The politics of memory: The role of the children of Holocaust survivors

Liane Lurie
Department of Psychology
University of South Africa
liane_za@hotmail.com

Ricky Snyders
Department of Psychology
University of South Africa

ABSTRACT

In this study, the first author investigated the impact, experience and perceptions of the children of Holocaust survivors. The study attempted to ground itself in a postmodern and social constructionist paradigm so as to contextualise the unique experience of the research participant. The single participant in the study identified herself as part of the ‘second generation’, that is, the children of Holocaust survivors. She was questioned by way of an open-ended interview schedule. She reported that the experience of being raised by parents who had survived the Holocaust had a profound impact on her both personally and later in her choice of profession. This aspect of her collective history has led to a constant search for knowledge and answers. Themes relating to all aspects of the experience were delineated by means of content analysis.

Keywords: Holocaust survivors; memory; multi-generational transmission; politics; second generation

More than half a century ago, six million Jews were murdered in an unparalleled genocide (Benz in van Ijzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Sagi-Schwartz, 2003). Approximately one and a half million children under the age of 15 were killed. Although Hitler and his Nazi army almost reached what was termed the ‘Final Solution’, many Jewish children and adults managed to survive World War II (WW II) either by hiding, or by constantly escaping with no shelter, or having experienced the horrors of the ghettos, concentration camps, and death camps (van Ijzendoorn et al., 2003).

Many have wondered and written about how survivors adapted to post-war life and how they dealt with the traumas experienced during WW II (van Ijzendoorn et al., 2003). Perhaps these questions will remain unanswered, for the experiences and coping capacities of each survivor were and are unique. These, however, remain
questions which the children of Holocaust survivors, termed the ‘second generation’, appear to have wrestled with their entire lives.

Hoffman (2005) appropriately captured the dilemma of the children of Holocaust survivors as follows: ‘We who came after do not have memories of the Holocaust. Even from my most intimate proximity I could not form memories of the Shoah (Holocaust) or take my parents’ memories as my own’ (p. 7). Instead, such children were destined to be raised in a household where the horror that had been experienced, was either spoken about in silent and tortured whispers, or not at all. It seems as if it was among such a mix of narratives that this second generation had to negotiate their place, their role. For they in essence were post-war children (Hoffman, 2005). Whereas their parents themselves had lived through the horror, the violence, and atrocity, and could somehow understand what happened to them as actuality, the second generation, that is, their children, would receive their first knowledge of such inhumane events with only childish instruments of perception, and as a kind of fable (Hoffman, 2005). Nevertheless, many Holocaust survivors managed to build up new lives and new families (van Ijzendoorn et al., 2003), having lost the majority of their nuclear relatives in the war. The central question remains whether they were able to raise their children without transmitting the traumas of their past, providing the second generation with new chances to develop in a balanced way (Bar-On in van Ijzendoorn et al., 2003). It was often the case that such children would struggle to come to terms with their parents’ difficult past (Slier, 2005), or with a family history dealing with events almost beyond belief (Goffman, 2003). In an interview with journalist Paula Slier, one second-generation daughter, Tali Nates said: ‘As a child, I’d often wake up during the night to my father’s screams; and it’s only in the last ten years that my uncle has been able to talk about those times – the smell, the nausea, the feelings of horror’ (Slier, 2005, p. 108). Therefore, while in the raising of any child a parent will try to pass on moral values of right and wrong directly, the second generation were given an additional moral conscience – that of remembering, of never forgetting, of perpetuating the memory of those who did not survive – and in some way giving voice to that which was and still is often too painful for their parents to vocalise.

There is an inherent distinction between a survivor and a survivor’s child. For whilst the adult survivor will first ask, ‘What happened?’ and from there follow a route towards the inward meaning of the facts, those who are born after such a tragedy sense its most inward meanings first and have to work their way outwards towards the facts (Hoffman, 2005).

As this second generation reach later middle-age, they struggle to grasp something about their twentieth century legacy (Hoffman, 2005) and they find that their personal identity is often overshadowed by their tragic history (Goffman, 2003).
following questions seem to be ever present: ‘How should we think about the Shoah (Holocaust) from our lengthening distance?’; ‘What meanings does it continue to hold for us, what kinds of understanding can we bring to it or garner from it as it recedes from looming view and actual memory into the more remote realm of the past and history?’ (Hoffman, 2005, p. 155).

It appears that one issue faced by the second generation is the inherent need to reconstitute a vanished, often repressed, past (Goffman, 2003). Therefore, many have engaged in a journey of both historical and personal reconstruction (Goffman, 2003). This journey, however, is highly dependent on that which their parents, the actual survivors, were willing to share. Rosenheck and Nathan (1985) hypothesised that secondary traumatisation was caused by the disturbances of the survivors who as parents would be unable to protect their children from the aftermath of the Holocaust; where secondary traumatisation refers to traumatic effects of events that did not take place in the lives of the second generation themselves, but in those of parents who may or may not have communicated their experiences in a verbal or non-verbal way (van Ijzendoorn et al., 2003). In their endeavours to separate their past from their present and newly founded family life, the survivors would help to create a ‘conspiracy of silence’ that indirectly traumatised their offspring (Danieli in van Ijzendoorn et al., 2003).

