

MAKING SENSE OF THE PAST—PERSPECTIVES ON RESILIENCE AMONG HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

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The concept of “survivor guilt” has come into increasingly widespread use over the past four decades. However, there has been almost no research on the resolution of moral dilemmas following exposure to severe trauma. The present study employed qualitative analyses of five testimonies of holocaust survivors to explore moral dilemmas and their resolution. In all five testimonies, survivors discussed a discrepancy between their behaviors prior to the war and after the war in contrast to their behaviors during the war. Remaining human in the face of dehumanizing experiences was described as a major struggle in all five testimonies. Ways of resolving this discrepancy varied, with some survivors willingly acknowledging its presence and others denying it. In all cases reviewed, however, the discrepancy continued to exist even five decades after the Holocaust.

The term “survivor guilt” was first introduced by Niederland (1964) in an effort to describe the experiences of individuals who struggled with feelings of guilt over having survived the horrific events of the Holocaust. The term has gained widespread usage not only in the context of the Holocaust but also in reference to other traumatic or catastrophic events that have resulted in extensive fatalities (Brende & Parsons, 1985; Williams, 1987). It has been acknowledged that many survivors of severely traumatic events experience some form of guilt, and thus guilt has been recognized as an associated symptom of posttraumatic stress disorder in the DSM-III-R (Brett, Spitzer, & Williams, 1988).

Received 5 May 2006; accepted 29 July 2006.

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Despite the relative popularity of this term, there has been little empirical research to identify how people resolved their moral dilemmas following the Holocaust. To date, the majority of research on the Holocaust has focused on the pathological aspects associated with exposure to such severe trauma, with little attempt to understand how and why the majority of Holocaust survivors were able to resume adaptive lives. The goals of the present study were to identify the moral dilemmas faced by Holocaust survivors and ways in which survivors were able to resolve these dilemmas and develop adaptive and functioning lives.

Method

Testimonies were retrieved from the Shoah Visual History Foundation. This foundation was established to preserve testimonies of survivors of the Holocaust. Eligibility criteria for this study included speaking English; self-identifying as Jewish prior to September 1, 1939; being between the ages of 15 and 20 when the war began; and being in the Auschwitz concentration camp at some point during the war. Five interviews with two women and three men who were between 72 and 75 years of age at the time of the interview were randomly selected from the pool of eligible testimonies. This sampling methodology was intended to ensure that survivors would share relatively similar trauma experiences.

Liat Ayalon and Chris Perry coded the testimonies thematically following Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory approach, which involves constant comparisons. Themes were compared for similarities and differences and were supported by direct quotations from the interviews. Themes were not forced into preexisting categories (Patton, 2002). Disagreements between the two coders were discussed. Common themes in each of the testimonies are described, following a discussion of commonalities across testimonies.

Results

Interview 1

MAIN MORAL DILEMMA

Mr. P is a Polish-American man 73 years of age. Mr. P was approximately 17 years old when the war broke out in Poland.

He was in Birkenau/Auschwitz and Dachau during the war. Mr. P's interview reflected his conflict between his views of himself as an active person who is striving to benefit the group and his tendency toward inaction in the midst of the war.

RESOLUTION

Fantasies of action. In contrast to the multiple incidents in which Mr. P was, indeed, active, Mr. P also was inactive many times during the war. In situations when action was not taken, Mr. P used several mechanisms to resolve this discrepancy. One way to resolve such a conflict was engaging in fantasies of action to replace inaction. For example, after discussing Mengele's murder of children, Mr. P reported an elaborate fantasy of hurting Mengele: *"I would doggone put him on a table and pull every vein out from him alive. Day by day I would hold him how long I can. Make him pay with pain you know for what he did. Cut pieces and salt his arm with pepper and sew it up."*

