

TRAUMATIC MEMORIES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS' AND THEIR EFFECT ON THE EXPERIENCE OF IDENTITY

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Introduction

In the history of the Holocaust, the status of Lithuania is unique from a number of standpoints that have led to exacerbated results. The percentage of Jews killed was the highest in Europe, the local population's collaboration (including thousands who became voluntary murderers) is among the highest in Europe, and violence occurred in dozens of localities even before the invasion of the Nazi forces. These factors make the case of Lithuania worthy of a distinct study in many aspects, including psychological repercussions for the survivors.

Therefore, the strategy of overcoming the trauma among Lithuanian Jews will be compared with available data in other communities.

It is obvious that there is a significant quantity of academic literature where the traumatic events of the Holocaust are described. From there we get lots of information about psycho-traumatic experiences, such as tortures, humiliations, threats, starvation, loss of households, loss or even death of close relatives during that period.

Bearing in mind the fact that the victims of the Holocaust did not survive, there is incomparably less academic literature, not only in the realm of psychology, about their long lasting experiences. Those who managed to survive experienced severe, sustained traumas which haunted and will haunt them for the rest of their lives causing sustained psychological problems. This literature indicates that identity defects, that evolved after the Holocaust, are particularly severe and evoke enormous psycho-traumatic effects. Thus, psychological consequences of the Holocaust are similar to those manifested at any phase of psychological threat (Yehuda, Kahana et al., 1995, Chaitin, 2000).

As it is mentioned above, there are not many academic sources about the consequences of the Holocaust on the level of individual survivors. There is even less research in the field of psychology.

Many research of the Holocaust survivors suffering PTSS (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder — PTSD) and its influence on a personality are presented in literature (Lang, 2000, Major, 1996, Rosenthal, Bar-On, 1992 et al.) Despite the fact that Lithuanian Jews were almost completely annihilated during the Holocaust, this subject not been discussed thor-

oughly enough even today. No psychological studies aimed at studies of people who survived the Holocaust in Lithuania have been done. There are studies on the psychological effect of Soviet repressions in Lithuania showing that former political prisoners, deportees and other victims of repressions had much more severe traumatic experiences than those who did not suffer the repressions (Gailiene, Kazlauskas, 2005).

The aim of this study is to contribute to the investigation of a specific trauma suffered by the survivors of the Lithuanian Holocaust, its influence on the identity experience in the further lives of the survivors. Our research question is: "How are traumatic memories involved in the identity experience of the survivors of the Holocaust?"

Methodology

A biographical narrative interview was used for data collection. A methodological decision to use a biographical narrative interview, regardless of the specific research question, is based on the fundamental theoretical assumptions. Dealing with questions of social sciences or history that relate to social phenomena linked with people's experiences and have a biographical meaning for them lead us to interpret the meaning of these phenomena in the context of a biography (Rosenthal, 2004). A individual assumptions are:

1. In order to understand and explain social and psychological phenomena we have to reconstruct their genesis – the process of creation, reproduction and transformation of them.
2. In order to understand and explain people's actions it is necessary to find out about both the subjective perspective of the actors and the course of their actions. We want to find out what meaning their actions had for them at the time, what meaning they assign today, and in what biographically constituted context they place their experiences.
3. In order to be able to understand and explain the statements of an interviewee / biographer about particular topics and experiences in his / her past it is necessary to interpret them as part of the overall context of his / her current life and their results in the present and future perspective.

One informant participated in the pilot research. The informant is a 82 years old woman, a

Holocaust survivor. She was born in 1930 in Lithuania. In 1941 she was imprisoned in Šiauliai ghetto, from 1943 till the end of the war – in the Shtutthof concentration camp.

The interview was taped, transcribed and analysed according to procedures of thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, 2006) by the research team.

Results

Thematic data analysis led us to the identification of three major thematic categories of the identity experience by the survivor of the Holocaust: self-perception as a weak physiological being, relationships, and gratefulness for staying alive.

Self Perception as a Weak Physiological Being (Victim)

This category covers experiences of a helpless, weak, dehumanized, physiological being during the Holocaust: “You were almost killed”, “They forced us into the barn in February, 1945 when the Russian army came closer. We continuously lay. We were not given anything to eat, except potato peelings. We were not allowed to do anything: neither stand up, nor go out”, “I was almost no longer a human. I didn’t think of anything”, “We lived like animals”.

