

MEMORY, WAR, AND TRAUMA. By Nigel C. Hunt. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 232 pp. Softbound, \$32.99.

Memory, War, and Trauma provides a broad overview of the psychosocial impact of war. Specifically, Nigel C. Hunt seeks to address a series of limitations impacting current psychological understandings of war-related trauma, which he argues are directly related to “focusing too much on the individual, and not enough on the social and cultural world in which we live” (2). Thus, Hunt encourages psychologists who are interested in better understanding war-related trauma to look beyond psychological research—to support and practice increased interdisciplinary collaboration, particularly with the fields of sociology, history, political science, and literature analysis. As such, Hunt should be applauded for providing a useful starting point for approaching psychosocial understandings of war-related trauma and for articulating the potential for interdisciplinary collaboration on the subject.

Hunt begins with a concise overview of the book’s purpose and definitions of two related concepts—war trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Chapter 2 then articulates the historical context that informs modern understandings of war-related trauma, while Chapter 3 offers a cursory discussion of the methods and ethics that inform psychological theorization on the subject.

From there, Chapter 4 presents a thorough discussion of PTSD as a social construct, which Hunt uses to build a case for prioritizing the study of traumatic memory. Chapter 5 then outlines a host of psychology-based methods that have

informed our understanding of traumatic memory. In Chapter 6, Hunt considers the subject of posttraumatic growth, whereby people process their experiences of war and related atrocities in ways that allow them “to develop their understanding of themselves, other people and the world” (81) without necessarily causing them long-term psychological or social harm. Hunt argues that those individuals who are able to make narrative sense of their trauma will experience posttraumatic growth, while those who “lose the coherence of their life narratives” (126) will experience negative effects.

Hunt continues by exploring the relevance of memory and history for the study of war trauma—what he refers to as “the heart of the thesis in the book” (96). Chapters 7 and 8 articulate the influence that history has on an individual’s psychosocial response to trauma, with emphasis placed on the relationship between history, collective memory, social discourse, and the narrative. He contends “[War trauma] arises out of a complex interaction of personal, social, cultural, historical and political forces—the relationship between the personal narrative and social discourse” (114). Chapter 9 then defends this narrative coherence model—a predominantly qualitative pursuit—from the criticisms of psychologists and related practitioners who privilege quantitative analysis.

At this point, Hunt offers several examples that demonstrate the benefits of applying the narrative coherence model to war trauma. Chapter 10 looks at the long-term effects of traumatic memory among elderly war veterans, while Chapter 11 considers the positive impact of writing for helping survivors of war trauma restore coherence to their experiences. Chapter 12 examines the interrelated practices of memorialization and commemoration and their ability to transform popular perceptions of past conflicts. In Chapter 13, by describing his tour of the battlefield at Passchendaele in Belgium, Hunt touches upon the subject of dark tourism and its ability to influence how civilians understand war. Finally, Hunt concludes his text by reiterating his main argument—that a “good understanding of memory, war and trauma requires more than psychological research” (196)—and offering suggestions toward continued interdisciplinary advancement of the narrative coherence model.

Hunt’s exploration of war trauma relies primarily on secondary sources from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, history, political science, and literary criticism and his practical experience as a psychologist who works with veterans of the Second World War. His analysis of psychological approaches to war trauma is strong, as is to be expected, and provides a valuable, albeit brief, historical overview of the field—an excellent starting point for newcomers, particularly when one delves into the extensive bibliography. However, Hunt’s analysis of other social scientific approaches to the study of war-related trauma is often weak and demonstrates a poor understanding of their fundamental principles.

For example, Hunt dedicates only three pages (43–45) to his discussion of the narrative as methodology, despite citing the narrative as central to the book. Within this overview, he limits his discussion to the one-to-one interview and written documents—making no mention of ethnography or life history interviews, for example—two excellent ways of situating narratives within the individual’s social, cultural, and political background.

Unfortunately, Hunt’s discussion of ethics (45–49) is similarly limited. He too briefly acknowledges the dangerous potential of researching war trauma in relation to causing psychological distress to participants or exposing the researcher to vicarious traumatization and physical danger through visiting war zones. In addition, Hunt presents a narrow view of how the narrative should be constructed. He states “An interview—especially in this field—is not a conversation. It needs structure and guidance. The interviewer needs to know how to make progress in the interview, to cover points required, to know when a discussion is a ‘blind alley’ or is likely to lead somewhere useful” (48). This statement dismisses the approach to interviewing typically used by oral historians and ethnographers by suggesting the researcher should arrive at the interview already understanding what is important to ensure the successful recovery of their participants. In practice, taking a more passive stance, at least initially, often allows the researcher to learn a great deal about the social, cultural, and political background of each individual participant, which in turn—as Hunt himself acknowledges—determines how the trauma impacts the individual and provides valuable clues toward promoting post-traumatic growth. Again, brief examination of the literature emerging from the fields of political ethnography, oral history, and other social sciences would greatly inform Hunt’s overview in this instance.

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