The children of Holocaust survivors have perhaps become part of an ongoing process whereby their own experiences and character, as well as that which they intuit was the experience of their parents, has done much to shape their fates (Jacobson, 1994). It seems that, in some inexplicable way, trauma, loss, hurt, and even survival can show up in one generation to the next; things that seem rooted in something are passed on, and those things, according to Jacobson (1994), may in fact be indelible. There is much to be learnt from the Holocaust survivors and their children about the long-term and intergenerational effects of traumatic experiences (Van Ijzendoorn et al., 2003). As Goffman (2003) so aptly stated, it is history which imposes its burdens on the present; however, for some, the remembrance of a vile past is done for the sake of a better future.

Without imposing a value judgement, the first author acknowledged that the experience of growing up with a parent who had survived the horrors of the Holocaust must have been both complex and somewhat trying to negotiate. In some way the first author hoped that the interview with the ‘child’ of a Holocaust survivor would shed some light on the perceptions of how the second generation have handled and experienced their home circumstances, and what impact the knowledge that their parents had undergone such trauma had had upon them. Thus, the first author wished to explore further the possibility that the trauma experienced by Holocaust survivors might have been transferred across the generations to their offspring. The
study, therefore, aimed to communicate a depth of understanding to those who are interested in the interface between a Holocaust survivor and his or her child/ren; bearing in mind that those findings cannot be generalised across the entire second-generation population.

METHOD

Social constructionism

Social constructionists believe that psychological knowledge is historically and culturally specific. Researchers are, therefore, urged to extend their enquiries beyond the individual into social, political, and economic realms in order to gain an adequate understanding of the evolution of an individual’s psychological and social life (Burr, 1995). Researchers are further cautioned against looking at ‘once-and-for-all’ definitions and descriptions of people or society, since change appears to be the only constant (Burr, 1995). Social constructionism, according to Burr (1995), is characterised by certain assumptions which involve adopting a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge, namely: that individuals understand the world based on their cultural and historical contexts and environments; that knowledge is sustained by social processes; and that knowledge and social action go together.

While human beings are born with the freedom to choose their attitude in a given set of circumstances, such a belief might be perceived as somewhat superficial, if not naïve, when presented to individuals who have lost their homes, livelihood and, more critically, their families in a human-made disaster such as the Holocaust. It is only with hindsight and deep reflection that such a victim might be able to reconstruct a semblance of meaning. Social constructionism thus provides individuals with an adequate basis to investigate this reconstruction.

Constructionist thought places a strong emphasis on the freedom of human beings, on each individual’s ability to language his or her attitudes, purposes, values, and actions (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998). Perhaps it is here that the second generation might be located. For in not having directly experienced the atrocities of the Holocaust, they have more freedom per se to choose what to do with this traumatic past; to find out from the victims what effect it had on them; to perpetuate the memories of those who perished – to remember them or just as easily to forget them. They also experienced the privilege and combined pain of listening to the stories of the Holocaust survivors, their own parents, and of creating a language by means of which they were able to make sense of events. Constructionism holds that the human life-world is fundamentally constituted in language and that language itself should, therefore, be the object of study (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). The language in which survivors chose to retell their stories and, consequently,
the various ways in which the children of such survivors have made sense of such language, formed an integral part of this study. According to constructionist ideals, it is human beings who live in a world of conversational narrative, within which they will understand themselves and each other through changing narratives and self descriptions (Anderson & Goolishian in Rapmund, 2005). It makes sense then, in view of this study, that constructionism does not treat language as if it were neutral and transparent, but rather as a tool that aids in constructing reality (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). After the atrocities of WW II, the European Jewish community had in some way to decode and reconstruct (Hoffman, 2005) what had happened in order to create a present and a future. It is here that a further fit with constructionism is found in terms of its concern with the broader patterns of social meaning encoded in such language (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Whatever importance Holocaust survivors and their children attached to the language of being Jewish, their Jewishness came to serve two functions, namely, the way others perceived them and the way they experienced themselves (Jacobson, 1994). They were forced to language their plight and ask: ‘Who am I and how important is being a Jew to who I am?’ (Jacobson, 1994, p. 9).

Social constructionism is also concerned with knowledge as power, believing that ‘cultural specifications’ wield a real impact on people’s lives (Dickerson & Zimmerman in Rapmund, 2005) and it takes a stand on the overpowering effect of discourses (Rapmund, 2005). The ideologies of Hitler, his Nazi party, the Third Reich, and present day crusades of Holocaust denial are representative of such discourses. It is from this basis that Holocaust survivors and succeeding generations have had to reconstruct a semblance of meaning to challenge those dialogues that serve to oppress and show disrespect for the experience of others.

