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Sense of Coherence During Female Holocaust Survivors' Formative Years

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Abstract

Four female Holocaust survivors were interviewed in order to investigate how they coped prior to the Holocaust, during the Holocaust years, following the end of World War II, and during integration within emerging Jewish society prior to the establishment of the State of Israel. Antonovsky's (1987) concept of sense of coherence (SOC) and thematic analysis were employed. The analysis suggests that their ability to navigate these life changing circumstances as young women was the result of the elasticity of the SOC components and the meanings ascribed to them, depending on the situations encountered.

Keywords: coping, Holocaust survivors, immigration, integration, sense of coherence

INTRODUCTION

There has been widespread research devoted to those who survived the Holocaust, examining every aspect of their lives. However, a shift can be noted in the literature investigating the reactions of Holocaust survivors, moving from the aim of identifying the negative long-term implications of facing the horrors of the Holocaust to ascertaining what enabled survivors to cope with the ordeals of the Holocaust and post-Holocaust periods, and to carry on with their lives (Zeidner & Aharoni-David, 2015). Some evidence suggests that survivors managed to live successful and fruitful lives (Cassel & Suedfeld, 2006), thus indicating that they succeeded in activating the resources needed to stay healthy (Antonovsky, 1979).

THE SALUTOGENIC MODEL

Antonovsky's (1979, 1987) salutogenic model suggests that individuals face personal, societal, cultural or geo-political processes as well as personal changes which threaten their well-being. At the core of the model lies the concept of sense of coherence (SOC). SOC is a global disposition that stipulates the reactions of each individual to the circumstances encountered and includes three firmly interconnected dimensions, all contributing to successful coping.

Comprehensibility represents the ability to perceive the world and life events as understandable, ordered and to some extent, predictable. *Manageability* signifies one's confidence that s/he has the necessary resources to deal with environmental demands successfully. *Meaningfulness* indicates the belief that life is worthwhile and that its challenges are worthy of the investment of effort and resources, echoing Frankl's (2006/1959) assertion that the **meaning of life** is found in every moment of living, even in times of difficulties and suffering.

Individuals exhibiting high levels of SOC are more inclined to be prepared to adjust to stressful events and are less likely to feel threatened by them (Eriksson, Lindström, & Lilja,

2007). High levels of SOC are likely to be the result of growing up in well to do (Geckova, Tavel, van-Dijk, Abel, & Reijneveld, 2010), caring and supportive families (García-Moya, Moreno, & Jiménez-Iglesias, 2013).

The SOC-immigration nexus has been studied in several immigrant communities. Elmeroth (2011) studied the narratives of Vietnamese women who had taken refuge in Sweden, and found that they mainly discussed the difficulties in making sense of their forced departure from their homeland and their integration in a new country whose culture and customs they were unfamiliar with. Borwick, Schweitzer, Brough, Vromans, and Shakespeare-Finch (2013) analyzed the narratives of refugees from Burma who settled in Australia, and identified several key themes. These included the importance of interpersonal relationships with family members and with the community at large, existential values (escape, survival and safety, independence, freedom, home, centrality of politics and culture in one's life), sense of future and agency, and spirituality.

Few studies have examined Holocaust survivors with regard to the concept of SOC, and none have investigated their integration in Jewish society in British Administrated Palestine (BAP), prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. This is the aim of the current report.

HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS AND SOC

A comparison by Cassel and Suedfeld (2006) of Jewish Holocaust survivors and Jews who had not experienced the Holocaust found that survivors ranked higher both socially and economically on the measure of SOC. Studies conducted amongst Holocaust survivors who were children or adolescents during World War 2 pointed to the following findings. Amongst

Holocaust child survivors, the connection between traumatic experiences of the Holocaust and post-traumatic stress was rendered more moderate by their SOC (Van der Hal-van Raalte, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2008). Furthermore, higher levels of SOC contributed significantly to the coping of child Holocaust survivors with traumatic experiences they faced when reaching old age (Fossion et al., 2014). Zeidner and Aharoni-David (2015) reported that SOC levels were higher among men Holocaust survivors than women survivors, and among those who had lost their parents and/or had been separated from them for most of the war. The researchers suggested that during the Holocaust, children and adolescents who lost or were separated from their parents were forced to employ their inner strengths which probably contributed to a stronger drive to stay alive.

