**“You should know better”: Expressions of empathy and disregard among victims of massive social trauma \***

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**Abstract**

There is a commonly held belief that victims of extreme violence should be sensitive to the suffering of others, in spite of the fact that most of the psycho-social literature points to the opposite. We examine this belief by looking at research and educational work that we have carried out on the psycho-social effects of the Holocaust and on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. We assert that the experiences of being a victim of collective violence often inhibit empathy toward others and create an atmosphere of continued animosity. We also focus on intergenerational aspects connected to victimization and their negative impact on the expression of empathy among descendants of victims, in order to explain why the sense of victimhood and justification of repeated violence is often expressed by individuals born years after the original violence took place.

**Introduction**

*Fatma: People who suffered in the Holocaust should know what suffering is and suddenly they do these things.*

*Nasser: I don’t see a difference between what you do to us and what they did to you.*

*Avner: (raising his voice): This comparison is absolutely out of place. There is by no means any similarity between them...*

*Abdullah: … in memory of the Holocaust you should educate in a different way, to respect human life, but that isn’t what you’re doing... you’re going to inflict a Holocaust upon the Arabs. You should use this tragic event that happened to the Jews to educate your children for respecting the other...*

From a group encounter between Jewish and Palestinian students, all Israeli citizens, in which Fatma refers to a media report about Israeli soldiers who had beaten Palestinians for attempting to enter Jerusalem without a permit

As evidenced by the dialogue in the above quote, there is a folk myth that people who are brutally harmed by others develop heightened sensitivity and empathy toward the suffering of others. In this article, we explore this commonly held belief by looking at research and teaching experiences that focused on understanding the significance and meaning of living through wars and genocide. Specifically, we will explore how these experiences affect individuals’ perceptions of self and of their group, and their views of others, including "the enemy." We will look at instances in which there are manifestations of empathy and sensitivity to the needs of others, and the opposite manifestations of distrust and hatred/fear.

This topic interests us for a number of reasons. For several years we have been engaged in research and peace work that aims to understand the psycho-social effects of the Holocaust and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on people who have been impacted by these tragedies. We have examined the meaning and significance of the Holocaust on survivors and their families, and on Israeli young adults and descendants of Nazis, and undertaken in-depth inquiries into the quality of discourse between Palestinians and Jewish Israelis. On the personal levels, we are also emotionally connected to this topic. As Jews and Israeli citizens, our personal and family experiences are deeply entwined in the Holocaust past and in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Therefore, the topic of what people take with them from their traumatic pasts has deep importance for us, on professional, personal and family levels.

We begin with a review of literature that deals with conceptualizations connected to long-term effects of extreme social trauma on victims and descendants of these traumas. We then present our thesis of how degradation and violence often leads victims of violence to a monolithic perception of self and the other, thus inhibiting complex and nuanced perceptions of others perceived as being outside one's group. Such a stance leads individuals to see themselves almost exclusively as victims and the other almost exclusively as a perpetrator or an enemy. We then use examples from our work to demonstrate our thesis and conclude with ideas concerning the difficulty that victims have expressing empathy for others, especially their "enemies."

The effects of massive social trauma on victims – a brief review of the literature

*The effects of the Holocaust, genocide and extreme violence*

Psycho-social and anthropological literature has shown that victims of massive and intense social trauma, such as wars and genocides, continue to feel the effects of these traumas for many years after the event (Bar-On, 1995; Danieli, 1998; Dickson-Gomez, 2002; Robben & Suarez-Orozco, 2000). Much of what we know comes from research on the effects of the Holocaust on the survivors and from research on survivors of the atomic bombings in Japan at the end of the Second World War. As early as the 1960s, when Niederland (1968) detailed the *Survivor Syndrome*, based on clinical work with Holocaust survivors, he noted that one of the major effects of having lived through the Holocaust was the development of distrust in others. In her clinical work with Holocaust survivors and victims of other massive social traumas, Danieli (1982, 1989, 1998; Danieli, Brom & Sills, 2005) found that this distrust of others often leads survivors to fear the advent of another Holocaust. This fear of becoming close to people from outside one’s family is transmitted to their children, either directly or latently, causing the trauma to have intergenerational effects. Lifton (1967, 1980), who studied both clinically and empirically the psycho-social effects of the atomic bombings on Japanese individuals, also noted that one of the major characteristics of A-bomb victims was the feeling of suspicion of counterfeit nurturance toward individuals who had not experienced the bomb.

*The effects of massive trauma on peoples’ worldviews*

Severe humiliation, degradation and violence at the hands of others also lead victims to question the basic assumptions that they held about the social world before their experiences. For example, Janoff-Bulman’s social-psychological research (1992) shows that survivors of violence tend to have their pre-victimization assumptions shattered, leaving them with the belief that they can no longer put their trust in others. As people try to rebuild their lives after such violence, one major challenge they face is the creation of new assumptions, ones that take into account their past experiences while not paralyzing them with fear.

Janoff-Bulman’s thesis was partly based on Lerner’s earlier conception (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978) of the *Just World Hypothesis* which avers that people need to believe that they live in a just, orderly and predictable world, where people usually get what they deserve. According to this hypothesis, when people witness unjust suffering, their first motivation is to restore justice by helping the victim. However, if this is not possible, people will often switch to blaming the victims, either because of their "bad" acts or because of their "bad" character. The Just World Hypothesis has been used in a number of settings, such as in the empirical study of psycho-social aspects of perpetrators and bystanders in wars and genocides (Staub, 2003; Waller, 2002) and those researching and treating rape victims (Murray, Spadafore & McIntosh, 2005). In these cases, and in others, victims often chastise themselves for not having taken good enough precautions against the persecution. Blaming the victim is often carried on by others as well, such as the perpetrators and bystanders, who in this way justify the violence (Waller, 2002). In sum, then, it appears as if, on a very basic level, people need to believe that their world is a fair one, and when this belief is shattered, they look for someone to blame, sometimes resting on themselves, sometimes on others.

