Holocaust Survivors’ Memories of Past Trauma and the Functions of Reminiscence

Norm O’Rourke, PhD, RPsych,*1 Sarah Canham, PhD,1 Annette Wertman, MA,2 Habib Chaudhury, PhD,2 Sara Carmel, MPH, PhD,3 Yaacov G. Bachner, PhD,4 and Hagit Peres, PhD4

1IRMACS Centre, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada. 2Department of Gerontology, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada. 3Center for Multidisciplinary Research in Aging, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Be’er Sheva, Israel. 4Department of Public Health, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Be’er Sheva, Israel.

*Address correspondence to Norm O’Rourke, PhD, RPsych, IRMACS Centre, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada V5A 1S6. E-mail: ORourke@sfu.ca

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Purpose of the study: Existing research suggests that specific ways of recalling autobiographical memories of one’s past cluster in self-positive, self-negative, and prosocial reminiscence functions. We undertook the present qualitative study to gain understanding of reminiscence functions as described by 269 Israeli Holocaust survivors and to see whether groupings of themes that emerged would correspond to our tripartite model of the reminiscence functions.

Design and Methods: Participants (M = 80.4 years; SD = 6.87) were asked to describe memories that typify a reminiscence function in which they frequently or very frequently engage. Thematic analyses were conducted in English (translated) and Hebrew.

Results: Responses reflect the range of ways in which Holocaust survivors reminisce. The task of describing early life memories was difficult for some participants, while others’ lived experiences enabled them to teach others to ensure that their collective memory remains in the consciousness of the next generation of Israelis and the Jewish state. Data are imbued with examples of horror, resilience, generativity, and gratitude.

Implications: As hypothesized, survivors’ memories cluster in self-positive, self-negative, and prosocial groupings consistent with the tripartite model of reminiscence functions.

Key words: Autobiographical memory, Holocaust survivors, Life review, Reminiscence functions, Qualitative analyses

The final stage of development is believed to be a point when life is viewed in its entirety leading to either integrity (i.e., serenity, compassion, and acceptance) or despair (i.e., hopelessness, bitterness, and regret; Erikson, 1959, 1998). While creating a coherent life narrative, older adults come to terms with life as lived and cope with later life losses (Butler, 1963; Haight, Michel, & Hendricks, 2000). Consistent with theory, a link seems to exist between well-being in later life and reminiscence functions (Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, & Webster, 2010). However, accessing autobiographical memories is not always beneficial as reminiscence has both positive and negative effects on mental health and well-being (Webster & Haight, 2002). For example, overall reminiscence frequency predicts depressive symptoms over time (Balmoral, Gong, & O’Rourke, 2013).
Early Life Trauma and Reminiscence
Survivors of the Nazi Holocaust are one group for whom the challenge to achieve an integrative life narrative may be especially difficult. For instance, survivors commonly compartmentalize memories of early life events (Cohen & Shmotkin, 2007) making it more difficult to see the course of their lives as a coherent whole.

We undertook the present study to gain greater understanding of reminiscence functions as described by Israeli Holocaust survivors. Specifically, we examine Holocaust survivors’ narratives describing a specific memory that exemplifies a reminiscence function upon which they often, or very often rely (see Methods section).

Tripartite Model of Reminiscence Functions
Autobiographical memory research suggests that there are eight distinct functions of reminiscence (Webster, 1993, 1997) that serve three distinct purposes (Figure 1). This tripartite model of reminiscence functions (Cappeliez & O’Rourke, 2006; Cappeliez, O’Rourke, & Chaudhury, 2005; O’Rourke, Bachner, Cappeliez, Chaudhury, & Carmel, 2014) consists of three higher-order latent constructs: self-positive functions (i.e., identity, problem solving, death preparation); self-negative functions (i.e., bitterness revival, boredom reduction, intimacy maintenance); and prosocial functions (i.e., conversation, teach/inform others).