Sagy and Antonovsky (1995) analyzed life stories of two women Holocaust survivors, who were 18 and 21 years of age during the Holocaust. Both had later immigrated to Israel and settled in the same kibbutz. One of them scored high on SOC and described a supportive and caring family atmosphere prior to the Holocaust, while the second, who scored low on the measure, provided a contrasting description of her family life.

HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS IN BAP

Cohen (2013) discussed the motives driving Holocaust survivors to make their way to BAP and the challenges encountered there. Some were approached by representatives of the Jewish Agency, the body responsible for assisting Jews immigrating to BAP, or by the Zionist movement, which encouraged survivors to make their way to BAP rather than to other destinations. Some survivors, usually members of the Zionist youth movement that operated in

Europe prior to and during the Holocaust, wished to take an active part in the Zionist project. Others aimed to reunite with family members.

Immigration and integration into the existing society in BAP was not easy for the newcomers, as the analysis of Holocaust survivors' testimonies by Gil (2013) suggests. Many of them reported that they felt discriminated against by members of the Jewish community of BAP. This was the case in the job market and was especially true for female survivors, who struggled to find employment. Furthermore, survivors found that members of the Jewish community were reluctant to provide any form of emotional support.

THE CURRENT RESEARCH

Coping literature offers several models to explain how individuals deal with life's challenges, such as the Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) model .PTG is defined as "positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances that represent significant challenges to the adaptive resources of the individual" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). Like other models, PTG pinpoint the contribution of various factors to coping, yet, it leave aside the possibility of changing patterns of use depending upon the varied situations encountered.

The Salutogenic model suggests that SOC develops through childhood, adolescence and early adulthood (Antonovsky & Sagy, 1986), and that cultural, social and historical settings have a considerable impact upon it (Antonovsky, 1987). Thus this analytical framework is employed within the current context which explores the ways young Jewish female Holocaust survivors managed to tackle multiple challenges in a short period of time within various socio-historical settings: their childhood years prior to World War II, their Holocaust experiences, the period

after liberation, and their immigration and integration within the Jewish community in BAP, prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. The aim is to discover if any connecting thread can be detected in terms of the development and contribution of SOC in coping with the multiple challenges these women faced as adolescents and young adults.

Holocaust survivors who made their way to the United States or Australia knew in advance that these countries had unique cultures to which they would have to adapt in order to rebuild their lives, and in which they would be members of a minority group. A different scenario awaited Holocaust survivors in BAP. It is likely that these survivors perceived themselves as part of a Jewish collective which was going through processes of self-edification and self-definition. In that respect, rebuilding one's life in BAP was not only a personal project but one strongly embedded in a collective effort. Therefore, immigration, which is known to be a major trauma that impairs the well-being of many immigrants (Berger & Weiss, 2003), could have been a factor in further hampering the psychological welfare of Holocaust survivors making their way to BAP. Conversely, partaking in larger societal processes could have served as a lever for personal adaptation and growth. In such instances, as proposed by Antonovsky (1987), the feeling of being part of and living within a certain context strongly contributes to one's feeling of meaningfulness and thereby contributes to his/her health.

METHODS

Participants and procedure

Participants were four female Holocaust survivors who, at the time of the research, were married, had grandchildren, and were pensioners. When they had arrived in BAP, they were 18 to 24 years old, and when interviewed, were 75 to 85. As a result of World War II, none had

managed to gain a full high school diploma and after arriving in BAP, the courses of their lives had denied them access to higher education. The interviews discussed here are part of a larger research project aiming to explore the effects of the Holocaust on Jewish-Israeli Holocaust survivors and their descendents. Participants were recruited through a convenience sample. After securing ethical approval from the researcher's IRB institution, the participants were approached by the first author and her graduate students who conducted the interviews. The current report focuses on four interviewees who, although their Holocaust experiences had differed, were similar in their affluent and nurturing family backgrounds on the one hand, and their post-Holocaust experiences in the Jewish community in BAP on the other. This raises the question of whether any connecting thread can be discerned in their life stories regarding their coping in multiple socio-historical settings.

Survivors volunteered to participate in the study, signed informed consents, agreeing that their interviews would serve academic purposes. The interviews lasted up to 2 hours, were conducted in Hebrew, taped and transcribed verbatim. Interviewees were first asked to freely tell their life stories, and described their experiences before, during and after World War II in detail. In the event that the interviewee had not addressed her experiences in BAP or had only briefly discussed them, the following clarifying questions were presented by the interviewer: "Could you please tell me about your experiences on arrival in BAP?" and "How would you describe your integration within the Jewish community in BAP?"