The stories of Holocaust survivors and their children do not stand in isolation but rather represent a collective history. This falls in line with constructionist tenets that ideas, words, and signs have meaning by virtue of standing in relationship to other signs (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). The social world is further interpreted as a kind of language, as a system of meanings and practices that construct reality. The Jewish ceremony of Holocaust remembrance, Yom Hashoah (Day of the Holocaust), forms part of such a reality. It appears then that the everyday talk of Holocaust survivors and succeeding generations will help to create and maintain the world in which they live (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Thus, a social constructionist perspective will locate meaning within an understanding of how ideas and attitudes are acquired and developed over time within a social, community context (Dickerson & Zimerman in Rapmund, 2005). It additionally makes sense within the world of social constructionism that representations of reality, practices, and physical arrangements are structured like a language, a system of signs (Terre
Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). As such, they construct particular versions of the world by providing a framework or system through which people can understand the world, its objects and practices, as well as who they are and what they should do in relation to those systems (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Holocaust museums, such as Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, which commemorate the lives of those lost as well as those who risked their lives to save others, and foundations that teach tolerance education, such as the Vulindlela Network in South Africa, serve as lenses through which people may perceive themselves, their world, and their position in that world. People can, therefore, accept the social constructionist viewpoint that the content of their consciousness and the manner of relating that they construe with others, is taught by their culture and society (Owen in Rapmund, 2005).

It is the first author’s hope that the paradigm chosen has done justice to the experiences under investigation, for it is social constructionism which prefers stories based on a person’s lived experience rather than on expert knowledge (Doan in Rapmund, 2005).

**Qualitative research**

Qualitative research focuses on the meanings of lived experiences and to this extent involves observation and data collection in natural settings as opposed to contrived ones, where the incorporation of context, complexity, and diversity are essential (Breakwell, Hammond, & Fife-Shaw, 1997). Therefore, qualitative research was appropriate for the purposes of this project in that it would be insufficient to attempt to quantify the rich and complex experiences being explored. Furthermore, since the first author had a personal interest in the topic under investigation, qualitative research additionally facilitated an element of interactivity between the participant and the first author. Qualitative research enabled the first author to gain insight into how people perceive, understand, and explain the world in which they live and whether such perceptions and beliefs are subject to change (Breakwell et al., 1997). It is conceivable, in line with this study, that the cognitive schemata through which the participant views her own life world would be subject to review as she gains more knowledge of her family’s experiences throughout her lifespan.

**Design**

The study took a non-experimental, qualitative, individual interview based form. The first author had a particular interest in the experience of having grown up with a parent or parents who had survived the Holocaust and factors associated with that ordeal. As a result of this study being non-experimental, it might also be deemed to have been somewhat correlational (McBurney, 2001) in that it aimed to examine the relationship between being the child of a survivor and the associated feelings.
that were experienced. It must be noted that this approach was appropriate in that the first author was not looking to establish causation. It was important that the text generated via the one-on-one interview spoke for itself, without imposing expectations of what themes would arise.

Data analysis

The data gathered was analysed by way of thematic content analysis. Krippendorf (1980) argued that ‘[p]otentially content analysis is one of the most important research techniques in the social sciences, it seeks to understand data not as a collection of physical events but rather as symbolic phenomena and to approach their analysis unobtrusively’ (p. 7). This is in line with both the tenets of postmodernism and social constructionism in that it aims to be sensitive to the systems of knowledge and meaning to which it gains access. The study focused on an experiential aspect of human functioning, in terms of having the identity per se of being the child of a Holocaust survivor. This would justify the use of thematic content analysis, which by its very nature is exploratory (Krippendorf, 1980). The common focus within such applications of qualitative methodology is, therefore, the interest in human subjectivity (Eagle, 1998), bearing in mind that the chosen methodology still requires an open-minded (Krippendorf, 1980) orientation, especially since the first author was personally involved in the research process from start to finish. In this vein, thematic content analysis was even more appropriate in that it allowed greater ‘independence’ in exploring the impact that the story of the Holocaust has had upon the participant.

In view of this study, aspects of human subjectivity might pertain to an element of self-consciousness (Eagle, 1998) in terms of how the second generation as a community of individuals has made sense of their experiences. However, as the first author was personally involved in the analysis of the interview transcript, she brought her own ideas, emotions, and understandings to the themes that were identified and discussed. Certain themes, such as feeling responsible for their parents’ well-being and happiness, and anger at people for inflicting such pain, devastation, and confusion, can be revealed per se by way of the chosen methodology. It was the content of the interview as well as the first author’s personal inferences which allowed such themes to emerge. Thematic content analysis, therefore, served as an illuminative representation of the meaning of the issue (Eagle, 1998), and afforded the first author the freedom to deal adequately with a large body of interview material (McBurney, 2001). The first author endeavoured to work in collaboration with the text, so as not to adopt the stance of an expert. It should be noted in this vein that content analysis ‘transcends conventional notions of content as an object of concern and is intricately linked to more recent conceptions of symbolic phenomena’ (Krippendorf, 1980, p. 10).
Hence, while the first author may not have had direct access to the phenomena of interest, that is, not having directly experienced the Holocaust herself, as a researcher she was able to make inferences about the described experiences (Eagle, 1998), whilst looking at the latent content so as to make inferences about the existence of a particular theme (McBurney, 2001). Therefore, this move towards an analysis requiring more inferential skills overall reflects a trend toward what could further be construed as ‘interpretative content analysis’ (Guba & Lincoln in Eagle, 1998). Furthermore, Krippendorf (1980) has shown that the application of this method led to an escalating positive reception and constructionist acknowledgment of the context within which communication took place; in this instance the encounter between parent as survivor and child as part of the second generation.