*Displacement of anger and aggression*

Another tragic outcome of surviving social trauma, reported in the empirical literature, is that victims of humiliation, degradation and violence will often displace the anger that they feel toward their aggressor on others (Bar-On, 2007; Lindner, 2002). Displacement, a defense mechanism used by the ego to distort the image of reality in order to ward off anxiety, often involves difficult emotions, such as anger and aggression, and protects the individual from expressing dangerous hostility toward others (Freud, 1967). According to McWilliams (2003), in situations of psychic danger, the ego erects a defense. Danger situations originated in early childhood can be elicited by similar perceived threat in any stage of development. Although defense mechanisms may serve useful protective functions, they usually involve some measure of self-deception and may seriously interfere with the effective resolution of the actual problem. The inability to face one’s aggressor, either because technically it is impossible to do so or because one feels too weak to do so, can lead former victims to become violent toward weaker targets. Displacement of anger and aggression has also been tied to the ways in which an individual reconstructs one’s traumatic past and identity - leading to an identity that has victimhood as a central component of one’s personal and collective identity (Adwan & Bar-On, 2005). We will return to this idea of victimhood below.

*Long-term effects of the trauma on the victims*

The effects of violent social trauma are long-term. For example, clinical research on Holocaust survivors, who were children during the war, has shown that the trauma did not end when the persecution and killing did, but continues throughout life, presenting challenges for coping as the person moves through different developmental stages (Durst, 2002; Felman and Laub, 1992). Keilson (1994), who undertook a longitudinal study of Dutch Jewish war orphans, writes of "sequential traumatization", comprised of three periods: (1) the period of enemy occupation and the beginning of terror, which impacted the social and psychological integrity of Jewish families; (2) the period of persecution; and (3) the postwar period during which the fate of the children was decided.

Keilson’s concept offers a radical change in the understanding of social trauma. Instead of an “event” that has “consequences,” trauma is viewed as a process with life-long sequences. For example, he found that a severe second traumatic sequence and a ‘good’ third traumatic sequence usually led to better long-term health perspectives for the victim than a ‘not-so-terrible’ second traumatic sequence and a ‘bad’ third traumatic sequence. This is important in explaining why trauma continues, even years after the event and it also helps us understand why some individuals develop symptoms after the original trauma, sometimes years later. Keilson’s concept also has implications for intergenerational transmission of trauma. That is, since there is no “post” in trauma, individuals born many years after the persecution, who have prolonged contact with the direct victims, may also be affected by the original traumatic situation.

We find Keilson’s conceptualization to have relevance for different cultural and political settings. Since it does not define a fixed set of symptoms or situations and does stress the importance of relating to historical processes when analyzing trauma, it is possible to adapt his concept to different contexts beside the Holocaust. For example, it seems important to pay special attention to the sequential change that occurs between war and persecution and the period that follows the persecution. Researchers and clinicians need to be aware that these ‘afterwards’ will need to be divided into different sequences, with different possible consequences for the victims of the violence.

*Intergenerational transmission of the trauma and collective memory*

Keilson’s work, and others (Bar-On, 1995 and Volkan, 2001 in their empirical work; Weingarten, 2004 in her clinical work), has shown that the effects of social trauma do not end with the victims, but often impact their children and grandchildren, leading to intergenerational transmission of the traumatic past. Kellerman (2001), who is both a clinician and researcher, has theorized that intergenerational transmission of trauma can be explained by a combination of four factors: biological, socio-cultural, psychodynamic and family aspects, and that all play an important role in such a transmission.

Focusing on the biological aspects of intergenerational transmission, Yehuda et al.’s (1998) empirical research found that the adult children of Holocaust survivors, who have been diagnosed with PTSD, are at greater risk for developing this disorder than the offspring of survivors not suffering from PTSD. In 2001, Yehuda and colleagues compared the effects of childhood trauma on the symptomatology and biology of adults who were offspring of Holocaust survivors and who suffered from PTSD, with offspring of parents who had not been diagnosed with the disorder. The children of survivors with PTSD reported more emotional abuse and neglect than descendants without parental PTSD. Furthermore, they were also at greater risk for developing PTSD. Yehuda and colleagues’ studies present evidence that exposure to trauma may set the stage for biologic alterations that affect the descendants of victims, compatible with the subsequent development of PTSD.

Empirical work, about the Holocaust and other social traumas, has supported the idea of intergenerational transmission of social trauma. For example, in Nagata’s (1990) research on the impact of a parent’s internment during World War II upon third-generation Japanese Americans, the subjects reported being less secure about their rights and having a greater preference for affiliating with other Japanese Americans than those whose parents had not been interned. In psycho-social research on the Holocaust, Solomon, Kotler & Mikulincer (1989) found that combat soldiers who were sons of Holocaust survivors suffered from more instances of post-trauma and a worse recovery rate than soldiers whose parents had not had these experiences. In their clinical work, Danieli (1982, 1989) and Wardi (1990) found that adaptation to the Holocaust past involved not only the victims, but their children as well. Kidron's (2003) anthropological study, carried out on a non-clinical population, found that when children of Holocaust survivors participate in self-help groups, they tend to adopt a "second generation identity," one that ties them directly to the traumas experienced by their parents, and they stress that this identity sets them apart from others in their age cohort.

Our shared notions form much of the fabric of our beliefs about ourselves as a society concerning our past, our goals, our ideals, and our future (Bar-Tal, 1995; Halbwachs, 1992). In this sense, collective memory is fundamental to the reinforcing of national identity and unity. As a result, recalled memories of people who do not fit the mainstream narrative of "who we were” are often excluded from public discourse. Thus, collective memory can also further hegemony (Gramsci, 1971); it stigmatizes and delegitimates those who offer memories that call into question publicized memories that re-inscribe the dominance of the powerful individuals and groups in society.

*The impact of the trauma on identity –narrative identity and victimhood*

The intertwined phenomena of collective memory and identity can also be seen as resulting from the discourse which characterizes the social-cultural context into which people are born. Whitebrook (2001) uses the term *narrative identity* to describe the stories people tell about themselves and about their group/collective. According to this viewpoint, the individual is “trapped” in his/her collective narrative, which serves as a filter through which s/he sees reality and assigns meaning to it. Through it people see themselves, the "other," and the "truth." Furthermore, people interpret present-day social and political events in light of their collective historical memory and the meaning that their group attributes to past events. The story that they have at their disposal shapes the way they experience the present, and their expectations of the future.