Analysis

The thematic approach (Lieblich, Tuval-Masciach, & Zilber, 1998) was employed to analyze the interviews, leading to the detection of themes discussed by the interviewees and the

effects of SOC in each life stage. The authors read the transcripts and evidence of the three components of SOC and their contribution to coping were identified in each period analyzed (childhood, Holocaust experiences, pre-immigration, and integration in BAP Jewish society). Analysis proceeded as follows: First, each author read the interviews as a whole and made general notes regarding the four life stages discussed. Second, each author pinpointed the manifestation of SOC and its contribution to coping during each of these stages. In order to validate interpretations of the transcripts, each author maintained an audit trail (Carlson, 2010) of his/her analysis and shared it with a third reader. Finally, the researchers met to discuss the separate analyses and disagreements were resolved through discussion.

RESULTS

The Interviewees' Pre-, During and Post-Holocaust Backgrounds and Experiences

With the exception of Hava, daughter of a Christian father and a Jewish mother, the interviewees were raised by Jewish parents. Hava was born in 1925 in Poland, the older of two daughters, and attended a Jewish school. She was smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto, and spent the war years in hiding, disguised as a Christian Pole.

Riva was born in 1926 in Czechoslovakia, the youngest of five children, and attended a Jewish school prior to the Holocaust. Riva, her two younger brothers and parents were deported to Auschwitz, with Riva being the only member of her family to survive the camp. Her two older brothers managed to escape the family's deportation, and made their way to BAP following the end of World War II. Hadara, the older of two daughters, was born in 1925 in Poland, and attended a Jewish school prior to the Holocaust. Her parents smuggled their daughters out of the

Warsaw ghetto, and the sisters, posing as Christian Poles, worked as manual laborers on several farms until the end of the war. Kora, born in Holland in 1923, the older of two sisters, was a member of a Zionist youth movement prior to the Holocaust. She escaped her family's deportation to Auschwitz, where they were killed. She posed as a Dutch Christian, working during the war years as a housemaid in the home of a Christian family. At the war's end she worked as a nurse's aide in a Jewish hospital in Amsterdam. Riva and Kora were granted visas to BAP, and following their arrival became certified nurses. Hava and Hadara, as members of the Zionist movement and with the aim of becoming kibbutz members, trained in Europe as agricultural laborers. They were not granted visas, and attempted to reach BAP illegally. Their ships were intercepted by British naval forces and they spent several months in detainee camps in Cyprus until their certifications were approved, and they then made their way to BAP.

SOC Prior to WW II

The interviewees noted that their families were financially stable, that relationships between parents and children were good and that the families were part of the Jewish community. Hava stated: "I had a wonderful childhood, economically we were well-established. We would spend the summer in a beautiful house and it was fun; lots of happiness and laughter at home". Riva noted: "We were five children, four brothers and me. Our home was full of family members and friends, good food and joy".

Riva's words exemplify comprehensibility: "My parents set rules to follow for us kids, like any other Jewish family of the time. Everyone in the family knew his/her place and duties in the family". The enhanced sense of meaningfulness was expressed in several ways. The importance of being part of a Jewish community and taking part in Jewish celebrations was

noted by Riva: "My family was a member of a cohesive and supportive Jewish community; as children we were proud of our Jewish heritage which played an important part in our lives". Meaningfulness was noted also when education, whether in Jewish or public schools, was discussed. Hadara said: "For my parents, education was a really important. I was a good student and already thinking about going to university". Coping successfully in the educational system was a motivating influence. It also meant that as children, the interviewees had a strong sense of manageability, as they perceived themselves as having the necessary resources to cope successfully with environmental demands such as school assignments and life's challenges.

SOC During the Holocaust Period

The interviewees' SOC in general and its comprehensibility component in particular, was shaken to the core during the World War II years. Kora recalled: "Suddenly the nightmare began; we did not fully grasp what was going on and pondered time and again - should we leave everything behind and flee? ... It was a feeling of total chaos". Hava, whose Christian Polish father had left her mother and sister to marry a Christian Polish woman, added: "And then came the war and from being a happy child who had everything, I felt I was thrown into an abyss, hardly managing to figure out what was going on around me". These statements echo the weakening of the SOC components of comprehension and manageability, as the narrators experienced being wrenched from a stable and joyful childhood and thrown into an unknown, unpredictable and incomprehensible reality.