In view of this methodology, it was important to examine both manifest and latent content. The former took place according to specified guiding principles (Eagle, 1998), while the latter was guided by the first author’s insight, intuition, and imagining as a generally accepted process to draw inferences about covert content (Eagle, 1998).

Procedure

By virtue of the fact that the experiences under investigation were of a highly personal nature and the impact thereof could not be gauged by way of simple yes or no responses, an open-ended interview schedule was used. This linked well with the use of thematic content analysis and social constructionism since it would not do a text, or for that matter, an experience, justice to study messages in isolation (Krippendorf, 1980). In this regard, the interview process as well as the data had to be approached as entities that were representative of the experience of a second-generation child on the one hand, and that which would yield new insight on the other. Accordingly, the procedures used were aligned with the guiding principles of thematic content analysis, which were employed so as to reduce and categorise (Eagle, 1998) the interview material into more meaningful thematic units (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000). Interpretations and subsequent commentaries were made from these units.

It was of course of critical importance to bear in mind, as Weber (1985) has stated, that the inferences drawn from the data analysis could concern different subjects: the dispatcher of the communication, the message itself, and the receiver or the audience of the message. People take into account who says what, in which channel, to whom and with what effect (Laswell, in Titscher et al., 2000). The audience in this case was the first author whose inferential role was important with regard to an awareness of her own conceptualisation of the Holocaust and all that it entailed (Breakwell et al., 1997). Above all, it was both the content of the message itself and
the inferences this led to about the sender of the message (Eagle, 1998), in this case the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, that were of significance to the study.

**Principles guiding the categorisation of data**

In order for the first author to grasp fully the complexity of the experience under investigation she needed to ‘unitize’ (Krippendorf, 1980) the data, that is, to break it down into sampling, recording, and context units (Krippendorf, 1980). The sampling units were the interview transcript obtained from the interaction between the first author and second-generation ‘child’. It must also be noted that the sampling units were not independent as far as the phenomenon of interest was concerned (Krippendorf, 1980). Consideration needed to be given to the context in which the interviewee had lived; and the experience of growing up with and being raised by a parent or parents, who had endured such an experience. The recording units, on the other hand, were regarded by Holsti (1969) as ‘the specific segment of content that is categorised by placing it in a given category’ (in Krippendorf, 1980, p. 58). Thus, the specific emotive expressions (Eagle, 1998) of the participant as well as the thematic units comprising a sentence, a statement, or a group of statements about a particular topic or issue raised by the questions posed comprised the recording units, and subsequent themes (Eagle, 1998). Of final concern with regard to ‘unitizing’ (Krippendorf, 1980) was the definition of the context units. In relation to this study these were delineated on the basis of whether, in terms of location, a response was obtained in reply to a leading question (Eagle, 1998), or the use of a probe was deemed necessary by the first author.

In view of the domain of interest being experiential, the nature of this analysis was ‘thematic’ (Krippendorf, 1980, p. 62). The process, however, remained dynamic and the themes derived were also based on the ideas, expressions, and material that ‘spoke’ to the first author in light of what she also brought to the process. Commonly reported arguments and ideas presented in the surveyed literature pertaining to the Holocaust itself, both survivors’ and children’s reactions to it, in conjunction with its handling and the impact of such an experience upon the child, could now be complemented by a text that was able to speak for itself. It was thus hoped that such a thematic analysis would do justice both to aspects of the research questions and to concerns of the interviewee, with the process and subsequent categorisation of data intuitively having been guided by the initial research interest (Eagle, 1998), which aimed to explore the place of the second generation, in terms of remembering such a traumatic past.

**Sampling**

The researcher was primarily concerned with the experience of being the child of a Holocaust survivor and the factors associated with that event and its impact. In
this vein, purposive sampling provided the most appropriate sampling method. The researcher also had to employ snowball techniques since she had found that the sample of interest was a difficult-to-get-to population (Breakwell et al., 1997). One member of the target population, who had already been selected for participation in the study, was asked to introduce the first author to other potential members. However, in this article the experiences of one participant were analysed in a case study format, after data collection by means of a one-on-one interview with the participant. The participant is a 42-year-old female, the daughter of Holocaust survivors. Like her parents, who left Europe and settled in Israel, she is an immigrant, now living in South Africa. She is married with two young children. She is a teacher by profession and is currently involved in projects promoting ‘Tolerance Education’. The interview took place in the privacy of her office.