Self-Positive Reminiscence Functions
Self-positive reminiscence functions reassert earlier self-understanding to create new self-awareness; these include identity, death preparation, and problem solving. Identity refers to the use of personal memories to find worth and meaning in one’s life (Korte, Bohlmeijer, Westerhof, & Pot, 2011). Reminiscences that foster death preparation refer to the recall of autobiographical memory to come to terms with one’s finitude. These reminiscences help to reduce anxiety about death and to approach the end of life with a sense of wholeness and completion (Cappeliez et al., 2005). Problem solving entails remembering past experiences to help solve present challenges. Problem solving is a self-positive function because such autobiographical memories entail a positive self-understanding as capable and competent (Cappeliez & Webster, 2011).

These self-positive functions share in common the evaluation and synthesis of personal memories to find meaning through reflection on one’s life as lived (Randall & Kenyon, 2001). Self-positive reminiscence functions demonstrate a significant association with physical and mental health (Rasmussen & Habermas, 2011).

Prosocial Reminiscence Functions
Conversation and teach/inform others are prosocial reminiscences (Alea & Bluck, 2003). The latter entails sharing memories to convey a life lesson whereas conversation is communicating personal memories with no evaluative or instructive intent (O’Rourke et al., 2014). According to Cappeliez and colleagues (2005), prosocial reminiscences maximize opportunities to experience positive emotions in social encounters. Prosocial reminiscences affect physical and mental health primarily by emotional regulation (Alea & Bluck, 2003; Pasupathi, 2003).

Self-Negative Reminiscence Functions
Bitterness revival, boredom reduction, and intimacy maintenance are self-negative reminiscence functions. Bitterness revival pertains to rehashing difficult life memories, unattained goals, and regrets about the past. Boredom reduction refers to memories used to fill a void of stimulation or interest in the present (Cappeliez & O’Rourke, 2006). Finally, intimacy maintenance involves evoking memories of those who are now gone (Alea & Bluck, 2007). Like boredom reduction, having few important relationships today may lead older adults to recall those now deceased. In other words, boredom reduction and intimacy maintenance can suggest a void in one’s life due to the loss of people or purpose that have not or cannot be replaced (e.g., a widowed spouse who remains unmarried).

Research has demonstrated the negative emotional valence of bitterness revival, boredom reduction and, to a lesser extent, intimacy maintenance. The shared feature of these self-negative reminiscences is that the person is caught...
in a persistent cycle of rumination on the past (Cappeliez & O’Rourke, 2006). Self-negative functions exhibit a negative association with health (Cappeliez et al., 2005). Apathy, absence of purpose, and dwelling on past conflicts and losses are associated with reduced wellness in later life (e.g., depressive symptoms; Korte et al., 2011; O’Rourke, Cappeliez, & Claxton, 2011).

To date, support for this tripartite model has been found with Hebrew, English, and French speaking older adult on four continents (Cappeliez & O’Rourke, 2006; O’Rourke et al., 2013). The question remains whether this tripartite reminiscence model also applies to those who experienced early life trauma and the long-term sequelae of trauma. We explored this question by examining memories reported by Holocaust survivors living in Israel that typify a reminiscence function in which they frequently or very frequently engage.

**Methods**

**Design and Sample**

Ten research assistants (RAs) were trained by Israeli authors to interview participants at a location participants selected. Study questionnaires were administered in face-to-face interviews lasting 30–40 min. Bilingual Russian and Hebrew speaking RAs interviewed survivors from the former Soviet Union, most of who had now lived in Israel for more than 20 years.

**Participants**

The Israeli authors recruited a convenience sample of Holocaust survivors living in living in cities, smaller communities, and kibbutzim (i.e., collective communities). Participants lived in all parts of Israel though most were in the south and central regions. They provided written consent to participate at recruitment.

Participants were fluent in Hebrew or Russian, had lived under the Nazi rule/occupation in Europe or North Africa, and immigrated as refugees to Israel after World War II or after the fall of the former Soviet Union. Participants received no financial remuneration. Over 12-months, 269 survivors participated in the qualitative component of this study. Five participants discontinued interviews due to their discomfort discussing the past.

