

THE IMPACT OF EARLY LIFE TRAUMA ON REMINISCENCE FUNCTIONS AMONG ISRAELI HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

DAVID B. KING, PHD & NORM O'ROURKE, PHD
IRMACS CENTRE, SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY, CANADA

PHILIPPE CAPPELIEZ, PHD
SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA, CANADA

YAACOV G. BACHNER, PHD & SARA CARMEL, PHD
BEN-GURION UNIVERSITY OF THE NEGEV, ISRAEL

ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that traumatic early life experiences influence the emotional content of personal memories in later life. For the current study, we examined the frequency of various forms of reminiscence among elderly survivors of genocide, specifically Israeli Holocaust survivors. We compared the frequencies of reminiscence functions reported by survivors ($n = 100$) to those reported by older Canadians ($n = 100$) and other older Israelis ($n = 100$) allowing us to distinguish survivor-specific effects from cross-national, Israel-Canada differences. A series of MANCOVAs with age and education as covariates were run comparing self-positive, self-negative and prosocial groupings of reminiscence functions. As hypothesized, male and female survivors reported significantly greater frequencies of self-negative functions compared to both comparison samples. Post hoc analyses indicated survivor-specific effects for each of the three self-negative functions: Female survivors reported reminiscing more frequently to reduce boredom and intimacy maintenance; whereas both male and female survivors reminisce more frequently for bitterness revival. Compared to older Canadians and other older Israelis, survivors are more likely to reflect and dwell on bitter memories, likely due to the sheer number and intensity of traumatic early life experiences. We discuss the implications of these findings for trauma survivors in later life.

METHODS & ANALYSES

Comparison Samples. 1. Israeli Holocaust Survivors ($n = 100$); 2. Older Canadian Adults ($n = 100$); 3. Older Israeli Adults ($n = 100$); all samples 50% male, 50% female.

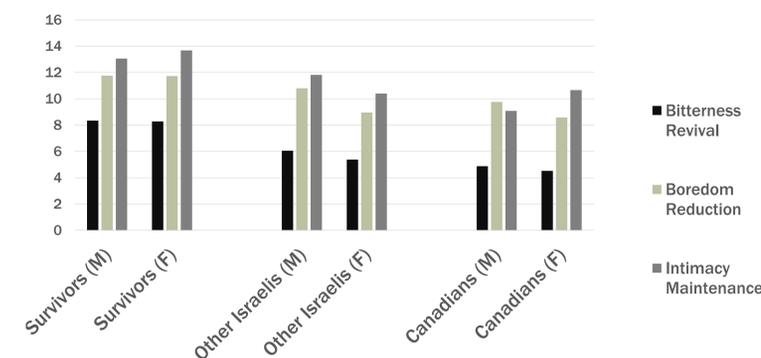
Holocaust survivors. Participants who survived the Holocaust were recruited from nursing homes and adult day centers in the south and central regions of Israel with the aid of the National Center for Psychosocial Support for Survivors. This included those living in cities, smaller communities and kibbutzim (i.e., collective communities). All participants were fluent in Hebrew, 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 Soviet Union in 1989.

The average age of survivors was 78.4 years ($SD = 26.05$), significantly older than the other Israeli comparison group ($M = 65.3$, $SD = 17.3$), $t(198) = 4.67$, $p < .01$, but not older Canadians ($M = 74.3$, $SD = 5.3$), $t(198) = 1.56$, $p = .06$.

Reminiscence Functions Scale. The original RFS consists of 43 items (RFS; Webster, 1993, 1997). Respondents indicate how often they reminisce for each item ranging from never (1) to very frequently (6). Survivor responses were collected via interview format; comparison group responses were collected using electronic questionnaires.

Analytic Procedures. We computed multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVA) to compare responses between survivors and both comparison samples for each of the three groupings of reminiscence functions (i.e., self-positive, self-negative, prosocial functions). Where multivariate significance emerged, we then compared responses to first-order reminiscence functions within each grouping. And where univariate differences emerged, post hoc analyses were performed to determine which groups significantly differed. MANCOVAs were run separately for men and women.