"I did it for the group," Another mechanism to explain his inaction is to attribute it to the benefit of the group. For example, he explained his inaction in response to soldiers dumping the bodies of children into a ditch and then shooting them with machine guns: *"The people behind me was holding me and I was my guts was turning over, it still does today when I'm talking about this. 'Don't run to him.' I was trying to jump on him or go over to the kids, see. 'They're going to kill us, they're going to kill a 100 for one.' They says 'don't do it,' they hold me by the belt and the pants you know, and they hold me on tight didn't let me loose."*

"There was nothing I could have done." Another mechanism commonly used by Mr. P to explain his inaction was the notion that there was nothing he could have done. For example, when describing himself watching Mengele murdering a woman, Mr. P said, *"What could I do? I couldn't help her, I couldn't do nothing. I was just like a newborn child that comes out in a few minutes that helpless."*

In sum, this person had memories of not acting when others suffered. These persistent memories required continuous reappraisal, both within his mind and in telling others about them. In this instance, one concept was of the self as a newborn child, to signal helplessness and hence no choice of whether or not to try to save others or join them in extremity. This addenda, self as a helpless newborn, deflects away from the actual adult choice, which was that if he acted on behalf of others he would as a consequence

personally suffer injury or death, and so he chose not to act on impulse to be a helper or caretaker.

Interview 2

MAIN MORAL DILEMMA

Mrs. X is a 75-year-old Polish-American woman who was 19 years of age when the war broke out in Poland. During the war, Mrs. X was in the Warsaw Ghetto, Birkenau/Auschwitz, and briefly in Ravensbruck. Mrs. X's main moral dilemma can be characterized as separating from her family members during the war and potentially surviving versus staying with her family and dying. This dilemma was most evident on two occasions. The first when Mrs. X was separated from her parents and youngest sister when the Warsaw Ghetto was established. The second was when Mrs. X was separated from her sisters during the *celektzia*; she was selected to work, and two of her sisters were sent to the gas chamber.

RESOLUTION

External locus of control beliefs—others. Mrs. X's main method for dealing with this moral dilemma was to emphasize control of external sources in her life. For example, when talking about the *celektzia*, Mrs. X said: "*And then was the segregation—left and right. Me and my sister told left, the other two sisters right. So I said I want to go with my sister. 'No, you have to go here,' and he gave me a slap in my face.*" Similarly, to explain her separation from her sister at the end of the war, she said, "*April the 25th, they came from the Red Cross, from Sweden, and we didn't know where we are going, because the woman that took care of the barrack, she said 'Get up, you going, you going.' I said 'Where we going?' 'You going, don't ask me questions, you are going.' I said, 'I don't want to go—want to go with my sister. 'She said to me, 'You go now, your sister go tomorrow. Every few minutes another transport we are sending, you have to go.'*"

External locus of control beliefs—Lack of knowledge. Mrs. X emphasized lack of knowledge to explain her survival. When describing her separation from her parents and younger sister, Mrs. X stated, "*We didn't know, they came unexpected, we didn't know that there'd be liquidation. . .we didn't know—they didn't let us know before, in advance, maybe if we would know we would go to our parents, we would stay with them.*"

“They are better off.” Another mechanism to help Mrs. X better deal with her moral dilemmas was the notion that the dead are better off: *“My reaction was very bad [to the death of her sisters], but you know some time I was happy that they went, that they didn’t have to went through so much what I went through. Maybe it was better—I wish I said I would go with them, because we didn’t know that we would coming alive, that we would be alive, we didn’t believe.that we’ll be alive.”*

In sum, as with the first case vignette, the situation pits self-preservation against a value of caring for the welfare of others. The memory repeats itself, intrusively. The concept for coping with the persisting theme of moral dilemma is to repeat that at the time it was a common human choice to detach self from kin, and one condoned rather than condemned by others. (Others who “must” condone or condemn include imagined audiences to the recordings at the time of making the record.)

Interview 3

MAIN MORAL DILEMMA

Mr. Z is a 72-year-old Polish-American man who was 16 years of age when the war broke out in Poland. He was in Birkenau/Auschwitz and briefly in Dachau during the war. During the interview, Mr. Z explicitly described his moral dilemma as being a human being (e.g., being part of the group) versus being an animal (e.g., taking care only of oneself). Mr. Z’s testimony vacillates between these two poles throughout the interview.