Close to 75% of participants were born in Poland, Romania, Hungary or the former Czechoslovakia (Czech Republic and Slovakia). The average age of these survivors was 80.4 years (SD = 6.87) and they had completed an average of 10.6 years of formal education (SD = 4.08; range 1–25 years). This low average was expected, as most participants were 9–21 years of age during the Holocaust with no access to schools or any other form of formal education. In Nazi Germany, the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 expelled Jewish children from public schools (Dawidowicz, 2010); these laws were later imposed on Nazi occupied nations.

**Data collection**

**Reminiscence Functions Scale**

We first administered the 28-item Reminiscence Functions Scale (RFS; Robitaille, Cappeliez, Coulombe, & Webster, 2010) which asks how often participants reminisce for various functions ranging from never (1) to very frequently (6). Items are grouped within eight categories: boredom reduction (e.g., “When I reminisce, it is for lack of any better mental stimulation”); death preparation (e.g., “. . . it gives me a sense of personal completion or wholeness as I approach the end of life”); identity (e.g., “. . . to see how my past fits in with my journey through life”); problem solving (e.g., “. . . to remind me that I have the skills to cope with present problems”); conversation (e.g., “. . . it promotes fellowship and a sense of belonging”); intimacy maintenance (e.g., “. . . to remember people I was close to but who are no longer a part of my life”); bitterness revival (e.g., “. . . to rehash lost opportunities”); and teach/inform others (e.g., “. . . to leave a legacy of family history”).

After completing the RFS, survivors were asked an open-ended question based on a RFS scale item to which they indicated that they often or very frequently engage. For example, if a participant responded to item 26 indicating that she reminisces very frequently to rekindle bitter memories, the interviewer then asked, “Earlier you indicated that you reminisce often or very frequently to rekindle bitter memories. Please describe a memory you recall specific to this time in your past (e.g., a specific event you may have had in mind when responding to this question).” This allowed us to capture snapshots of survivors’ lives as recalled in the present.

If there was more than one RFS item for the interviewer to select, the item for which we had the fewest qualitative responses from previous participants was chosen. We did this because self-positive functions tend to be more frequent than self-negative functions (Balmoral et al., 2013) whereas prosocial functions are context dependent (e.g., need contact with grandchildren to teach them traditions). We obtained a minimum of five open-ended responses per item and a maximum of 14. Each participant provided an open-ended response to only one RFS scale item.

We asked participants to describe these autobiographical memories to enhance understanding of reminiscence functions, give voice to survivors, to see which groupings of themes would emerge, and whether or not these themes correspond to the tripartite model of reminiscence functions. We did not ask participants to recall events specific to the Holocaust, though the majority did so.
Open-ended responses in Hebrew were recorded and transcribed verbatim, de-identified to ensure confidentiality, verified for accuracy, and entered into the NVivo (2012) qualitative software program. We noted points in transcripts where words and phrases were translated by the interviewer in vivo from Hebrew to Russian (or Russian to Hebrew). This allowed participants from the former Soviet Union to understand the question and respond fully. Qualitative analyses were performed independently in both English (Canada) and Hebrew (Israel). A bilingual Hebrew-English RA translated the text into English working with the first author to capture the meaning of idioms and nuance of meaning. A second Israeli-Canadian RA independently translated the text back into Hebrew; the back-translated text was then compared to the original. In the few instances of discrepancy these were resolved by translators and the first author.

Data Analysis

We conducted thematic analysis of the open-ended responses to augment understanding of autobiographical memory among Holocaust survivors and to determine if qualitative responses reflect a tripartite model of reminiscence functions (i.e., themes cluster in self-positive, self-negative, and prosocial functions). The content of recall of the past is determined by one’s life history as well as one’s current life circumstances; the present is a filter through which life is understood, interpreted, and constructed (Kenyon, Clark, & de Vries, 2001; Randall, 2013).

Analysis began with an initial read-through of each response for general meanings. An initial coding framework was based on initial low-level coding that resulted from reading responses and coding units of text or themes, and labeling these units with a word or phrase closely related to the participant’s account (Boyatzis, 1998). The data were independently coded and analyzed by three study co-authors to reduce any biases due to researcher preconceptions. Data were discussed in-depth, a dialogue facilitated the productive exploration of the data, until consensus was reached on participants’ meanings and ideas (Hycner, 1985). Throughout this iterative process, codes were subject to constant comparative analysis to further refine the interpretation, the framework, and relationships across codes (Boeije, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The result was a detailed coding framework.