**Unstructured interview**

The justification for using an unstructured interview was that, for the most part, the research conducted focused on the experiential aspects of being a second-generation ‘child’. The interview was unstructured with a series of open-ended questions and prompts where appropriate, to assess perceptions, feelings and opinions of the experience in question. This hopefully maximised the chances (Breakwell et al., 1997) of collecting adequate, satisfactory, and novel data, from a text which had to be allowed to yield its own insights. The respondent was able to expand on given answers quite spontaneously (Campbell, 1950 in Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). The participant’s responses were tape-recorded and transcribed. This allowed for a more efficient and clear thematic content analysis.

Consideration was also given to the fact that responses within the context of a face-to-face individual interview are both verbal and non-verbal in terms of body language and eye contact. Therefore, even though a structured interview by contrast would have provided more comparable responses, the researcher hoped that this method would yield fuller and deeper replies (Bradburn in Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991) as opposed to those of a forced-choice interview schedule.

The research questions were formulated according to the surveyed literature (Breakwell et al., 1997) as well as the researcher’s curiosity. However, utmost care was taken to ensure that the issues dealt with were sensibly related (Breakwell et al., 1997).

Whilst it is true that the interview was highly dependent on the child of a Holocaust survivor being willing and able to give complete answers to questions posed on her childhood (growing up) and current experiences (Breakwell et al., 1997), the interviewer did not experience any difficulties in this regard and did not feel that this impacted in any way on the richness of data collected.
Ethical considerations
Owing to the sensitive nature of the issues that were under investigation, the participant’s welfare was of utmost importance. Therefore, the participant was thoroughly informed of the purpose of the study by way of written and verbal correspondence before the commencement of the actual interview and via the provision of a letter of information. The first author also obtained the participant’s written consent to take part and to be audio taped.

The first author took further care to ensure that the participant was not compelled to respond to questions that touched on anxieties or emotions not otherwise adequately reflected upon, and pertaining to her experience as the child of a Holocaust survivor. From the outset of the study, the interviewee had the option to withdraw from the research at any time (Breakwell et al., 1997) regardless of whether prior consent to participate in the research had been given. Due to the personal nature of the experiences under investigation only the analysed data has been used in this final research report. The original written transcript and audiotape relating to the person’s experience have been safely stored with only the authors having access to it, and the participant being fully informed of this (Breakwell et al., 1997). Every attempt was also made to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of subject and material via the substitution of the participant’s name with a pseudonym.

RESULTS
Provided here is an elaboration of the themes that emerged from the one-on-one interview that was conducted and subsequent analysis of the interview transcript. For the purposes of confidentiality, the participant’s name has been substituted with a pseudonym.

Holocaust as part of one’s emerging culture
It seems that the Holocaust and notions thereof were as intrinsic to Sarah’s youth as the very air that she breathed. She related how the children of survivors were ‘born to it in many ways’. In addition, she placed the way in which she was socialised in context, by locating herself and her family within the emerging independent State of Israel. It appears that there, the Holocaust formed an integral part of the nation’s culture in all spheres. As she described:

There was always music, sad music, the siren (sounded throughout the country on certain days to commemorate the six million people who died), everyone is talking about it, the school is doing something about it . . . you cannot escape it. It’s there and it’s there in your consciousness basically from the start.
It is ironic to note that those who had survived the death camps were, as Sarah expressed it, ‘enslaved by the haunting memories of the past, even when they were supposedly free’. She said that ‘in survivors’ families it was clear from quite an early age’.

**Silence versus openness**

Sarah’s knowledge of the Holocaust was gained from persistent questioning of survivors. From the interview, however, it would appear that survivors were not forthcoming about their experiences and only spoke about them when pushed for details. The title of this theme, *silence versus openness*, refers to the contrast between the ways the survivors chose to deal with the past, as opposed to Sarah’s need to verbalise the stories she had been told. Perhaps her father and her uncle’s silence was due to the horrors they had endured being too awful to speak about. Sarah explained how her father ‘did not speak when I [she] was youngish’. This contrasted with the basic information that was made known to her, such as a ‘granny that died, aunts that died’ (in the Holocaust). As a result, from a young age she was aware that what she knew was like an incomplete painting, lacking in details that she was conceivably too young to grasp. ‘Early childhood details were there but sketchy’, she said. Sarah did nevertheless articulate how later in her life, her uncle started to open up and relate very personal accounts by sharing both his memoirs and poetry, as it appeared that, ‘that is where a lot of the knowledge was accumulated’. Yet in spite of this, there was no clear line between that which remained unspoken and that which was verbalised. As Sarah so poignantly communicated:

There is a lot of stuff I don’t know and maybe will never know . . . My father is dead, my uncle doesn’t speak about it or doesn’t want to speak about it, so there will be stuff I will never know and I’m accepting that.

This flux between what is documented on paper or etched in the psyche and that which is shaded in darker hues appears to have in part spurred Sarah’s quest for knowledge. In a sense, it has provided her with the key to the closed door in the form of questions she unceasingly asks. In this vein she emphasised that, ‘We don’t ask enough. I didn’t ask enough, for many years, and now I’m asking too much’.