RESOLUTION

“The will to survive is so strong.” Mr. Z explicitly acknowledged the universal will to survive, which according to Mr. Z “turns one into an animal;” *“You just think of yourself. . . you don’t want to be human. . . once you got to Auschwitz you had 6 weeks of training on how to save your life, how to act, how to be an animal. . . . I wasn’t there to be a good Samaritan, I wouldn’t have helped them if I could, I was there to save my life. . . anybody human. . . didn’t survive, if you became an animal you had a chance.”*

I survived for my family. In addition to acknowledging his strong will to survive, Mr. Z emphasized that by surviving he had fulfilled his father’s wishes and had kept alive the name of his family that otherwise would have perished in the war. *“I would say, I hope we’ll*

survive—he [father] would say, I hope you’ll survive. When discussing his first thoughts following liberation, he said, *“I survived, my father told me to survive and I survived, I survived for my family, maybe to raise another family.”*

In sum, this vignette added, similarly to the first one, a shift in self-image. While the first interviewee shifted to helpless newborn, this interviewee shifted to nonhuman animal, conceiving as an animal an interest only in self-preservation and no social values. Others could condone instinctive survival in an animal rather than a person, in this subject’s view, although we believe that he is decades later still struggling to do so.

Interview 4

MAIN MORAL DILEMMA

Mr. Y is a 72-year-old Greek-American man. He was 16 years old when the German army invaded Greece in 1941. During the war, Mr. Y was in Belgrade, Birkenau/Auschwitz, the Warsaw Ghetto, and then Dachau for a short period before liberation. Throughout the interview, it appeared that Mr. Y’s main moral dilemma was the discrepancy between his views of himself as a giving person and his actual behaviors during the war, which, at times, were characterized by him taking care of himself only.

RESOLUTION

Shame and guilt versus uniqueness and strength. In his interview, Mr. Y vacillated between feelings of shame and guilt and feelings of uniqueness and strength. The shame and guilt were expressed indirectly by talking about other people’s struggle with guilt. Guilt was mentioned in the context of other people acknowledging their own inappropriate behaviors or thoughts toward Mr. Y and asking for his forgiveness. For example, according to Mr. Y, the commandant in Dachau had asked for the prisoners’ forgiveness after watching their condition following their march from the Warsaw Ghetto to the Polish border. *“They [German soldiers] saw how we were mistreated, how we were suffering, and we told them what happened with the crematoriums and the gas chambers, and the commandant says ‘I don’t believe that this happened’; the very next day when he came over he apologized to us, yes, he says, ‘I’m ashamed what happened to you people the Jews for no reason.’”*

The only time that Mr. Y mentioned his own request for forgiveness was when he and his fellow inmates sang “Selichot,” a Jewish prayer of asking for forgiveness from God for past sins. However, Mr. Y immediately said, *“We would sing ‘Selichot’ very quietly in the night, not because we were sinners, but we wanted to sing ‘Selichot’ because they were the criminals, we were the victims; they were the ones that uprooted us, and we were the ones that had suffered.”*

“I was forced to do this.” To explain some of his behaviors, such as burying people alive or loading bodies into the crematorium, Mr. Y often emphasized the fact that there was nothing he could have done and that he was *forced* to do certain things against his will: *“We were forced to do it, everybody was forced to do it. We had no other choice.”*

Intellectualization. Mr. Y’s use of intellectualization was evident by his report style, which was emotionless throughout almost the entire interview (the only time during the interview that Mr. Y smiled was when he talked about his wife’s food). During the interview, he tended to rely on statistical information and was extremely detail oriented, especially when talking about the more horrifying experiences of the Holocaust. *“The slowest day was 680 dead, and the highest one about 1,400, 1,470... We were placing up to 10 bodies in one pit, in one crematorium, and in 15 minutes they were already burned.”*