Results

We present findings in groupings to identify themes that emerge on the basis of these 28 reminiscence items to determine if themes are consistent with the tripartite model of self-positive, self-negative, and prosocial reminiscence functions. People use their memories in different ways. Three overarching groupings subsume each of the eight reminiscence functions in accord with the tripartite model of reminiscence functions. We explore each of these groupings in turn.

Prosocial Functions

As noted, the prosocial reminiscence construct is comprised of two functions: conversation and teach/inform others, both of which generally have positive effects on mood (Alea & Bluck, 2003; Pasupathi, 2003). Prosocial reminiscence fosters opportunities to experience positive emotions in social interactions (Cappeliez et al., 2005). But does this also apply to narratives of traumatic life experiences?

Conversation as a reminiscence function involves forging common bonds with others in order to connect. Sharing memories is one way to enable conversation, usually with friends and family (Alea, 2010). For our participants, having lived through the Holocaust created a common bond with other survivors. Being able to reminisce with others who share a similar history creates a common ground.

Seniors have many things in common; we all went through the Holocaust together. Although Bulgaria wasn’t Nazi Germany, through stories we find common ground. Each person shares, and we make comparisons. (Rachel from Tel Aviv)

With new acquaintances, those who do not necessarily have shared life histories, attempts are made to find a connection:

With old friends I can speak and remember places where we were in our youth, during the war and after, at the same area, the same issues. With new friends, there is curiosity about how they lived, where they lived, what they remember. When there are interesting things, I’m full of memories too, and then there is a more comfortable atmosphere to continue the friendship. (Moshe from Jerusalem)

For several of our participants, memories of the Holocaust are shared mostly with others survivors. As Joshua from Be’er Sheva stated, “When I talk with another Holocaust survivor, we have a common understanding; we raise the subject and we can understand each other better. I don’t talk about the Holocaust with just anyone.” Yet discussions of traumatic life experiences are more difficult for some than for others. As Dov from Haifa stated:

I was involved in my community with a group of Holocaust survivors about 3 years ago. The survivors struggled to talk about what they went through but
I was among the few who said that he has nothing to hide, and it doesn’t affect me emotionally to talk about things because you can’t change the past. After describing some of the things I went through in the Holocaust, people who had difficulties also began to open up and share their stories.

Conversation is a way of remembering one’s own life and to learn the memories of others. Sharing difficult memories may encourage others to become comfortable disclosing their own memories. Existing research suggests that sharing memories with those with similar life experience predicts less depression and fewer PTSD symptoms (Bisson & Andrew, 2007).

Teach/inform others entails recalling and sharing memories in order to transmit knowledge and cultural values, often to bridge generational understanding. This was done by our participants to transmit knowledge to younger generations of Israelis and Jewish people (i.e., grandchildren and grand-grandchildren). As a prosocial function, teaching/informing others about one’s past fosters connections between people. For instance, Shaul from Ramat Gan stated:

A year ago, I traveled with my two grandchildren to the town in France where my father was saved from the Nazis. I shared with them details about my lost childhood, things that I’ve told almost no one. That connected me with my grandchildren more than any other family get-together.

One lesson participants wanted to convey was the belief that memory will protect the Jewish people. It is important to understand history to maintain awareness, and in turn, remain vigilant. Miriam from Be’er Sheva expressed this:

Every time I went with pupils to Poland, I would share my memories so the students would know what had happened to the Jewish people and how they should act so that something like that will not happen again.

For our participants, reminiscence to teach/inform others was necessary to ensure the survival of the Jewish people and to encourage younger generations to persevere in the face of current life difficulties.

I want the younger generation to know what I went through, what we all went through. I hope that our education system will teach them so that they know how to protect themselves and the state. (Leah from Kibbutz Nir-Oz)

Values and sharing life lessons were a further impetus for sharing life stories with younger generations. As various participants discussed, younger people in Israel today do not appreciate food insecurity.