As noted above, one of the ways that individuals may come to see themselves, in relation to another real or imagined enemy, and one of the narratives that they may use to tell their communal story, is the narrative and identity of *victimhood*. Adwan and Bar-On note (2001, p.vii): “Victimhood refers to an identity process or to a state of mind that is developed in violent and long conflicts, in which at least one party (sometimes both) reconstructs its identity around its victimization by the other side. Victimhood describes and defines the situation of conflict the parties live in.” This idea also ties into two more phenomena - Kelman's (1999) concept of *negative interdependence*, in which one’s identity is dependent on the identification of an enemy that is seen as being the concretization of evil and Staub's (2003) notion that victimization can lead to an "ideology of antagonism" (p. 431) where the victimized view the other group as an enemy whose goal is the destruction of one's group. Both of these concepts tie closely into the German-Jewish context and the Jewish-Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which we will describe in more detail below.

*Empathy*

How do the above notions tie into the concept of empathy? According to Batson et al. (1989), empathy is defined as the ability to see reality from the other's point of view and to understand his/her thoughts and feelings in a given situation. Empathy is expressed through non-judgmental responses that reflect understanding and acceptance of the emotions behind the words (Rogers, 1959), even when there is disagreement.

Social-psychologists have stressed the importance of empathy in groups in conflict, finding that the ability to understand the other may contribute to eliminating negative stereotypes and decreasing feelings of fear and threat (Rothman, 1992; Stephan & Finley, 1999). For example, in their empirical study, Nadler and Shnabel (2006) found that in meetings between Palestinians and Israelis, expressions of empathy by Palestinians concerning the plight of the Israelis led to greater willingness of Israeli participants for reconciliation. The Palestinians view Israelis as the more powerful party in the conflict and as the perpetrators of wrongdoings, and they see themselves as the weaker party and as *the* victims. As Nadler and Shnabel note, when the victims express empathy with the perpetrators’ pains, the victims convey that they accept the wrongdoers as human beings who also suffer from the conflict. Such expressions of empathy by the victims serve to ‘re-humanize’ the perpetrators, who are then seen as individuals who have committed bad acts, rather than as bad and immoral people.

*Summary – effects of massive social trauma on victims’ ability to be empathetic*

Based on the above review, we see that severe and massive degradation, humiliation and violence can lead to a number of psycho-social outcomes: it often causes individuals to develop severe distrust of others, shatters world assumptions that the world is a just and safe place, continues to affect the individual throughout his/her lifetime, affects one’s sense of identity, and has intergenerational aspects, impacting descendants of victims’ collective memory, their sense of identity, often leading them to see themselves as victims as well. If this is the case, can we expect that individuals who have suffered such trauma, or who are descendants of social trauma victims, to be able to relate to the suffering of others and to develop feelings of empathy toward them?

It is our contention that this is very difficult and that, in most cases, individuals who have suffered such massive traumatization, or have been exposed to it due to their family history, will find it very hard to connect to the suffering of others, especially if those others continue to be defined as "the enemy." Our work with descendants of Holocaust survivors and Jewish Israelis and Palestinians, has shown us just how difficult the task of empathy is. Not only do the horrors of the past often continue to haunt the victims, and children of these victims, but they also tend to re-inscribe us vs. them thinking (Waller, 2002), distrust of others and the belief that the world is a dangerous place (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Staub & Pearlman, 2001), displaced aggression (Bar-On, 2007); a collective identity rooted in victimhood (Adwan & Bar-On, 2001) and a monolithic perception of social identity (Bar-On, 1999) that is intertwined with negative interdependence of identity of the other (Kellman, 1999).

However, this is not the entire picture. There are also signs that in certain circumstances victimization can have the effect of making one sensitive to the other's pain as one develops relations with others, including "enemies." It can indicate that the person has reached the highest of the three stages of the healing process, set forth by Herman (1992): (1) safety; (2) acknowledgement and (3) reconnection. Therefore, our contention is that while past victimization does not, as a rule, enhance empathy toward others, how one perceives and relates to these others is complex and nuanced leaving space for future dialogue and revision of one's dichotomous thinking.

In order to explore this issue, we will now turn to examples from different research studies that we have carried out over the last 11 years. We will look at life story interviews undertaken with Holocaust survivors, work with Israeli-German student exchanges, and group encounters between Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel. It is not our aim to present detailed research results here, but rather to use these examples to show the complexities connected to expression (or denial) of empathy and sensitivity to others, and their perceptions of others, including "enemies."

**Surviving the Holocaust and empathy toward past and present 'enemies'**

In our research on Jewish survivors of the Holocaust in Israel, we have found that when recounting their life stories, most victims focus on their suffering and losses both during the war and after it, the effects that their experiences have had on their relationships with their children, and how they have managed, with differing degrees of success, to live with their past. In these interviews, when the biographers talk about how they view their former persecutors or how they view the Palestinians, when discussing the conflict between Israel and her neighbors, we have found very little evidence of empathy toward their former (Nazi) or present-day (Palestinian) enemies.

The most extreme example comes from the interview undertaken with Yona[[1]](#footnote-1), who as a teenager from Hungary survived Auschwitz. Yona was interviewed in 2002 for a joint Palestinian – Israeli oral history project which documented the life stories of Palestinian refugees from 1948 and their descendants, and Jewish Israelis and their descendants, who had been refugees from either the Holocaust or Arab countries where they often suffered persecution, and who immigrated to Israel in the late 1940s. In the Israeli sample, there were 25 interviewees; Yona was one of the first.