**Protection**

Intricately tied to the notions of *silence versus openness, protection* appears to be a broader overarching theme. Perhaps it was because Sarah’s father could not be protected from the horrors of Nazi Germany as a boy that he endeavoured to protect and shield his young children from the full account of what he and
his family had actually endured. She said that her father ‘had nightmares and he was screaming at night’. It is possible that her father, like so many other survivors, battled to make sense of what had happened; and as such struggled to relay the details to his young children. Nonetheless, it seems that amidst the nonverbal, Sarah’s intuition was heightened. She seems to have felt an intense need to parent her father and also to protect him, to ‘run after him and ask him if he’s alright because I must make it alright’. She explained that even though she ‘didn’t know it was going on, I just did it naturally from a very, very young age’. There is a further possibility that the notions of protection relating to the Holocaust were carried through into Sarah’s parenting of her own children. For she too did not want to ‘give too many details too soon’. Her son ‘knows that his grandfather was a Holocaust survivor’; however, she pointed out that, ‘I do not say anything to him about Schindler’s list’ on the basis that she believes he is too young. Conversely, Sarah related how in May 2005, her older child, a 16-year-old daughter, accompanied her to Poland to join ‘March of the Living’ (an international programme that brings survivors, their children and non-survivors together in a march from Auschwitz to Birkenau – the largest concentration camp complex built in WW II) to see ‘the camp where her grandfather was’. In some synchronistic way it appears that the adults in Sarah’s childhood world along with those in her own children’s world have unconsciously decided that age is a prerequisite for exposure to weighty awareness. It is impossible to place a value judgement on this, since the need to protect and preserve the innocence of the young is easily understood.

The burdens and blessings of identity

Sarah seemed to have perfectly captured the complexities of identity. She eloquently articulated that there is great value in the components of which people are comprised, namely, their name, gender or religion. However, she also conveyed that for a person to own their own identity often involves a very painful growing process. She grew up in Israel, where many of her friends were the children of native born Israelis. As such they had escaped the encumbrances that came with having a parent who was a Holocaust survivor. Sarah’s awareness of the suffering her father had endured and the atrocities he had witnessed, made her feel compelled in some way to take responsibility for his well being and happiness. Unlike the majority of her peers, whose identities were simply Israeli, Sarah’s identity was more complex in that it comprised elements that stemmed from those who were persecuted in Eastern Europe. Most significantly, all of the female members of her family were exterminated during WW II. She recounts that in the second generation, she ‘was the
only girl representing all the women that were murdered’. From this it seems logical to infer that as a child, her female identity carried a huge weight. In accordance with the Jewish custom of naming babies after deceased family members, she was given the second name of Helen, ‘after his [her father’s] sister who was sixteen when she was murdered’. At the time the name was a huge burden, given the need of children to fit in with their peer groups. She described how, ‘As a child, you are hiding the name . . . in Israel Helen . . . it’s not an Israeli name’. Thus, in addition to being inescapably linked to the deceased female members of her family, Sarah’s second name implied a differentiation that in a sense prevented her from entirely aligning herself with fellow Israeli-born children whose lives were more carefree. Alongside this, she provided insight into what it possibly was like for her brother as the male child. She described how, ‘He never understood why she got all the attention and love’. However, it seems logical to surmise that in the process of Sarah coming to accept her identity and see it as the ‘blessing’ she now does, she was simultaneously able to lift the burden of her brother’s identity. She said, ‘When I explain it to him . . . he didn’t know and he didn’t think about it, it really sets him free a little bit’.

On another level, however, the knowledge of her family’s history enabled her to avoid stereotyping people on the basis of their national or ethnic identity. Her family was persecuted and tortured by Germans on the basis of being Jewish. Yet, Oscar Schindler, a non-Jew, saved her father and her uncle using the very same rationale. ‘Schindler was a German’, and while many Jewish survivors and non-survivors vehemently equated everything German with Nazism, Sarah’s family regarded Schindler as a saviour and hero. Sarah said this happened ‘because Schindler came and Schindler saved my father’. With this awareness she was able to reframe the notion of identity or a label, in the belief that ‘not everyone is bad or good . . . people have choices, Schindler had a choice’.

In a very real way it seems that the multi-faceted identity that Sarah carries has empowered her with the sense of purpose that motivates the interracial, non-denominational healing and teaching projects which have become her life’s work.

**Intellectualising versus understanding**

In the wake of such an epic catastrophe, it is conceivable that those left with the task of making sense of it, would start with that which was recounted by those who survived. Sarah appears to be no different. She chose history as one of her school and university subjects, on the basis that she ‘was trying to learn more . . . finding out more details . . . and building more of a knowledge base’. This need for intellectual knowledge to underpin experiential understanding may further elucidate
her chosen career path. She ‘taught Holocaust studies at the College of Education’ and ‘in the last years is lecturing a lot about it, reading a lot about it’. Her brother evidenced similar leanings; there was ‘a period in his twenties where he tried to learn everything and know everything’, and after a period of 20 years during which he lost interest, has again started taking an interest. Sarah did caution that this is not a phenomenon that occurs across the second generation, nor ‘does it happen exactly the same, even in the same family . . . my cousin is also not interested or shows very limited interest’.