When I see children who don’t appreciate food, I tell them about the hunger I suffered from during the Holocaust. I needed to eat no matter what I was given. Also when I hear a child saying that the food is disgusting, I tell him that as a child during the Holocaust, I couldn’t say such things about food. (Benjamin from Givat Ayim)

Several participants described how teaching/informing younger generations about the Holocaust, is their “duty” or “mission.” This duty to share memories extends beyond individual; their stories belong to all.

The memories of what I went through do not belong only to me but also the next generations . . . and to the Jewish people. It is my duty, and the duty of all those who went through the Holocaust, to ensure that what happened to us will be remembered for generations. (Adina from Tel Aviv)

Embedded in these responses is the concept of generativity and the importance of guiding the next generation (Grünberg, 2007). As Yoav from Kiryat Bialik stated, “I try to help my granddaughters and give them advice . . . ” Teaching the young to learn from the past, whether or not related to the Holocaust, were important functions of reminiscence for many survivors. Consistent with the tripartite model of reminiscence functions, these interpersonal reminiscences provide opportunities to turn bitter memories into opportunities to connect with others who share their experiences and with those who can learn from their past.

Self-Positive Functions

Problem solving, identity, and death preparation comprise the three self-positive functions. In accord with Erikson (1998), these functions may be those most likely to foster a coherent life narrative (i.e., integrity vs. despair).

Problem solving entails remembering past experiences to help solve present problems, to put problems into perspective, and to avoid making past mistakes (Westerhof et al., 2010). As participant narratives reveal, problem solving as a function of reminiscence underscores the resilience of these survivors. Reminiscence in this context is a way participants are reminded about their stories of survival and, in the process, enhances self-efficacy and a positive outlook.

Participants also reported that, over time, their experiences gave them the ability to make better decisions. As Ruth from Lod stated, “Today it’s different, memories of the past certainly help you, today you are smarter and you have more experience.” This perspective is grounded in having survived the Holocaust as well as the belief that life today is much improved from years past. Being a survivor provides an opportunity for people to appreciate their
current circumstances and see the past as a buttress against current life challenges.

Most of the problems, even the major ones, become smaller when I remember what I went through. The desire for a better life, every little thing is better than it was before. I became more optimistic, open, believing. This resilience helps me help others. (Eli from Meitar)

Reminiscing as a means of problem solving occurs when the present is understood compared to the past, to enhance the present—and for some, the welfare of others.

Identity is a second self-positive function that refers to the use of memories as a means of self-understanding and growth, of defining oneself, and comparing patterns of personal change with stability. Coherence and meaning in one’s life are sought by remembering, which contributes to the maintenance of identity (Korte et al., 2011).

As Joel from Jerusalem suggests, the values and teachings of parents were important to self-identity even into late life:

I remember a lot of my childhood, my parents, my house when we were a family, and the values with which I was raised. So every time I recall the past, it defines who I am today. My education was very strict; it taught me to be organized, and should be on time and responsible, and this is what I saw at home and this is what I’m trying to be today. All these characteristics are who I am today.

Despite difficulty in discussing memories of painful experiences, some participants described their childhoods and how they see life differently.

It is not easy to speak about the subject, I’ll try. I was a child, growing up in a warm house with little girl dreams, then the war came and everything I dreamt of disintegrated, we lived in fear day and night, it changed me. Through the Red Cross they found me and we immigrated to Israel to the kibbutz. I think I tried, and succeeded, to forget the dark years. I brought children into this world, and I’m happy. I have grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and today, in recent years, I go back to the memories. (Leila from Kibbutz Zeelim)

These narratives suggest that being a survivor is integral to participants’ identities. As Sara from Ramat Gan stated, “With little hope, but still we survived despite what we saw around us, all we saw was death.” Resilience is at the core of identity for many of these survivors. Common were statements such as “I built a successful family (Noah from Tel Aviv)” and “I built the country (Arik from Haifa).” As Shlomo from Givat Ayim reported:

At the age of 12, I was forced out of my house to a labor camp in Liibitz. I remember the beautiful house where I lived and how my family was very happy, until that moment. My parents had stores in the town where we lived in Poland. This memory gave me a lot of strength as a person who survived the war, to go on and rebuild my life as before. I feel that I succeeded in building a new life.