Yona’s story focused on his and his family’s experiences. He went into detail concerning the dissolution of his ‘normal’ life after the Nazis invaded Budapest in 1944 and the degradations and violence that he and his loved ones suffered. Since he was a teenager at the time of the war, he focused on the life of an adolescent who often did not understand the situation and the consequences that it might have. After Yona told his life story, he was asked to share his views on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, including possible solutions to this conflict and to the Palestinian refugee issue. Yona said:

*…If it were up to me I would put all of the Palestinians on transports and send them to the gas chambers just like they (the Nazis) did with us. And I know Palestinians, I have worked with them and I have had Palestinian friends, but this is what I think…*

This statement was so emotionally difficult for the first author, who was the interviewer, to absorb that she actually did not 'hear' it until she watched the video to check for sound and visual quality. However, once the message was heard, it left no room for confusion; one of the main lessons of the Holocaust for Yona was that when one carries out violence against your group, the only solution is to answer them in kind. It is interesting to note that while he repeatedly asked throughout his interview how the Nazis and their Hungarian collaborators could have been so cruel to the Jews, Yona does not say that these perpetrators should have been gassed after the war ended. This macabre suggestion is made only for the Palestinians, his present day enemies.

Yona presents only one group as “the victims." Empirical research has found that in protracted conflicts such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, each side tends to see itself as a sole victim (Bar-Tal, 1995) while totally negating the victimization of the other (Gur-Ze'ev, 1998; Gur Ze'ev and Pappe, 2001). Empathy does not exist between the two sides who are preoccupied with their own victimization (Nadler, 2002). In Yona's view, since the Palestinians are perceived as “the enemy,” the only way to solve the conflict is by destroying them, so that the Jews can live in peace. Yona even chooses the method used in the death camps as a way of 'solving' the problem – that of gas asphyxiation.

While Yona asserts that he has Palestinian friends, the personal contacts that he has had over his lifetime do not appear to cause him to become more empathetic of the Palestinians, as a people. This stance is reminiscent of events that occurred in former Yugoslavia that led to their bloody wars; warm and cordial interpersonal relations among people of different religions and ethnicities, became relations of hatred and killing, as neighbors became enemies virtually overnight (Halpern & Weinstein, 2004; Shriver, 2001). In our case, Yona shows no interest in the Palestinians' story or in their suffering and only relates to them vis a vis his personal suffering and the suffering of his own collective. In short, when faced with a potential contradiction (Palestinian friends/ Palestinians as the enemy), he appears to be unable or unwilling to see Palestinians as anything other than an evil that must be destroyed. His thinking reflects a simplistic approach to the Palestinians in that he adopts an us vs. them perspective (Waller, 2002), and reflects displacement of aggression (Bar-On, 2007). This leads him to but one solution – the one that the Nazis used in their attempt to exterminate the Jewish people.

Anat, a Jewish Holocaust child survivor, offers a very different perspective. Anat was three years old when her mother hid her in a cellar in Warsaw, after her family had been deported to death camps. The little girl spent many hours and days alone in that cellar, as her mother belonged to the Polish underground and she would often leave Anat alone when she went to smuggle Jewish children out of the ghetto to the Aryan side of the city. For Anat, her life in the cellar was ‘typical’; at the time she did not realize that she was not having a normal childhood. This was due, in no small part, to her mother’s behavior; she would tell Anat fantasies and stories, as well as talk to her about how she was helping children, and what she saw on her excursions. Anat’s mother would draw pictures on the floor with charcoal; she made a doll for Anat, and tried to provide her with love, security and a sense of normalcy in those extremely abnormal times. However, the experiences that Anat had in that cellar, mostly when she was left alone, and the ones that followed until the war ended, were often traumatic and are etched in her memory. Not only did she have a childhood that deviated sharply from any definition of “normal,” but she also witnessed severe acts of brutality, for example, when she saw her mother lose an eye, as she was beaten by the Gestapo.

When Anat was interviewed for a university project that documented life stories of Holocaust survivors and their children, one message that she wished to transmit to others was that her experiences taught her the deep importance of being sensitive to the pain of one’s “enemy.” For example, when Anat talked about a trip to Poland that she took with a group of Jewish Israelis, she said:

*…They (the Israelis) said ‘those disgusting people – those despicable Poles’…this is shocking to think this way, I can understand when someone…has difficult and burdensome memories… (I had a) very harsh argument... with them…they wanted to walk carrying the (Israeli) flag ‘We are here. We are Israelis. We have a State. We will show you. We will prove to you. We will fight with you. Now we will get our vengeance’ that’s what they wanted…The fact that there are...evil people …that’s true! There are (people like that) everywhere, in Poland as well…but… I went to Poland not in order to fight…and nobody in the group … understood me…it’s not connected to the Jewish people, it’s not connected to what the Germans did to us…it’s connected to me and mother…and I can’t tell you how wonderful it was for me to (be there)… I don’t forgive the murderers and I don’t want to conciliate with the bastards. I carry (the pain) with me... and my children for sure have problems of the second generation, and perhaps there will also be problems in the third generation, who knows? …I don’t say to forget everything and to begin again…I so much want to forget and can’t!...but today for me to hate the Poles, that won’t help. It won’t help my mother’s brothers to rise from the dead…if I …yell at them ‘You are corrupt and bastards and evil and stupid…’ that won’t help me, the opposite is true… vengeance is not sweet! …It’s legitimate to get out your emotions… to get angry, to cry, but the person needs to keep it in proportion…among all of these Poles, there were also people who saved lives...I don’t think that in order to be happy, you need to take down somebody else…by doing that… you hurt your people, and you hurt your country…and you create a new generation of anti-Semites …the Poles have enough problems of their own…*

In this excerpt, we see that Anat does not provide a worldview of distrust and hate of others (Staub & Pearlman, 2001), even when relating to Poles who were involved in the persecution and destruction of her people. Her ability to see these others in complex ways, and to empathize with their pain ("the Poles have enough problems of their own"), points to assumptions about others that have not been shattered by her traumatic life experiences (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). In spite of her painful memories and emotions, Anat makes a conscious effort to overcome the tendency for self-pity and hatred and rejects adopting a victim identity, even when taking such a position means arguing with fellow Jewish Israelis, and perhaps becoming ostracized from them. She shies away from making generalizations and stereotypes about "all Poles;" she distinguishes between those who had hurt her and those who had not, and her ability to perceive others as complex enables her to be sensitive to their needs and difficulties.