“Something good will come out of this.” Another mechanism was the belief that “something good will come out of this experience” and that he was uniquely equipped to tell the distorted and untold story of his minority group, the Greek Salonikan Jews. Mr. Y reported that he had told his story many times and viewed his unique situation as a member of a minority group among the prisoner population as an opportunity to give meaning to his survival, in the sense that if he had not survived, the story of his group may have been lost or distorted: *“In general the historians of the Holocaust... neglected or... abandoned to mention that we the Sephardim were equal victims of the Holocaust. Why is there always the mention about the Eastern European Jews were the victims of the Holocaust, and when we ask we, the Sephardim, to have the same time to speak about the destruction of the Jewish community of Greece, they refuse.”*

In sum, this interviewee adds the concept of future compensation, in that good can come from bad. We infer the bad is not only the bad done by the aggressors, but the imagined bad of being

self-preservatory in the moral dilemma. We should be clear with the reader that we do not judge self-preservation as “bad” but are making the point that even though the subjects made a reasoned choice, their automatic inner self-critics called this reasoned choice “bad” because it did not go to the maximum aid for others. That is why the choice is still reviewed decades after the events.

Interview 5

MAIN MORAL DILEMMA

Mrs. W is a 73-year-old woman of Polish extraction who was raised in Germany prior to the war and resided in Belgium at the time of the interview. Mrs. W was 13 years of age in 1938 when the war broke out. She was in Auschwitz and Ravensbruck during the war. The primary dilemma identified in her interview was the tension between the desire to be with her family and the necessity of separation in order to survive. Mrs. W described a series of very significant separations throughout the war: separating from her father, her great-grandmother, her mother, her brothers, and her entire community. She then continued to discuss the struggle of separations from family members even after the war.

RESOLUTION

Focus on the positive in interpersonal relationships. A mechanism Mrs. W used to resolve her dilemma of separation from family members and loved ones was focusing on the positive—specifically, focusing on the positive in interpersonal relationships. Mrs. W credited the friends she made during the war with saving her life. In addition, although she was forced to separate from her family in order to survive, she viewed her ability to remain part of a group as the key to her survival. Throughout her testimony, Mrs. W described being helped by various people in Belgium: “*They let me [stay in their house] knowing that I was Jewish, they didn’t take any money from us, I was like their own daughter there.*” And “*she [mother] went to this doctor, that’s what she told me, and he looked at her and at the end he said, are you Jewish—my mother started to cry, and she said yes, and he went to his bureau, and took an amount of money in an envelope, and gave it to her.*” She described help from a guard on the train to Paris after her arrest: “*he [German soldier] said you are so young, I would like to help you... I’ll give you the address of my parents... in Germany and you’ll always be safe.*” An interrogator in the Paris prison

said [he would] *do everything to keep you here in Paris so they won't send you to Poland or Norway.*" A fellow inmate in Auschwitz also provided assistance: "*When she heard of the coming selection she brought a pair of boots and a coat to put on so my legs would look less skinny.*" Finally, a German guard helped her after the evacuation orders were given: "*He said 'Ah, we are now reaching a town, if you want to escape I'll give you some addresses of where you can go.' But we didn't take any chances.*"

Returning to the past. Staying connected to past experiences and maintaining a relationship with people she had met during the war were other mechanisms she used to resolve separation from family and loved ones. After the war, Mrs. W described active efforts to maintain contacts with people. She visited those who had helped her family in Belgium: "*We went to visit him [physician who helped them], and my brother said what can I do for you, as a [recompense], to compensate for what you have done for us.*" She visited her great-grandmother's grave: "*We went to Cologne and we found the number where she [great-grandmother] was buried in Cologne in the Jewish cemetery, and a few years ago we had a tombstone made for her in the Jewish cemetery.*" Also, she remained friends with the Dutch woman she had met in the transport camp.

Intellectualization. Another mechanism that Mrs. W utilized was intellectualization. It was evident from her testimony that she had told her story over and over, and had written and translated her story for her grandchildren to read. During parts of the interview, Mrs. W read aloud from her written transcript instead of relying on her memory to tell her story.