Tied to identity is generativity for various participants who defined survival in terms of their children and grandchildren.

I think about the past and the entire family that perished in Auschwitz, and I think where I came from, and what a wonderful clan I established with children grandchildren and great-grandchildren (David from Jerusalem).

Participants also spoke with gratitude for their survival and for having children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Noam from Kibbutz Tirat-Tzvi stated:

They killed all of my family but by some miracle I survived. My mother said that I would survive and that’s what happened. The Nazis shot my brothers and then my parents; then they shot at me but missed. All my life I have been an orphan . . . but here, thank God, I have a house and I have children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Also within identity narratives, participants expressed gratitude in being able to enjoy life today despite their past. As Nathaniel from Be’er Sheva stated:

I was 15 in September 1939 living in Łódź Ghetto. Now I live like a human being and I feel very good. People help me and I am satisfied.

For others, they expressed their gratitude in feeling free and safe living in Israel:

We returned to Israel as free people; our children have nothing to fear. We returned as Jews without fear. Thank God I have a beautiful family. We worked hard and our labor gave us meaning. Even when there was no money, we felt free. (Isser from Haifa)

Memories of the past forge present day attitudes; and survivors’ past, in part, defines who they are. Their appreciation for life today is enhanced by juxtaposition to memories of the past. This self-positive reminiscence function allows survivors to redefine their difficult early memories as a resource and a basis for gratitude. Death preparation is a third self-positive function that refers to the use of memories to cope with thoughts of mortality and to prepare for and reduce fears of death. Realizing one has lived a full life enables greater death acceptance. Participants stated that from a young age death has been an ever-present part of life. But because of the Holocaust, they have little fear of death. As Tomer from Tel Aviv stated, “I
have no fear of death because I’ve seen it up close and for so long. I got used to the fact that it would come.” Frieda from Be’er Sheva agreed: “Death doesn’t scare me; I’m waiting quietly for it will come.”

In this sample of Holocaust survivors, narratives of death preparation suggest that awareness of death has been central to participants’ lives from their earliest memories. Surviving the Holocaust, immigrating to Israel, raising families, and witnessing the continuation of their lineage through children and grandchildren have given survivors opportunities that those killed during the Holocaust did not have. Themes of resilience and generativity in the face of death and destruction are at the core of participant’s narratives (Kay, 1998). Consistent with the tripartite model of reminiscence functions, these narratives underscore a positive view of oneself and life as lived.

Self-Negative Functions

The three functions that comprise the self-negative construct include bitterness revival, boredom reduction, and intimacy maintenance.

Bitterness revival involves keeping memories of past pain fresh in one’s mind, rekindling bitter memories, and recalling times of being treated unfairly. Such remembering was integral to participants’ selves and significant in the narratives of past hurts and injustices prior to, during, and after the Holocaust. Memories were bitter and constant, were “hard to forget,” and were retrieved spontaneously throughout participants’ lives. As Sarah from Be’er Sheva stated:

I’m Jewish, almost 92 years old. I went through all the hell that there was in this world. I lost my dear family . . . I’m not a normal person anymore. At night I dream of my younger brothers and my old father, and it hurts me. Why did God abandon us? I can’t forget the bitter memories.

Examples of bitter memories entailed stories of loss and adversity experienced at a young age. One participant stated:

I had no youth because of the war . . . . They kicked us from our house, from school, from our friends. Then we were moved to a labor camp . . . . There are bitter memories, there were bombings in the city; I knitted socks for Nazi soldiers at 10 years of age. (Esther from Be’er Sheva)

Participants also reported bitter memories of being orphaned and alone during the Holocaust.

