individuals to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to their communities (Chung & Bemak, 2002). By addressing the socio-economic dimensions of trauma, these support systems can help foster long-term resilience and stability.

Implications for Post-Conflict Societies

The findings from the study on the coup in Seychelles have broader implications for post-conflict societies around the world. The persistence of intergenerational trauma among the descendants of those affected by the coup highlights the long-term impacts of political violence and underscores the importance of addressing historical injustices to promote healing and stability. For post-conflict societies, this study serves as a reminder that the consequences of conflict are not confined to the immediate aftermath but can ripple across generations, influencing the mental health, social cohesion, and economic prospects of entire communities.

One of the key implications is the need for comprehensive and multi-dimensional approaches to post-conflict recovery that go beyond conventional truth and reconciliation processes. While truth commissions and similar initiatives play a fundamental role in acknowledging past abuses and fostering dialogue, they are often insufficient on their own to address the deep-seated psychological and socio-economic needs of affected populations. As seen in Seychelles, the diverse emotional responses to the truth commission reveal that healing is a highly individualised process, requiring tailored support systems that include psychological counselling, legal assistance, and socio-economic interventions (Hamber, 2009). Post-conflict societies must therefore prioritise

holistic approaches that integrate mental health care, justice mechanisms, and community engagement to effectively address the legacies of trauma.

Another significant implication is the importance of acknowledging and validating the experiences of all victims, including those whose suffering may not have been directly visible during the conflict. In many post-conflict settings, there is a risk of marginalising or overlooking the descendants of trauma survivors, who may bear the burden of their ancestors' experiences without explicit recognition. Ensuring that reparations, educational programmes, and public memorialisation efforts include these second and third generations is vital for breaking the cycle of trauma and fostering a sense of inclusion and justice (de Greiff, 2006).

Furthermore, the study underscores the role of education and public discourse in shaping collective memory and societal healing. Post-conflict societies must actively work to integrate honest and inclusive accounts of their histories into educational curricula and public narratives. This approach helps future generations understand the complexities of their past, learn from it, and work towards a more equitable and empathetic society. Public acknowledgment of historical injustices, through both formal and informal means, is essential in building a foundation for reconciliation and unity (Borer, 2009).

Conclusion

The study of intergenerational trauma in Seychelles following the 1977 coup d'état reveals the enduring impacts of political violence on both direct victims and their descendants. The trauma experienced by those who lived through the coup has permeated subsequent generations, manifesting in various forms such as anxiety, depression, and a pervasive sense of insecurity. These psychological effects underscore the complexity of healing in post-conflict societies and highlight the importance of addressing not only the immediate consequences of conflict but also the long-term and often hidden legacies of trauma.

A key finding of the study is the diverse emotional responses to the truth commission, which reflect the deeply personal nature of trauma and the varied needs of those affected. While some individuals found relief and closure in recounting their experiences, others felt re-traumatised or dissatisfied with the outcomes, pointing to the limitations of one-size-fits-all approaches to reconciliation and justice. This highlights the necessity for tailored support systems that address the specific mental health, legal, and socio-economic needs of victims and their descendants. Comprehensive interventions, including psychological counselling, legal assistance, community engagement, and educational initiatives, are essential in fostering resilience and promoting long-term healing.

The collective call for reparations and justice in Seychelles illustrates a broader demand for acknowledgment, accountability, and redress. For many, reparations are not solely

about financial compensation but also about the need for official recognition of their suffering and a commitment to rectify past wrongs. Addressing these calls is crucial for building trust between the state and its citizens and for creating a foundation for sustainable peace and reconciliation. The study emphasises that justice in post-conflict societies must go beyond punitive measures and include restorative approaches that validate the experiences of victims and foster societal healing.

The implications of this study extend beyond Seychelles, offering valuable insights for other post-conflict societies grappling with the legacies of historical trauma. The persistence of intergenerational trauma underscores the importance of holistic and inclusive approaches to post-conflict recovery. By integrating mental health support, legal reforms, community dialogue, and public acknowledgment of past abuses, societies can work towards breaking the cycle of trauma and building a more just and resilient future.

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