

## **Further praise for *Resilience and Survival***

“To the ever-intriguing realm of human resilience, Clara Mucci adds a truly distinguished treatise. Deftly synthesizing recent advances in neurophysiology, modern child developmental studies, psychoanalytic object relations theory, and observations from psycho-political arena, Mucci constructs a sophisticated sociobiological model of hope, faith and grit that makes it possible for us to survive, if not master, the cruelties of fellow human beings and the calamities of nature. Her book is a theoretical and technical addition of great significant to our literature!”

**Salman Akhtar, MD, Professor of Psychiatry, Jefferson Medical College and Training and Supervising Analyst, Psychoanalytic Center of Philadelphia**

“Clara Mucci’s new book *Resilience and Survival* could not be more timely and deeply useful in so many parts of our beleaguered world. Tracing the vulnerability to trauma in individual and social situations, Mucci shows us how powerfully a psychoanalytic lens can offer productive help and understanding. The breakdowns and traumas she details come to the individual in the earliest point of human attachment, in all the later stages in the course of development in the encounters with individuality, sexuality and social life, and in the terrifying consequences of genocides and mass assaults on individuals and collectivities. Her book is both a register and testimony to the suffering trauma brings and a careful presentation of the social and individual projects for processing and surviving collective trauma. We need this book to understand the costs of collective cruelty and social conflict and to design the reparative projects which are necessary for recovery.”

**Adrienne Harris, PhD, Faculty and Supervisor, NYU Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis and Faculty and Training Analyst, Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California**

“In her latest book, Clara Mucci continues her important exploration of trauma and resilience based on both her extensive clinical experience and her mastery and creative use of the literature from psychoanalysis, attachment theory and neurobiology. Her categorization of trauma of human

agency at three distinct levels, from developmental and early trauma, to abuse and massive social traumatizations such as war and genocide, and her deft and original explanation of the mechanism of the intergenerational transmission of trauma, lead her to powerful recommendations for how to break the repetitive cycle and heal the traumatized at both the clinical and the societal levels.”

**Robert A. Paul, Charles Howard Candler Professor of Anthropology and Interdisciplinary Studies, Emory University, Atlanta and practising psychoanalyst, IPA**

“In this compact book, Clara Mucci seamlessly integrates a number of clinical and scientific disciplines that are now intensely studying human trauma and resilience. The depth and the breadth of these rich creative chapters is remarkable – from evocative clinical descriptions of a master clinician working right brain to right brain in the therapeutic alliance with traumatized patients, to neurobiologically-informed models of the cultural transmission of trauma over three generations.”

**Allan Schore, David Gessen School of Medicine, UCLA, author of *Right Brain Psychotherapy and The Development of the Unconscious Mind***

“Few scholars have the breadth, depth and vision Clara Mucci has maintained through her writings on intergenerational trauma and shared collective trauma. Now, with her latest book, *Resilience and Survival: Understanding and Healing Intergenerational Trauma*, Mucci has carried her vision yet further in sparkling and clear ways. The book speaks to readers new to the subject as well as those steeped in knowledge of the range of topics Mucci skillfully covers. Interwoven in this masterful work are core insights from John Bowlby, Sandor Ferenczi and many other gifted voices, helping Mucci articulate a hope for the future where connectedness and deep human listening have the power to offset the ongoing disruptive influences of war, adversity, insecurity and extreme trauma. This is a timely book that our world badly needs – readers will feel a sense of gratitude to Clara Mucci for producing this beautiful, if troubling, yet profoundly human and caring exposition.”

**Howard Steele, Professor of Psychology, The New School, New York, Co-director of the Center for Attachment Research and founding editor of *Attachment & Human Development***

Clara Mucci

# Resilience and Survival

Understanding and Healing  
Intergenerational Trauma



**KARNAC**

*living the mind*

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I would like to dedicate this work to the three friends  
and eminent colleagues I have lost in recent years:  
Giovanni Liotti, Philip Bromberg and Dori Laub.

This book is a tribute to their wisdom and knowledge,  
laying bare the gratitude I feel towards them  
as they continue to sustain me by the faith they  
showed in my work.

My endless gratitude and thanks.

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To Allan Schore, Otto Kernberg, Dr. James A. McCoy and Bobby Paul, I give sincere thanks for having always supported my work and for the fun of the discussion of it in crucial moments.

# 1

## **Introduction: Resilience and survival: understanding and healing intergenerationally transmitted trauma**

*‘A latent variable that underlies one’s reaction to the state of children today is one’s subjective view of human nature. If one believes that humans are naturally violent and individualistic, then one is not surprised that so much violence, aggression and alienation pervades society. However, if one believes that humans are typically not violent but prosocial, one is most likely to view aggression and alienation as indicative of an unbalanced state of affairs that can be remedied. Clearly, we take the latter position.’*

(Narvaez et al., 2013, p. 17)

*‘The history of the evolution of mammals is the history of the evolution of the family.’*

(Paul MacLean, 1990)

# 1 RESILIENCE AT THE LIMITS OF THE HUMAN

Resilience is a term taken from physics, where it indicates the capacity of a material to absorb energy when it is deformed and then release that energy and return to its normal state. Applied to humans, resilience describes the ability of being stretched beyond one's limits and then being able to return to being oneself again, having overcome these difficulties, thanks to our own unexpected inner resources. Resilience defines the human ability to resist adversity and/or to respond to trauma of various intensities (Mucci, 2013, 2018).