I remember in Auschwitz when we were separated from my sisters and mother. They opened the faucets to take a shower—the gas faucets, and then my sisters and mother were dead. Later, I moved with my father to a labor camp. These memories come back to me without wanting. I was 14 years old and had no family. (Shlomo from Lod)

Early life trauma continues to affect survivors decades later. Participants described their difficulty forgetting memories of being degraded, discriminated against, and humiliated. As stated by Mazal from Be’er Sheva, “You can’t forget the injustice . . . we were Jewish and that is why we suffered all that cruelty. There was no logical reason for what they did to us.”

Another participant spoke of his motivation to teach younger generations to be grateful for the freedoms they might otherwise take for granted:

Sure it was unjust . . . it’s important to remember now that we are here and free, I tell my grandchildren about what we had gone through. Now they need to be happy. Here in Israel we are free people. We got our independence, but it is important that they remember that once they wanted to kill us. (Nili from Tel Aviv)

Participants whose early life was defined by injustice and hardship readily recalled bitter memories. Zev from Givat Ayim stated, “I wrote about my memories in newspapers in Romanian and Hungarian. I suffered greatly and I think about it all the time.”

Boredom reduction is a second self-negative function that involves reminiscence to relieve boredom, for something to do, and to fill the void when time is heavy on one’s hands (e.g., for lack of other mental stimulation). Even though difficult, recalling bitter memories provides mental stimulation. As Avraham from Omer stated, “The memories keep me occupied and that helps me.” Another stated:

It’s true that when I have nothing to do, I sometimes remember family members who are gone. I light a memorial candle for my husband every year on June 29th. I remember how they took them to the trains . . . and I remember this sometimes, when I’m doing nothing. Even when the memories are difficult... I prefer to remember instead of just sitting at home and doing nothing. (Naomi from Meitar)

Memories that arise to relieve boredom are memories of personal importance. Participants described how, when they are alone or have extra time, they remember difficult times in their past. For instance, “If I’ve got nothing to do, the memories come back (Daniel from Jerusalem).” Memories recalled to fill a void were generally negative. This is consistent with the tripartite model of reminiscence functions in which boredom reduction is a self-negative function. As Havah from Kibbutz Magen reported:
reason. Their death was meaningless. Ones were often described as good people who died for no others, siblings, or spouses who had died. Deceased loved

ries that serve a frequent reminiscence function (i.e., they

of Holocaust survivors by asking them to describe memo-

We set out to give voice to traumatic early life memories of Holocaust survivors by asking them to describe memories that serve a frequent reminiscence function (i.e., they reminiscence often or very frequently to serve that function). For some, discussing their early life memories was difficult. As Zipporah from Kibbutz Ein-Zurim said, “I’d rather not elaborate more on subject, it’s hard for me.” For others, their lived experience enables them to teach others about the past to ensure that their experience remains in the collective consciousness of the next generation and the Jewish state.

In accord with the tripartite model of reminiscence functions (Cappeliez et al., 2005), survivors’ memories appear to cluster in self-positive, self-negative, and prosocial reminiscence functions. For instance, reminiscences that help prepare for death appear to foster calm and contentment (self-positive function) whereas memories that arise when bored tend to have a negative emotional tone (self-negative function). Also, memories they discuss with others demonstrate how shared experience allows them to bond with other survivors and to ensure that younger generations remember the Holocaust.

These shared memories were often bitter but enabled survivors to teach important life lessons (i.e., serve prosocial reminiscence functions). Consistent with Erikson (1998), those who have integrated their early life within a coherent life narrative appear to relay more positive memories. This observation underscores the resilience of survivors who have lived to late life (Barel, Van Ijzendoorn, Sagi-Schwartz, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2010; Shmotkin, Shrir, Goldberg, & Palgi, 2011).

We noted that participants would discuss their memories with grandchildren and great-grandchildren, but none mentioned their own children. This observation is consistent with other research suggesting that survivors often sought to spare their children knowledge of the horrors they faced (Braga, Mello, & Fiks, 2012). In the first decades after WWII, the Holocaust was not openly discussed. Today, survivors’ narratives are more salient as their numbers decline each year and to counter denial of history (Cohen-Almagor, 2013).