Relationships

This category covers experiences of supporting relationships and loss of relationships. Examples of supporting relationships: “My mom saved my life. If my mom had not done it, I would not have been able to survive”, “There was one warder, a Pole, he often brought a slice of bread and asked my mother to give me”, “We talked with God”, “When my father returned, we started another life. He moved us to Vilnius”.

Examples of loss of relationships: “They put my sister on the carriage. She died just in the carriage. When loaded”, “They gathered all children and took away – and till today no one knows, nobody knew where they were put. (pause). They just threw small children, who were crying on the vehicles, threw them into the vehicles and took away. My two cousins, two boys, were taken away”, “(...) and all my friends, school mates - I do not have any now - all went to the crematorium.”

Gratefulness for Being Alive (Survivor)

This category covers acceptance of the past, gratefulness, a positive attitude towards life:

“I believe in God. Well, it was a disaster, it was such an event. Apparently people were bad, that he allowed killing of so many people. But I still thank God for everything I have. For each day, for everything”, “It was our destiny. And we still had a good destiny that we were alive. Not everyone returned, not everyone survived. Well, very few people remained”, “You do not want a lot; you have to be happy with what you have, be satisfied with your life. Because you had such a life then, God forbid, it that is repeated. God forbid that of such a terrible thing as war repeats.”

Discussion

The results of this study showed that three major thematic categories of the identity experience by the survivor of the Holocaust were identified: self-perception as a weak physiological being, relationships, and gratefulness for being alive.

It is known that traumatic reality not only destroys the mechanism of self-defence but it can also lead to the helplessness, fear and regression of one’s Ego. In a traumatic experience, a person’s organism reaches such a level of excitement that he/she cannot control himself/herself and, as a result, one’s Ego can be rendered as completely helpless (Krystal, 1988). In our study we categorized this experience “self-perception as a weak physiological being”.

A human cannot live without explanations, so he/she gives an individual meaning to his/her trauma (Cramer, 1999, Laub, Aurhahn, 1993). In this study an individual meaning of her trauma is revealed in the category “gratefulness for being alive”.

We distinguished the thematic category “relationships” which in itself covers traumatic experiences of loss of relationships and supporting relationships, that enabled to survive.

According to Gemignani’s (2011) completed research, two opposite aspects of managing traumatic memories could be distinguished. The first is called “Past remains past” and the second is called “Past is our strength”. Despite their clear opposition these two aspects can be used by two different narrators to describe the same traumatic event. The aspect “Past remains past” is a strategy based on the suppression of traumatic memories in order to protect one’s identity, secure one’s position in society and ensure one’s constructive future. Meanwhile the aspect “Past is our strength” is an opportunity to integrate one’s past memories into present events. Feelings such as anger, sadness, loss, being still alive, can play an important role in helping the victim to understand oneself as a survivor. The results of our study clearly showed that the strategy “Past is our strength” helps to integrate past memories into present events.

It was a pilot research and only one informant participated in this study. More informants should be

used in further research in order to explain how the traumatic memories involved in the identity experience for survivors of the Holocaust.

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Summary

Collective disasters such as the Holocaust, war, repressions and ethnic violence are man-made political and social disasters. Not only they shock the wider (or future) public strongly, but result in serious trauma to the survivors.

A psychological trauma is an intense emotional experience with which human beings' "I" (self) strive. The psychological effects of trauma is the phenomenon of inability to adapt caused by psychological trauma. The identity is a dynamic system which defines a personality throughout interpersonal relations and emotional experiences. Traumatic memories disrupt conventional processes between an individual and the community relationships based on trust, care and giving people a sense of control, purpose and interconnectivity since the sense of identity is formed by the relationship with others. Traumas destroy or diminish the victim's earlier formed structure of self-perception and distort an individual's sense of reality, warping meanings of real events. In our research we tried to analyze how trauma affected a person's self-perception in the Holocaust.

A biographical narrative interview was used to collect the data. One informant participated in the pilot research. The thematic analysis procedures were employed in order to achieve the goal. Themes were generated to delineate the descriptions of traumatic experiences and understandings of how they affect the informant's life. Thematic analysis of the interview with the Holocaust survivor paved the way for better understanding of how traumatic memories are involved in the identity experience revealing the prevailing patterns such as self-perception as a weak physiological being, the relationship with the family, relationship with God, gratefulness for being alive.

Keywords: Psychological trauma, Holocaust experience, identity, self perception.