Furthermore, as the noun 'we' suggests, the sense of losing their grip on life was shared by children and parents alike. That prompted the children to realize that their parents were no longer a source of dependability. This state of affairs was further exacerbated when the

interviewees found themselves on their own, either after witnessing the death of their family members or by being separated from them. Yet these adolescents were able to cope as a result of several factors, all of which are related to SOC, particularly the ability to find some sort of meaning in their lives. Hava stated: "The situation in the ghetto became worse with each passing day. 1 day my mother approached me and asked: Do you want to stay alive? I said yes. I was young and wanted to live life to its fullest. My mother replied: There is no chance for you here with me and with your sister ... She paid someone to smuggle me out of the ghetto". When discussing her arrival at Auschwitz, Riva noted: "My parents and two of my brothers were dead. What kept me going during the years of the war was the need to know what had happened to my older brothers. I was hoping to find them". Manageability is noted in Hadara's statement: "I promised my father to take care of my younger sister no matter what. I was the older one and in charge of her. I grew up at once...to find work, look for food, and lie to others, if necessary. I did all that was needed to keep her and myself alive".

SOC Prior to Immigration to BAP

At the end of World War II, the interviewees returned to their countries of origin, where they encountered an inhospitable atmosphere. The decision to leave for BAP was influenced by several factors. The first was comprehensibility, as reflected in Kora's statement, demonstrating the need for stability and a new order in life: "I wanted a fresh start away from the horrors I had witnessed. I wanted to build a new future for myself".

Manageability is represented in Hava's account: "Prior to the war, we were city dwellers, not accustomed to hard labor. We all knew that in order to create a future for ourselves as kibbutz members we had to learn new skills. We believed we could and we did". Meaningfulness

is noted in Riva's description. "I reached the Jewish Agency and they notified me that my brothers were already in BAP. Life again had meaning, and all I wanted to do was to rejoin them". Another expression of meaningfulness, a more collective one, was the wish to participate in the collective effort of building a new Jewish society in BAP. Hadara explained: "My family had a strong Zionist inclination, and for me BAP was the place to find myself, not in the United States. I wanted to take part in something bigger than myself, to build our society and rebuild myself within it".

SOC During Integration Into the Jewish Community in BAP

SOC also impacted on the integration of the interviewees within emerging Jewish society in BAP. Meaningfulness was expressed by the recurring assertion that they were "coming home at last". Kora said: "We arrived in Tel Aviv in December, 1946. You can hardly imagine how emotional I was. I finally felt I was home". Another aspect of meaningfulness was expressed by Riva, who awaited her reunion with her brothers: "I could not believe that after so long we were all together. It gave me such a good feeling and hope for the future".

The interviewees also struggled to find common ground with long time members of the Jewish society in BAP. Riva recalled: "They could not understand why we had not fought back against the Nazis." Survivors found it hard to cope with this misunderstanding, yet they tried to understand its sources and that made it easier to cope with the rejection. Hava explained: "For them we were a living reminder of the horrors of the Holocaust, of life in the Diaspora. They wanted to build a new strong society, one which was free of the haunting past."

Manageability and meaningfulness also enabled the survivors to integrate into Jewish society. Hava, who joined a kibbutz as an agriculture worker, recalled: "I wanted to be accepted

by the long time members of the Jewish society and be similar to them. I worked as hard as they did, proving to them that I was investing all of my strength ... And they finally realized that I was like them." Kora, who was trained as a nurse, recalled: "I began my schooling as a nurse with several other survivors. We had no prior knowledge of Hebrew and quite a while had gone by since we were at school. At the beginning the experience was not easy. But I wanted to become a nurse. Our society needed nurses. So I did my best to become one. They recognized my contribution and accepted me".

DISCUSSION

Researchers have long been engaged in investigating how Holocaust survivors managed to carry on with their lives despite their horrendous past (Cassel & Suedfeld, 2006; Zeidner & Aharoni-David, 2015). The current study contributes to this ongoing effort by inspecting the dynamic nature of SOC as a promoter of coping skills and mental health as exemplified in the life stories of four female Holocaust survivors. These interviewees discussed their experiences prior to, during and shortly after the end of World War II, during immigration and integration into Jewish society in BAP.