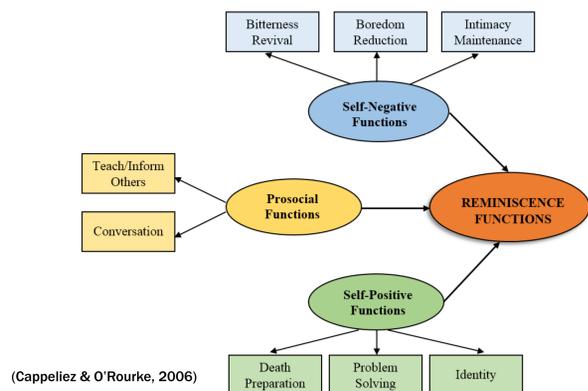
Summary of Group Comparisons on Self-Negative Functions



INTRODUCTION

Reminiscence is the voluntary or involuntary process of recollecting memories of one's self in the past (Alea & Bluck, 2007). A first generation of research recognized that various forms of reminiscence serve distinct functions (Webster & Haight, 1995) as later operationalized by Webster's taxonomy (1997). These eight functions are: identity, problem solving, death preparation, bitterness revival, boredom reduction, intimacy maintenance, conversation and teach/informing others. Subsequent research has identified a 3-factor latent structure subsuming each of the eight functions of reminiscence; in turn, these first-order functions (i.e., self-positive, self-negative, and prosocial functions; Cappeliez & O'Rourke, 2006) map onto a higher-order reminiscence latent factor (O'Rourke, Carmel, Chaudhury, Polchenko, & Bachner, 2013). We undertook the current study to examine the frequencies of the various functions of reminiscence reported by Israeli Holocaust survivors compared to those reported by older Canadians and other older Israelis.

The Tripartite Model of Reminiscence



RESULTS: MANCOVAs

Significant Covariates. Education (men & women), age (women).

Higher Order Reminiscence Functions. MANCOVAs comparing the overall frequency of self-positive, self-negative, and prosocial reminiscence functions across groups revealed that survivors reminisce significantly more for self-negative functions compared to other Israelis and older Canadian comparison samples. This result was found for both men, $F(1, 146) = 9.49$, $p < .01$ (Cohen's $d = .44$ and $.98$, respectively), and women, $F(2, 145) = 11.22$, $p < .01$ (Cohen's $d = .99$ and 1.23 , respectively).

Post Hoc Analyses of Self-Negative Functions.

Bitterness Revival. Survivors reported greater frequency of bitterness revival compared to both other Israeli and older Canadian comparison samples. This was true for both males $F(2, 147) = 13.73$, $p < .01$ (Cohen's $d = .61$ and $.98$, respectively), and females, $F(2, 147) = 21.03$, $p < .01$ (Cohen's $d = .84$ and 1.28 , respectively).

Intimacy Maintenance. Similarly, survivors reported reminiscing more frequently to maintain connectedness with lost friends and family (i.e. intimacy maintenance). This finding emerged for both males, $F(2, 147) = 12.38$, $p < .01$, and females, $F(2, 147) = 10.30$, $p < .01$. However, a survivor-specific effect was significant only for women when compared to other Israelis and Canadians (Cohen's $d = 1.12$ and $.79$, respectively).

Boredom Reduction. Female survivors also reported reminiscing more frequently to reduce boredom than both other Israeli and Canadian women, $F(2, 147) = 6.27$, $p < .01$ (Cohen's $d = .53$ and $.70$, respectively). Comparison groups did not differ in this reminiscence function (i.e., survivor-specific effect).

CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

We had hypothesized that survivors would report reminiscing more frequently for intimacy maintenance and bitterness revival (but not boredom reduction). In addition, we also assumed survivor-specific effects would emerge for identity (self-positive function), and to teach/inform others (prosocial function).

As hypothesized, male and female survivors reminisce more frequently for the self-negative functions compared to both Canadians and other Israelis. For women, post hoc analyses revealed survivor-specific effects for each of these three functions (i.e., bitterness revival, intimacy maintenance, boredom reduction). As we assumed, both male and female survivors reminisce more frequently to revive bitter memories but a survivor-specific effect for the intimacy function emerged only for women. Given the intensity and frequency of adverse early life events, it is not surprising that survivors were found to reminisce more frequently for self-negative functions. It appears that memories of early life trauma continue to haunt survivors well into late life.

Our findings offer qualitative support for the tripartite model of reminiscence functions. It remains to be determined, however, if similarity in reminiscence functions is specific to Holocaust survivors or is generalizable broadly to those who experienced other forms of early life trauma. Future research is required to replicate findings with those who have experienced other forms of trauma in early and mid life.

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