Once again, there appears to be intrusive repetitiousness not only of traumatic perceptions (others as beaten or starved to death, shot, etc.) but also of memories of internal moral choices as anchored to specific episodes of experience. Similarly to the fourth vignette, this survivor emphasized the "good" that came to be an integral part of her horrific experiences.

Discussion

Being Part of the Group

In all five testimonies, survivors discussed a discrepancy between their behaviors prior to the war and after the war and their

behaviors during the war. As reported by one of the survivors, this tension is never resolved: “*I think you are marked for life—you try to forget parts, it’s a long process, it takes many years, but you never recover completely.*” Some discussed this discrepancy as the tension between staying with the family or the larger group and being alone, while others discussed the discrepancy in more active terms, as the tension between taking actions for the benefit of one’s family or the entire group and taking actions to meet one’s needs even at the expense of others. However, in all five testimonies, the center of the discrepancy was on human relationships versus lack of such relationships. Similar findings were reported by Laub (2002), who argued that the outcome of the Holocaust as well as other genocides is the abolishment of the empathic human dyad and the fragmentation of human community.

Survivors varied in the degree to which they openly acknowledged the discrepancy in their behaviors. For example, one participant openly acknowledged his dilemma and, thus, was able to provide a clear and consistent rationale for his behaviors. Others were less up front about their behaviors and in their testimonies used a variety of different rationales that were inconsistent at times. In their testimonies, these individuals tended to rely more heavily on external locus of control beliefs to explain their behaviors during the war.

“I Remained the Same”

In several of the testimonies, interviewees attempted to explain the discrepancy in their behaviors during the war versus their behaviors prior to and after the war by denying its existence and the moral dilemmas that result from it. Many of them did so by engaging in fantasies of “undoing”: for example, describing an imaginary world in which one’s actions were in accordance with one’s idealized perception of oneself (i.e., fantasies of active revenge rather than inaction to better fit the image of active resistance) or creating an imaginary world in which loved ones were still alive.

Creating a Positive Spin

Similarly to Frankl’s (1963) as well as Park and Folkman’s (1997) view of finding meaning as a form of coping, we found that putting

a positive spin on one's experiences was a common theme in the testimonies reviewed, and all interviewees were able to identify a positive angle to their actions during the war and to their survival in the face of the deaths of family members and loved ones. Some were able to identify positive aspects in the consequences of the war. For example, one interviewee mentioned the belief that those who died were better off because they did not suffer as much as she did. Holding a belief about one's uniqueness and having a special commitment to telling the story of the Holocaust were mentioned by another interviewee as positive outcomes of his survival, while a third interviewee was able to see his own survival as fulfilling the wishes of his family.

Others were able to identify positive aspects in the war experience. One survivor, telling her survival story with zest and humor, was able to point to positive human interactions that took place during the war. Another interviewee was able to view his own inaction as a means to protect the group and, thus, a positive behavior even though it contradicted his own perception of himself as an active person.

Intellectualization

The use of intellectualization was evident in several of the testimonies. Survivors have told their story over and over and have been dedicated to doing so. For example, one of the interviewees even read parts of her testimonies from a manuscript she had written about her experiences. Another interviewee, who did not show any emotions during the interview, focused extensively on historical details and facts when telling his story.

Concluding Comments

This study is limited by the small number of testimonies reviewed and by the lack of objective criteria for adaptive versus maladaptive functioning. However, the study provides important preliminary information about ways in which Holocaust survivors make sense of their past. Identifying those techniques can be helpful in the development of future therapeutic techniques with survivors of trauma in general. In their testimonies, survivors acknowledged the constant presence of the dilemma in their lives. The dilemma

of a human being undergoing dehumanizing experiences has not disappeared even five decades after the Holocaust. Survivors are attempting to integrate a view of themselves as not all good or bad, but rather as human beings who underwent horrendous experiences and had made a conscious decision to preserve their lives. The dilemma associated with this choice has a constant presence in the life of survivors.

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