Where does the capacity to resist this momentary disturbance come from? And the ability to adjust to new circumstances and then restore good functioning at the physical and mental level after difficult events and to use creative resources that help the adjustment itself? Are these resources provoked and called forth by the challenge itself or are they created in the effort to fight back? Are they innate and dormant in the system or do they become available under extremely stressful circumstances? And why are they not available in all people in the same quantity or quality? Where does this unexpected strength come from? Why do some people experience the most adverse experiences

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and can keep going, maintaining a healthy attitude and the capacity to care for themselves and others, able to struggle and fight back, while others give way to despair, even suicide, or succumb to cumulative stress and become ill? Can this difference be explained by present scientific data, especially through neurobiological and psychological data, or even from research in trauma studies? What are the contributions of other philosophical, neuroscientific or widely interdisciplinary fields to these questions? Can they shed light on this mysterious but extraordinary or even unexpected human capacity?

In Auschwitz, Primo Levi called the people who succumbed to the extreme experience of the camps the 'Drowned' or 'Muselmann' (sic), a term actually used by the inmates of the camps to refer to 'the weak, the inept, those doomed to selection' (Levi, 1996, p. 88). The example of the Holocaust has become the epitome of appalling and particularly destructive evidence of human violence and destructiveness, in so far as it is an example of a genocide carefully organized and constructed over years by a nation state, with the support of the state police, bureaucracy and the silent acquiescence of the surrounding nations, a genocide intentionally and carefully planned by human minds through massive social organization. At present, it is the only genocide whose psychological and medical consequences have been studied through at

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least three generations and about which we have a wealth of reports, data and descriptions of clinical cases, with records of intergenerationally transmitted traumatic consequences and research on intergenerational transmission.

The full impact of other genocides in the last century and this one, though equally devastating and traumatic, is still to be fully explored in their intergenerational impact, and have received less clinical attention. For example, we lack, for historical or political reasons, a similar wealth of records, therapeutic reports and studies for the genocides of Armenia, Ruanda, Burundi, Sudan, Cambodia, Indonesia, Latin America, Iraq, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Haiti, Sri Lanka, Tibet or the former Yugoslavia, and for ongoing genocides.

In the Nazi camps, some people died almost immediately, some came back shattered and in very poor health, some committed suicide afterwards. Others, on the contrary, were able to resume their lives, marrying and having children, continuing with their activities and professions successfully, even thriving. The reasons for these differences in the individual response at the intersection between biology and psychology are up to now unknown and somehow difficult to account for. It is also important to understand the reasons for greater resilience, because, if this capacity is not innate, can those characteristics that guarantee a better or healthier response

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be cultivated and developed? And if there is something in the nature of the traumatic event that makes the difference to the response, how are we going to differentiate between these traumatic events? Finally, under which circumstances can humans rely on some complex psychological qualities at the intersection between what is possessed by the subject (developed or inherited) and what depends on the supposed nature of those external circumstances?

The Holocaust and the extremes reached by other twentieth-century genocides have marked a far point in the capacity for humans to be both inhumane on one side and to confront utter violence and respond to this inhumanity with amazing human and humane qualities on the other, stretching the limits between vulnerability and resilience.

We could say that the limits of being human, in the sense of both inhumanity and the capacities to resist the inhumane with amazing resilience, have been stretched after the Holocaust. These extremes of the human capacity to respond to stressful and violent conditions and to perform violence and destruction require all the tools we presently have at our disposal to understand the limits that the human mind can reach.

In my view, to understand and appreciate the limits and extension of the 'human' means to redefine an area of 'sacredness' in our normal life, a space of trust and hope in

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ourselves and in the interaction with others, which makes us capable of nurturing life in ourselves and in the other, even after having confronted extreme adverse experiences of the most extreme level. So how are trust and hope in life achieved or maintained emotionally, even in terms of affect regulation and neurobiological correlates?

Subjectivity is considered here through the lens of neurobiology and classical psychoanalytic terminology, such as personality, identification and interpersonal dynamics, therefore mind–body–brain at the interconnection between nature and culture, or biological determinants and cultural and political elements. (For a deeper discussion, see Mucci, 2018.)

I think it is important to start reviewing the connection between the trauma of human agency and the after-effects of interpersonal traumatization, in terms of both neurobiology, and political and societal outcomes. In contrast with the prevailing view of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), 5th edn (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), which, in all its editions from 1980 onwards, views post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as including both trauma of human agency and natural catastrophes or accidents, I urge a distinction between levels of trauma of human agency (i.e. human responsibility against another human, individual or group) and trauma due to