This message of empathy and sensitivity toward Palestinians was evident when, a few years later, Anat participated in an encounter group that included women from Israel and the Palestinian Authority, as well as from the conflict areas of Northern Ireland, South Africa and Croatia. In this seminar, each woman was given the chance to tell her life story, in order to learn about one another's experiences and the ways in which they coped with inter-group violence and hatred. As Anat was concluding her life story, she showed strong compassion when she turned to face the Palestinian women and said:

*…I tell you what happened to me in that cellar not so that you’ll feel sorry for me, but so that you’ll understand how I believe that my experiences taught me that what I went through no child should ever have to go through. No Jewish child and no Palestinian child…It breaks my heart to see Palestinian children suffer and to know that we Israelis are to blame for much of that suffering…*

Yona and Anat differ sharply in their expressed empathy toward their ‘enemies’: Anat shows empathy not only for the Poles, her past enemies, but also for the Palestinians, her present ones, while Yona expresses neither. What might account for the differences between the survivors?

One explanation is that during the Holocaust, Yona’s worldviews were shattered (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) concerning relations between Jews and non-Jews. Yona was a young teenager when Budapest was invaded, with an adolescent’s understandings about inter-group relationships, based on his own experiences. After the Nazi occupation, he experienced firsthand the disappearance of his safe world, and found it replaced by discrimination, aggression, deportation and death. It can be hypothesized that his new realizations broke with his old ones, leaving him with broken assumptions of a just world (Lerner, 1962) and these understandings carried over to the ways in which he later viewed all Palestinians, as an adult in Israel. There is also a displacement of anger from the Nazis and their collaborators to all Palestinians – even those with whom he has close personal ties. These are dichotomous understandings in which there are good people (one’s own) and bad people (others), leaving no room for empathy for the other.

Anat, on the other, hand, does not appear to have shattered assumptions about a just world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), perhaps due to the fact that she was a very young child and her understandings about interpersonal relations with one’s ‘enemies’, were rooted in memories of her mother’s words and actions. It appears as if her mother did not talk about death and loss with Anat, but rather provided her with a rich fantasy life in which life is exciting and an adventure, one in which people must care for one another – even if they are not your family. Later on, as an adult, Anat appeared to continue to hold on to this vision and differentiated between those who cause harm and those who do not, even if they belong to a group categorized as ‘the enemy’. And so while Yona suggests killing Palestinians as a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Anat seeks ways to get close to them, to support them, and to prevent their pain. Therefore, when considering Holocaust survivors, we can see Yona and Anat’s understandings as anchor points on a possible continuum of empathy for one’s enemies.

The effects of the Holocaust concerning empathy are also evident in the following example from Sara Roy (2002), a daughter of Holocaust survivors:

*For my mother and father, Judaism meant bearing witness, railing against injustice and foregoing silence. It meant compassion, tolerance and rescue... they cared profoundly about issues of justice and fairness, and they cared profoundly about people--all people, not just their own* (p. 7)

She then goes on to comment:

*Memory in Judaism--like all memory--is dynamic, not static, embracing a multiplicity of voices and shunning the hegemony of one. But in the post-Holocaust world, Jewish memory has...failed...in one critical respect: it has excluded the reality of Palestinian suffering and Jewish culpability therein. As a people, we have been unable to link the creation of Israel with the displacement of the Palestinians. We have been unwilling to see, let alone remember, that finding our place meant the loss of theirs... (p. 11)*

While the examples from Anat and Sara demonstrate victims' and their descendants’ empathy to the pain of others, unfortunately, most interviews with survivors of the Holocaust, with which we are familiar, do not contain such messages.

**Jewish-Israeli and Christian-German encounters – how much empathy, how much blaming?**

When descendants of Holocaust perpetrators and victims meet in order to confront the ways in which their families’ and societal pasts impact their personal, family and social lives, to what extent are these encounters characterized by empathy and sensitivity to the pain of their former “enemies” or by expressions of blame and victimhood? In 1997, the first author facilitated exchanges between Israeli and German university students that focused on these issues. The encounter was the last of four encounters between German and Israeli universities from the late 1980s. The 1997 exchange included two parts: first a visit by the German participants to Israel in the spring and a reciprocal visit by the Israeli participants to Germany in late summer. These seminars were very intense; each part ran for a week and a half, the students were hosted in one another’s students' apartments and homes, and the program included the recounting of personal and family stories connected to the Holocaust, as well as trips to Holocaust-related sites, such as Yad Vashem in Israel and Neuengamme[[2]](#footnote-2) in Germany.

The question of empathy and the ability of each side to be sensitive to the pain of the other was an issue that arose both manifestly and latently in these two seminars. The entire exchange was characterized by high emotions and tension that never got fully resolved. In the Israeli group, which had 10 participants, there was a student, Yael, who was a granddaughter of a survivor. Yael defined herself as “extremely left wing,” and that was also the way that she was perceived by the Israeli and German students. The German group was comprised of 9 students – 8 women and one man – and in this group most of the participants presented themselves as “radicals” who were active in left-wing political parties. During the trip to Israel they made a number of pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli comments. It appeared as if most of the German group felt the most comfortable with Yael, letting her know that: ‘You are one of us’ – a stance that upset Yael.

During the first seminar, the relations between the two groups were polite; on the surface, the groups got along well and the Israelis were extremely attentive hosts. Yael did not outwardly show that she was unhappy with the “adoption” by the German group. However, when the Israeli group met after the German group had returned home, in order to share their thoughts about the experience, Yael exploded with anger: “They are hypocrites. They are racists. The Germans act as if they’re open, but they only accept those who think like them and they hate anyone who’s different…” Yael’s comment was echoed by other students, who had the same impression. Yael was not sure that she wanted to participate in the reciprocal trip to Germany, but in the end, decided to go.