Consistent with existing research, identity is an especially important reminiscence function (Peleg, Lev-Wiesel, & Yaniv, 2014). Those who did and did not survive the Holocaust were targeted because they were Jews; just one Jewish grandparent was sufficient to be so identified (Noakes, 1989). The Shield (or star) of David on Israel’s flag was worn on survivors’ outer clothing as a mark of shame and to set them apart. Today survivors speak of the importance of freedom and the role for a Jewish state in safeguarding that freedom. As well expressed by Modi from Netanya, “The Nazis wiped half of us out but we overcame. And we will always have these memories . . . but now we are free, we have our independence, our flag and we are happy.”

Intimacy maintenance is a third self-negative function that involves remembering people who are gone and to keep their memory alive. It is Jewish tradition to light a yahrzeit or memorial candle for 24-hr on the anniversary of death. Participants described lighting candles for loved ones and others for whom no one is alive to remember.

We had a young friend from Yugoslavian who volunteered to fight in the IDF. He was killed in the [1948] War of Independence before he turned 18. He had no family, no one to remember him. . . . he was alone. I keep his memory on Memorial Day, I visit with a friend who is also dead when visiting a mass grave in Be’er Tuvia. This is a moral obligation. I light a candle every year in his memory. we went through the same hell together.

(Myer from Tel Aviv)

Most often, participants described memories of their parents, siblings, or spouses who had died. Deceased loved ones were often described as good people who died for no reason. Their death was meaningless.

I can’t forget my parents and siblings. I was left alone and I suffered a lot. Every time I think how good they were, and in the end, what kind of end they had. I was alone and that, I cannot forget. (Ariel from Haifa)

Participants also suggested that the loss of loved ones was especially difficult. Ephraim from Ramat Gan stated:

I often remember my parents because we had a very good relationship. My mother died at 70 and my father at 74. I think it was an impact of the war and because they worked so hard to make a living in Israel. The 4 years we were in the ghetto together, brought us closer. So when they died, their passing was very hard for me.

Opportunities to reminisce for intimacy maintenance are especially frequent for Holocaust survivors who lost friends, families, and entire communities. As with boredom reduction and bitterness revival, intimacy maintenance appears to serve a self-negative function. These memories commonly dealt with loss and remembrance, and how life and death can be brutal and arbitrary.

Discussion

We set out to give voice to traumatic early life memories of Holocaust survivors by asking them to describe memories that serve a frequent reminiscence function (i.e., they...
Summary and Implications

For this study, we recruited 269 Holocaust survivors from all regions of Israel though most lived in the south and central regions. This is not a representative sample. And though we obtained qualitative responses from a large number of survivors, the volume of data obtained from each was minimal. In other words, each of the 269 reported a single memory (i.e., transcribed paragraph from each). We did this to obtain multiple responses for each of the 28 RFS scale items from this population. Our results provide further support for our tripartite model of reminiscence functions, in this instance, with older adults who experienced early life trauma.

Our findings are in accord with Shmotkin’s (2003) resilience-vulnerability model and other research underscoring the hardness of survivors living to late life (Barel et al., 2010; de Vries, Suedfeld, Krell, Blando, & Southard, 2005; Suedfeld, Soriano, McMurtry, Paterson, Weiszbeck, & Krell, 2005). Yet despite the overall resilience of elderly survivors some require special consideration (Raposo, Mackenzie, Henriksen, & Affi, 2014). Shmotkin and Barilan (2002) suggest that elderly survivors either remain enmeshed in traumatic early life experience or learn to contain the effects of these memories. Consistent with Erikson (1998), survivors who remember drawing upon their inner strength and coping resources during the Holocaust appear to have a strong sense of meaning, coherence, and good mental health in late life (Zeidner & Aharoni-David, 2014).

However, factors such as dementia and other late life losses may reactivate memories of early life trauma (Giberovitch, 2014). For instance, elderly Holocaust survivors living in long-term care may become agitated by loud noises in the dark or when taken to the showers. Understanding the meaning and symbolism of survivors’ memories can enable care providers to make small changes in procedures to prevent reactivation of trauma (David & Pelly, 2003). Future research should examine the efficacy of life review and reminiscence interventions to help those survivors with dementia to cope with memories of early life trauma.

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References