Being equipped with first hand factual accounts, augmented by the study of historical fact, does not necessarily enable the reality of what had happened to be adequately internalised. Intellectualising on the one hand, pitted against true understanding on the other, appears to be a many layered process. Sarah captured the essence of this conflict when she expressed:

You go to Auschwitz and you stand there and you think that if you’ll go to Poland you’ll understand more and you’ll absolutely get it and it will be in colour it will not be black and white and if anything it’s opposite, because it’s so . . . the sheer size of everything . . . even though I’m a Holocaust scholar or you know I speak about it and I supposedly know a lot about it I know very little, because it was, it is very detailed and it is huge and enormous and many times you feel it is so big. Can you know everything? No, you cannot know everything. I don’t think the greatest professors in the subject know everything. And that is on the one level. Also on the level of suffering there is no ways that I can know what my father went through. No ways, I can hear the stories, I go to Poland and see where he was born, see where he worked in this concentration camp and where he was tortured in that concentration camp but still, there is no way, I don’t feel it. I, I was protected. I was born in Israel. I live here I have a privileged life. So there’s no way, no way you can really grasp it.

It is further pertinent to note that this so-called grasping of suffering does not seem, for Sarah, to be limited to the genocide of WW II. Granted, she would, ‘go and stand in Auschwitz and see the ash, see the crematoriums and you didn’t get it’, but her journey has continued as she explained how, ‘I was in Rwanda last year and I don’t get it. You know I stand in a church and I see four thousand skulls and bones and I still don’t get it’.

Coming to grips with suffering in any form does not appear to be effortless. Whether people rely on the process of rationalisation or try to access the deepest of human understanding, it seems to be a phenomenon that will continuously elude their grasp. Perhaps people also have to live with ‘not knowing’, as frustrating as that might seem.
Frustration inciting healing

It seems that coupled with an intense desire to understand what had happened to her family, Sarah experienced a sense of frustration that the world has not learnt from the atrocities of the past. Sarah grounded us in the present with her opinion:

You turn on the radio here and you hear that in Delmas, that is half an hour from here, people are dying from typhoid and we are in South Africa in 2005. How dare we stand by and not rush there with water . . . we as human beings are struggling to learn the lessons.

However, whilst this sense of frustration has the potential to render people helpless, hope still survives. Thus, whilst it may ‘be impossible to be involved in everything’ and to save the entire world as it were, Sarah’s own conviction to make some sort of difference has perhaps been born out of her own background. She has recognised the ‘need and the urgency to do more’.

This need to heal and to make things better, not only for a person’s own family members, but for others as well, is a recurrent theme that Sarah has seen played out in those close to her. She surmised that:

A lot of Holocaust survivors’ sons and daughters are in the fields of healing and are trying to do something, teaching a lot . . . even Math teachers, it doesn’t really matter but they are in the teaching and healing or people’s sort of avenues.

As she so beautifully encapsulated it, ‘that is the need of so many of us, to change it somehow’. For whilst they were not able to prevent their parents from enduring such horrors, they have the power to help others today. It might be inferred that for Sarah, just remembering the Holocaust is simply not enough. It is the way in which people use their knowledge for the benefit of others that really counts.

The instillation of values out of the darkness

It would seem reasonable to expect that someone who had been subjected to such horrors and torture as Sarah’s father had would emerge from his ordeals consumed with hatred and bitterness. She conceded that her father underwent immense trauma, and described how ‘one of his tasks at one of the camps was to . . . open the mass grave and to take the bodies out and burn them’. At this juncture it seems feasible to postulate: How is it possible for such a person to see any goodness in the world? Yet, in stark contrast, like the immortal words of Anne Frank, who wrote in her diary that, ‘[i]n spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart’ (van der Rol & Verhoeven, 1993, p. xi), Sarah’s father also, ‘in spite of everything, still
believed that people are really good at heart’. This was a principle which he passed on to his children, and Sarah acknowledged that these ‘values were very much instilled verbally and nonverbally to us as children and honesty and integrity and not vengeance were very much there’. Such values then might be conceptualised as forming the building blocks of a new life within a new country. His belief that people have choices was something which Sarah’s father applied to both his life and those of his family. Whilst he had undoubtedly ‘suffered at the hands of the Germans’, he had also been saved by one. In his years of freedom, he ‘worked in a German company in Israel’. Thus, for Sarah, ‘this is nonverbal, this is a value where you don’t generalise and you say, you know we have to build something together, and this is very powerful’.

Sarah has also been able to make sacred spaces for the instillation of values within her own family unit, such as the ‘side of social responsibility and our role in what you do after the Holocaust and . . . your responsibility in South Africa’.

Therefore, taking a disaster and reframing it in terms of lessons and life principles is something that resonated throughout the interview with Sarah.

**Loss**

*Loss* is a theme that seems to permeate the text both at a content and a process level. It was communicated both in Sarah’s words and in the silent way in which she held the experiences of her family. Loss is thus not limited to loss alone, but weaves its way into many different facets of the narrative that Sarah shared.