When the group was in Germany, the Israeli students were very impressed with the seriousness with which the Germans related to recycling and the instructions that they were given by their hosts concerning disposal of their garbage – brown glass was separated from green glass, plastic was separated from paper, etc. Recycling became one of the central topics for the Israelis – first it was met with laughter, then with sarcasm, and in the end with anger. By the end of the seminar, this issue had become the turning point for the group and a symbol for the divide that separated the two groups.

In our guided tour of Neuengamme, we found all of the signs in the camp written only in German. This made the Germans uncomfortable and greatly agitated the Israeli group. When we entered the exhibition hall, at the end of the tour, once again we found everything written only in German. By that time, the Israeli students had lost their patience and went outside to have their packed lunch.

As the Israeli group ate their lunch, all of the students – 9 women and one man – shared their experiences from their army service[[3]](#footnote-3). The discussion was accompanied by much laughter; stories of experiences from the field were coupled with humorous anecdotes. As the facilitator, I found it fascinating that the group chose to have *that* discussion in *that* place, especially given that most of the group was comprised of women who had not served in combat units. It was clear that this group of descendants of Holocaust survivors, who were feeling quite overwhelmed by being in the former slave labor camp, needed to attain a sense of security by connecting to Israel's military strength in a place that symbolized the darkest period of victimization in Jewish history.

As people got up to throw away their garbage, everyone noticed that on the trash containers, the signs were written in German *and* English (e.g. “glass here,” “paper here”). As perhaps could have been expected, this discovery led to a great deal of anger. Looks of amazement became glares of anger and led to raised voices. The next day, when the group discussed their experience in Neuengamme, Yael exploded:

*…You don’t care about people, you only care about garbage! You say that you are in favor of minorities and the helpless and the wretched, but it’s not true. You are busy sorting people into good and bad and you’re busy sorting your smelly garbage. You don’t care what happened to our families, you are willing to be our friends and spend time with us only on the condition that we hold the ‘right’ political views. I can’t stand it anymore…”*

She fled the room and refused to participate in the subsequent formal meetings between the two groups, although she did remain in Hamburg, spending her time with the Israeli group when they were on break.

This blow-up had a major effect on the relationships between the Israeli and German students in that it influenced the group to move toward a much deeper dialogue than before. During the last two days of the seminar, the relations between the two groups could not be characterized as ‘polite’; the dialogue was painful, at times accusatory, but also brave and honest. The two groups remained hypersensitive to one another, and there was no “happy end” to this exchange. However, by bringing the conflict out into the open, the participants were able to begin addressing issues of victims and victimizers, racism, stereotypes, ways of dealing with the past and conflictual family relations. Perhaps if there had been a follow-up seminar, some of these issues could have been further fleshed out and discussed. However, since this was the last time that the groups met, the Israeli students did not appear to demonstrate deeper levels of empathy and understanding of the German young adults' difficulty of having to deal with being the descendants of Nazi perpetrators or bystanders.

It was quite clear that in this seminar between descendants of Holocaust perpetrators and survivors, the Jewish-Israelis held on to their role of “the victims.” Furthermore, while some of the Israelis did talk about their brothers' military experiences in the Occupied Territories, none of them noted the possibility that they had perpetrated acts of extreme evil (Waller, 2002) in the conflict with the Palestinian civilian population.

In many ways, their behavior mirrored Nadler’s (2002) comment that victims are incapable of being empathetic to the suffering of others, since they already preoccupied with ‘empathy’ - toward themselves. It appears as if the Jewish-Israelis were so concentrated on their own collective past and present pain that they conflated the younger Germans, born many years after the war, just as they had been, with the older generation that was responsible for the persecution. Furthermore, this conflation and pain was coupled with the victimhood that they felt toward Palestinians. As a result, they often had difficulty understanding the pain of the young Germans or the Palestinians; their victim identity blinded them from being empathetic toward these others.

However, it cannot be ignored that a number of the Israeli students began to understand the pain that the German students felt as they confronted their parents’, grandparents’ and society’s dark past. This helped the Israeli students put the German students’ political and ecological activities into perspective, and they began seeing them as less hypocritical and more as attempts by the German students to take responsibility for their present-day world, as their elders had failed to do so many years ago. This also helped the Jewish Israelis accept statements made by the German group that they did not feel that they were guilty of the crimes committed before they were born, but that they *did* see themselves responsible for working for a better world. Working for political and environmental goals helped the young Germans cope with their family's history, and it helped bolster their belief that *they* were not victimizers, but also victims of the past.

**Living with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict – how much empathy, how much fear?**

Our final examples come from inter-group meetings between 9 Jewish and 8 Palestinian-Israeli university students who met once a week for three hours each session, over one academic year, in a group dynamics setting, to discuss and confront “the conflict.” The group, which met during 1996 - 1997, was led by two facilitators - one Palestinian and one Jew. As part of her doctoral work, the second author observed all the sessions and analyzed the dialogue that took place between the students. In her research, she found only four fleeting instances of expressions of empathy (Steinberg, 2002).

In the group, there was a discussion on the Memorial Day of the massacre that took place at Kfar Kassem[[4]](#footnote-4). From this conversation, it appears as if Assam, a Palestinian participant, expected recognition of his pain and empathy from the Jewish participants.

*Assam: …today is the 40th anniversary of the Kfar Kassem massacre. I am asking how much you are interested in it. I would like to know, for instance, if you saw me walking in campus* (as opposed to standing in silence) *when there is a siren on Holocaust Memorial Day. How would you look at me?*

*Avner: It would disturb me very much... It is unpleasant to admit, but since... it is not my people who were massacred.... the Holocaust is much closer to me than Kfar Kassem. Moreover... I only heard about the massacre when I was in junior high, high school; I know about the Holocaust from a very early age.*

Avner, the Jewish participant, did not address Assam's question about the massacre. It appears that it was easier for him to change the subject and talk about Holocaust Memorial Day, a day of commemoration about which he has no mixed feelings. We learned from Avner that he had grown up with the Holocaust ‘on a daily basis’ and that it carried deep emotions for him. He told the group that he lived in a kibbutz where most of the members are Holocaust survivors. From his birth, he was surrounded by survivors' testimonies, the memorial museum that was built on his kibbutz, with a huge sculpture in its front, and rituals commemorating the Holocaust.