Before discussing the findings, several study limitations should be noted. First, as the interviews were conducted more than six decades after the events in question, the possibility of limited and/or selective recall should be kept in mind. Second, the small number of interviewees, recruited through a convenience sample, all women who, according to their testimonies, grew up in nurturing and well-to do families, and had managed to acquire skills considered of high value in their receiving society, limits the generalizability of the results. Thus, inquiry into the workings of SOC among Holocaust survivors with less supportive backgrounds, men survivors,

those who found themselves in less positive positions in the labor market in BAP, is needed to further expand the current findings. Third, this study, similar to the one by Zeidner and Aharoni-David (2015), suggests that counter to intuitive thinking, being on their own during the Holocaust period led at least some survivors, to become self-dependent and to find the ways to cope successfully with the hardships encountered during this period and during immigration and integration within a new society.

This effect was noted by Zeidner and Aharoni-David (2015) to contribute to the coping of Holocaust survivors as they reached old age, following a comparison between survivors who were on their own during the Holocaust and those who were not. This contribution was noted during the war period and shortly after liberation. However, as the current study did not include a comparison to Holocaust survivors who went through the war and the periods following with a family member, caution is needed when discussing the potential effects on Holocaust survivors being on their own, until further evidence is gathered, looking into how this affected their coping as young adults and/or ageing adults.

Despite the limited scope of the study, it provides an in-depth look at the ways young female Holocaust survivors put their inner strengths to the test. The interviewees' ability to endure these life changing circumstances was first and foremost the result of the elasticity of SOC components, their ability to activate these components and the meanings they ascribed to them, depending on the situation encountered.

The study suggests that the interviewees developed a strong SOC in their earlier childhood, which contributed to their abilities to cope with the various challenges that they faced during their later formative years. This strong SOC is attributed to a nurturing, supportive and well to do family environment, a precondition for the development of SOC both among non-

Holocaust populations (García-Moya et al., 2013; Geckova et al., 2010), and Holocaust survivors (Sagy & Antonovsky, 1995).

The components of SOC were tracked at the different stages of the stories, but at each stage, some components were more dominant than others. Antonovsky (1987) suggested that a strong SOC is noted for its flexible nature, allowing individuals to choose what they considered the appropriate coping mechanism required to confront any given situation. When the survivors referred to the period preceding the war, they emphasized comprehensibility and manageability, while meaningfulness and manageability were stressed when describing the Holocaust period. Prior to the war, as children and young adolescents, they were members of families that took care of their needs. The challenges set by family members and teachers were few and in keeping with their chronological ages, and in cases of need, they had adults with whom to consult. The situations faced during the Holocaust forced them to mature immediately and to assign meaning to the physical and psychological suffering, thus leading them to develop and/or activate skills as coping mechanisms (Shantall, 1999). Secondly, being on one's own as a teenager, and especially being the victim of persecution, is highly stressful, and thus SOC is likely to weaken. Zeidner and Aharoni-David (2015) have suggested that the fact that many children and young adolescents were on their own during the Holocaust, augmented their SOC, as they had to rely upon their own strengths. Finally and alternatively, the lack of predictability is not necessarily an unpleasant or unhealthy experience. One can still consider one's existence to be meaningful and act energetically and positively in order to overcome various obstacles (Flensburg-Madsen, Ventegodt, & Merrick, 2005). Therefore, it is possible that as teenagers these survivors perceived the situations that they experienced during the Holocaust as trials or challenges to be

surmounted, which they did by applying new meanings to events. This, in turn, supported their ongoing attempts to live through the horrors.

After liberation, the survivors prepared to rebuild their lives on another continent and in a new society. Despite this self-preparation, certain challenges presented themselves, similar to challenges faced by other populations of traumatized immigrants (Borwick et al., 2001; Elmeroth, 2011) during the phases of immigration and integration. One was the need to acquire and adapt to a new language; another was to retain Zionist ideology, which strengthened the sense of meaningfulness and promoted their integration. In that respect, joining the collective effort in BAP had special meaning for them, as they had already perceived themselves as part of a group that embraced a unique collective identity. This was a factor of special importance during processes of integrating (Vertovec, 1997) into the new society.

During the integration phase, the lack of understanding and empathy by long time members of the Jewish community in BAP proved to be an obstacle. However, by employing the components of manageability and meaningfulness and advancing themselves to positions considered of high value within that collective, the interviewees managed to overcome potential threats that immigration carries for many immigrants (Berger & Weiss, 2003).

On the whole, the current report highlights the applicability of Antonovsky's (1979, 1987) salutogenic model to the study of Holocaust survivors, and calls for further implementation in other groups of traumatized immigrants.

Author Notes

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