Her father was robbed of his innocence at the age of 14, when he was separated from the vast majority of his family and taken to a concentration camp. There, he was ‘beaten up, [had] no dignity, starving, hungry, saw people dying, being shot . . . so definitely not a normal upbringing’. Loss in his life shifted between the emotional and the physical. Every female member of his family was murdered, thereby leaving him and his brother to fend for themselves. Any potential for a livelihood in the country of their birth was lost. As a consequence, with only ‘a few dishes, plates and clothes’, they made their way to Israel. Sarah’s mother also epitomised ‘loss of the familiar’, for although she was not a Holocaust survivor, she was nevertheless a refugee from Poland who went to Israel.

There is also a sense of loss in that which Sarah verbalised. Whilst it would be impossible to precisely define what constitutes a normal childhood, Sarah’s youth seems to have been fraught with its own complexities. Her father and his family had endured such an ordeal that there was no conceivable way they could have emerged, ‘unscarred, so their parenting could not have been normal’. Her intense need to take care of her father, and later her mother when her father died, in a sense robbed her of a carefree time when all childlike needs are catered
for. Thus, whilst Sarah was aware that her presence in this world was a gift, the gift itself carried a huge price; a reminder to her parents that they had survived whilst others had perished. So perhaps then part of the joy that a child is capable of giving others was depleted. This desire to care for her father might also have been spurred by a desperation to gain access to a part of her father’s world to which she was denied access, for her ‘father did not speak’ and so she cared for him ‘from a very, very young age’.

It is nevertheless important to contrast the notion of loss with that of the immense abundance of love and warmth, which Sarah described as being characteristic of her family – a climate that her parents endeavoured to create against the backdrop of intense struggle.

CONCLUSION

This study has represented a journey of both insight and exploration. The first author’s encounter with Sarah is truly one she will not easily forget. Whilst it is evident that Sarah’s is a story which she has told countless times, it seems that with each retelling new truths are revealed to her. She certainly provided the first author with a new lens through which to view the stories of both Holocaust survivors and their children. As a result, the first author is now more acutely aware of how each individual will construct and reconstruct his or her respective life narratives throughout the duration of his or her life span. Childhood perceptions are often transformed when the child reaches adulthood. As a child, Sarah was profoundly aware that her father had suffered some terrible hurt – the depths of which she would only come to touch in her adult years.

The study provided a privileged opportunity to gain insight into how various members of a family may choose to make sense of a traumatic past. What struck the first author as particularly interesting was that whilst it is generally taken for granted that family history is a component of a person’s present, she has become aware that there are people who choose not to integrate the past into their current lives.

The adult need to protect the young and preserve optimistic childhood illusions about good, truth, justice, and humanity was an ever present theme. This, however, appeared to disregard the innate insight and intuition of children. Sarah herself has elected to shield her young son from the major details of his grandfather’s past. In the course of the interview, it became evident to both Sarah and the first author, that children intuitively and instinctively pick up on the nuances of their environments and translate them into explicable language in the process. Her son is very much aware of what actually happened – even to the point of experiencing his own nightmares.
This has led the first author to believe that on some metaphysical or mystical level, a multigenerational transmission of knowledge and feeling must certainly exist. For the first author, this exploratory journey underpins the maxim that people need to know where they come from, in order to determine where they are going. Sarah recognised that her need to be involved in the circles of teaching and healing stemmed from her own history and that of her family.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Based on the sample size of one, the generalisability of this study is limited. In keeping with the tenets of social constructionism, the study in no way aimed to impose commonly noted themes in the literature on the respondent’s answers. This notion can be applied to a larger sample of the second generation, who may or may not feel that the findings reflect their experiences.

It must also be noted that, since the method of thematic content analysis was utilised, qualitatively the results may not be open to replication. Furthermore, questions asked during the interview were structured by the researcher, and may have been subject to interviewer bias as a result. The researcher tried to control this factor by audio taping the interviews.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The past, the present, and the future influence a person’s family life. There is an intergenerational transmission of narratives, whether verbally or intuitively. It has become clear that unresolved traumas within a family tend to impact upon successive generations. What exactly is transmitted and how it is passed on remains open to interpretation. Within the body of surveyed literature, many theories from the psychoanalytic to the biological to the systemic have been proposed. Perhaps what is needed then are more integrative studies, which represent cooperation within this field of interest.

As the generation of Holocaust survivors are nearing the end of their natural lives, there is an urgent need to conduct family studies with the survivors themselves, their offspring and relatives. This will in some way give an insight into the importance of personal history upon familial development.
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Liane Lurie received her M.A. in Clinical Psychology from Unisa in 2007. She completed her Community Service year at Sterkfontein Psychiatric Hospital in 2008. Her predominantly eco-systemic training has provided her with an excellent grounding from which to approach both therapy and research. She began working in private practice in February 2009.

Ricky Snyders is a professor in the Department of Psychology at Unisa. His interests include family and couples psychotherapy, psychotherapy supervision and training, and groups and organisations as systems.

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