Avner's reaction can be seen as an example of lack of empathy and “moral unconcern" (Opotow, 1990). Although on the superficial level he seems to be apologizing, on a deeper level, he justifies caring more about one's own group than the suffering of the other group. It seems that growing up on the story of the Holocaust obstructed his ability to be sensitive to the suffering of the other group.

We can also see the same kind of expectation of empathy from the side of the Jewish participants, who expressed disappointment with the Palestinians' response to Israelis' suffering. In one of the encounters, a Jewish participant told the group about her parents who had been seriously injured in a suicide bombing. She described in detail how she heard about the attack, the long hours of worrying that her parents may be dead, and the terrible suffering of the entire family as a result of the emotional, physical and economic consequences of the event. The Palestinian participants responded by saying that they were sorry to hear about her parents, but that they could understand why the suicide bomber decided to carry out his attack, referring to him as a “freedom fighter.”

After hearing this reaction, one of the Jewish participants expressed depression and pessimism as to the possibility of reaching conciliation in the foreseeable future. Amina, a Palestinian participant offered her explanation of what was seen by the other group as lack of empathy*: “…A person who is hurting... it’s hard for him to feel for other people... you ask us to understand your pain... but I am stuck in my pain, so it makes it hard for me to understand your pain.”*

Existential fear seemed to be each group's main concern. There was a feeling that one cannot count on anyone else but one’s own people. The following exchange took place after the Palestinians in the group voiced a demand for a bi-national state, and the Jewish participants claimed that Israel must remain a homeland for the Jewish people. Edo (a Jewish participant) justified this claim by expressing his belief about human nature: people are indifferent.

*Edo: ... I am telling you what I think about myself many times. I tell myself that I am passive about your suffering, when I tell myself that I do not do enough in order for you to have a Palestinian State... I do what everyone does and I don't think that this is such a strange process; it happened in Germany, it happens everywhere.*

*Guy: … A Jewish state is the ability to rely on ourselves. Because we got used to it that if you can not rely on yourself, no one can care for you...*

*Nasser: We were killed in Jordan, we were killed in different places, although these are Arab countries where they speak Arabic.*

*Hanna: Why can't you understand our need for security, our fear of this kind of ones who killed you in Jordan... Of course we think about ourselves. This is an existential need. The only place where we can achieve security is definitely the State of Israel, not in any other place…We have to care first of all about our own security, not anybody else's…*

This discourse reflects both sides' self perceptions that they are victims of one another. The dialogue was characterized by a lack of ability or willingness to recognize the other's fears and pain, crucial for understanding and peaceful co-existence (Gur-Zeev & Pappe, 2001). Concentrating on itself and on its needs, neither group of ‘victims’ was capable or ready to be empathic toward others (Maoz & Bar-On, 2002; Nadler, 2002). Indeed, the discussion does not sound like a dialogue, but more like parallel monologues that do not meet. This kind of communication, defined as *ethnocentric talk* by Steinberg and Bar-On (2002), usually escalates anger and aggression (Gergen, 1990). In this group, whenever the topic of the Holocaust was raised, it ended in this "dead end."

One reason for this "dead end" may be connected to the fact that, for many Jewish Israelis, Holocaust memory serves as one of the major unifying pillars of identity (Auron, 1993; Levy, Levinsohn & Katz, 2000). In addition, the Holocaust is an event that ties Jewish-Israeli history to Palestinian history (Rosenthal, 1999). Therefore, when members from the two groups meet, the topic will inevitably influence their interaction, whether they intend or do not intend it to happen. Since the trauma of the Holocaust is a complicated issue within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the two groups have great difficulty in discussing the topic in a way that may help one side understand the other group's perspective. The Jews tend to see the Holocaust as an issue that is not open for discussion; they see themselves as the ultimate victim and cannot bear others comparing the Holocaust to other traumas.

In the inter-group encounters, the Jews felt that the Palestinians raised the issue of the Holocaust in a way that evoked anger and paralysis. Perhaps, the Palestinians knew how sensitive the issue was, and purposely tried to inflict pain on the Jews, because of the latter’s lack of sensitivity toward Palestinian suffering. At the same time, the Jews may have been using the topic of the Holocaust in a manipulative way; when speaking about the Israeli-Palestinian context, they tended to use the Holocaust to fend off accusations, and as a way to avoid entering into a critical discussion of the ways that the Jews treat the Palestinians, which put the Jews in a less than good light.

Each group was self-absorbed, concentrated on its pain and suffering, and on what it "deserves." As noted above, victimhood obstructs conciliation and empathy because a person enmeshed in victimhood does not really listen to the other, does not recognize the other's pain, and does not take responsibility for the pain they have caused (Nadler, 2002). This is especially true in conflict groups that view themselves as victims of one another. A victim is ‘exempt’ from seeing and admitting that his/her group may also be a perpetrator, inhibiting strides toward reconciliation. In victimhood there is only *one* story – the story of how one's group has been harmed by others.

The examples from the Jewish-Palestinian inter-group dialogue show that when victimhood is a central part of personal and collective identity, it shapes the way people discuss traumatic events in their own and the other's past. The students’ conversations in this forum centered on discussions of the memorial days for different traumatic events, in Jewish and Palestinian history. These discussed memories, in turn, amplified feelings of vulnerability and victimhood in the collective identities and reduced the groups’ abilities to be empathetic of the other.

As a final point, it appeared that each group felt, that in order for it to be understood, it was necessary that the other understood the emotional load they brought with them to the encounters. Each side recalled painful memories and expected the other side to be empathetic and feel its pain. However, this did not happen since recognition of the other's pain requires the listener to be ready to face the perpetrator in him/herself, to legitimize at least part of the criticism leveled at the group, and to change one's perception that there is only one victim (Bar-On & Kassem, 2004).

**Conclusion and Directions for Future Work**

In this paper, we addressed issues connected to the experiencing of severe social trauma, or of being a descendant of a victim, by focusing on the (in)ability of such individuals to be empathic toward the pain of the other. We averred that the commonly held belief that people who have suffered at the hands of others ‘should’ be more aware of the pain of others does not usually come to pass; as a rule, persecution and violence lead people to become suspicious of others, and to become so engulfed in their own pain that they cannot be self-critical and/or open to the pain of others, pain that they might be partially responsible for. Furthermore, it often stifles their ability to take positive actions within their own groups that might move them beyond the sense that they are victims and oppressed (Wallace & Carter, 2003).

If this is the case, why do people hang on to the belief that others, especially their present/former enemies, should “know better” and be more sensitive toward their own pain when they are constantly faced with evidence to the contrary? It appears to us that one central explanation can be found in the subjective perceptions that often impact the way that individuals see, or do not see, others’ realities. These subjective perceptions are influenced by a number of factors, some of which we will expand upon here.

To begin with, it appears that when one has lived through extreme persecution in the past, as in the case of Holocaust survivors, the experience often leaves the victims with worldviews that do not allow the suffering of the other to penetrate. As Janoff-Bulman (1992), Lerner (1980) and Danieli (1982) found, the just worldceases to exist, leaving room only for acknowledgment of one’s own suffering. In such cases, the victim invests much energy in thinking about the injustices suffered, with little energy left over for dwelling on the pain others might be suffering. Since one’s pain continues to be experienced so fully and one’s focus is on this pain, it is difficult for the individual to understand why the other continues to “ignore” what appears to be such obvious pain.

As a second connecting point, when past extreme victimhood is combined with an ongoing sense of extreme insecurity, as in the case of the Jewish-Israelis who have always lived in the shadow of war, subjective perceptions tend to become even more biased. That is, not only do victims use their energy to focus on their pain, but the pain of their enemy (in this case, the Palestinians) becomes almost invisible. This may explain why we have found very few Holocaust survivors who speak about the need to insure that other peoples never face the persecution that they faced and why we also tend to find very little specific evidence of empathy toward the suffering of the Palestinian people since their uprooting and loss of land in 1948.

Thirdly, when one is in the throes of acute pain, as in the case of Palestinians who still experience discrimination, military control and occupation, the ability to be aware of and empathic toward the suffering of the other, who is the source of this discrimination, also appears to be a near impossibility. One’s misfortune is perceived as being a direct result of the other’s fortune; the fortune of the War of Independence for the Jewish-Israelis became *al Naqba* – the Catastrophe – for the Palestinians. This idea ties into Kelman’s (1999) conceptualization of negative interdependence and leads to the understanding that when the relationship between self and other is a negative one, the ability to be aware of the other’s pain tends to be beyond one’s ken. Hence, each side continues to hold on to the notion that the other *should* be more understanding of the pain that they are inflicting and *should* take steps to right the wrongs.

Our fourth point is connected to subjective perceptions of legitimacy. It appears to us that when one side does not extend legitimacy to the historical collective narrative of the other side, because this narrative is perceived as detracting from or hurting the legitimacy of their own claims, it is very difficult to feel empathy toward the others. The contexts that we discussed in this paper are all characterized by degrees of lack of extension of legitimacy to the suffering of the other. Granting legitimacy to the others’ claims threatens one’s sense of identity and understandings concerning “our history.” Being blind to the legitimate rights of others, therefore, impacts one’s ability to extend empathy to their suffering. Being blind to being blind to the issue of legitimacy may also account, in part, for why people hold on to the belief that the other side “should know better…”

Our final point connected to the difficulty of being empathetic toward the other, while also believing that those who suffer should be so, is rooted in the use of defense mechanisms. People who have been harmed tremendously by others often use displacement of anger, projection and rationalization when dealing with their own pain and with the way they relate to their ‘enemies.’ They often displace their aggression from their perpetrators to others who have, objectively, caused them no harm, project their own feelings of aggression and hatred onto their enemies, and rationalize that their lack of empathy (or worse) is justified, due to the harm they have suffered. Therefore, we conjecture that such a massive use of defense mechanisms makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for victims of extreme social trauma to understand the other’s reality, to be empathetic (Batson et al., 1989; Rogers, 1959), while retaining the belief that others *should* be empathetic toward them.

This paper focused on negative aspects of experiencing severe social trauma. While we have found these aspects to be salient, we categorically do not claim that they are the *only* outcomes of such experiences. As we noted above, there were instances of beginnings of understandings of the pain of the other, and of realizing that the victim – perpetrator dyad is not always as simple as it might first appear.

In light of the topics discussed here, we offer two possible directions for future work that are connected to one another. The first recommendation is that social psychologists, peace psychologists, conflict resolution professionals, trauma experts and mental health professionals enter into more joint work that will help them better understand the factors impacting victims’ and their descendants’ difficulty in developing empathy for others. Understanding the factors and their co-relationships can help them jointly find ways in which to overcome such obstacles. Our second suggestion is that clinicians, scholars, and practitioners also enter into joint research to strengthen theory and the conceptual framework of empathy and victimhood. Such integrative work – in praxis and research – has the potential for making a dual contribution – strengthening theory and bettering individual and group practice with distressed populations.

Perhaps if mental health professionals, educators, policy makers, and community activists become more aware of the negative long-term outcomes of extreme social trauma, we will have more success in applying this knowledge in our work with populations in distress. By bringing this knowledge to the fore, we can help others become aware that their victimization does not necessarily need to lead to the further ignoring of the others’ pain, or worse, to their further victimization.

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1. All of the names of the interviewees and participants in the research and projects are pseudonyms. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A former slave labor camp located near Hamburg [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In Israel, military service is compulsory for all Jewish 18 year old men and women. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On the eve of the Sinai War in 1956, the Israeli army imposed a curfew on all Israeli Arab villages near the Jordanian border. The order was given to the Israeli border police before most of the Arabs could be notified. Members of the border police killed 47 villagers when they returned to Kfar Kassem from work. Eleven border policemen were eventually charged with crimes and eight were convicted. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)