

The Effects of Gender and Survival Situation of the Parent Holocaust Survivor on Their Offspring: An Attachment Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Background: This article examines the attachment characteristics of the offspring as a function of the survival situation of their parents (Holocaust survivors). According to Bowlby's theory (1), proximity to a significant "other" increases the capability to regulate difficult emotions. Therefore, Holocaust survivors who were accompanied by a significant "other" should be less traumatized than a lone survivor who had to be completely self-reliant during the war. Therefore, we hypothesized that the parent's survival situation (alone or accompanied by a significant other) affected the way they bonded with their children. We also assume that an association between age of parent during the Holocaust, survival situation (alone or with a significant other), and avoidance attachment orientation of offspring will be found.

Methods: One hundred and eighty adult Holocaust survivor offspring were recruited and supplied with a sociodemographic questionnaire.

Results: The research results show that offspring of mothers who survived the Holocaust alone have a greater orientation to attachment avoidance than those who survived the Holocaust accompanied by a significant other. Also, offspring of fathers who survived the Holocaust alone showed a greater orientation to attachment avoidance than those who survived the Holocaust in the company of a significant other.

Conclusions: The research results highlight the basic argument of Attachment Theory: The need for a significant other to help in engendering in the individual a sense of security, emotional regulation, and the ability to cope with

difficult times. That is, the role of the significant other can be pivotal to more than feeling regulation. It can determine the impact and aftershocks of different traumatic events. Along with a host of other variables such as age and gender of trauma survivor, the presence of the significant other may mitigate the traumatic scars that will remain in the future.

ATTACHMENT THEORY

Over the last four decades, Attachment Theory (1, 2) has emerged as one of the most important conceptual frameworks for understanding the process of affect regulation. Attachment Theory was originally developed to understand the relationship between infant and caretaker, and subsequent manifestations of self and social perception. Bowlby (1) claimed that attachment styles, shaped into internal working models, constitute the internalization of attachment experiences with the caregiver. According to his theory, interactions with significant others who are available and supportive in times of stress are internalized into inner working models of attachment security and facilitate the formation of what Sroufe and Waters (3) referred to as a sense of "felt security." Waters, Rodrigues and Ridgeway (4) viewed this sense as a set of expectations about the availability of others and their responsiveness in times of stress organized around a basic prototype or script (i.e., secure base schema).

ATTACHMENT THEORY IN ADULTHOOD

The conceptualization of attachment was extended beyond infancy and childhood development into adolescence and

adulthood. Working models in childhood are believed to be generalizable into later relationships outside the family as sexual partners and friends continue to play a crucial role over the lifespan by affecting the individual capacity to form affectional bonds with others (5-10). In studies on adolescents and adults, tests of these theoretical ideas have generally focused on personal attachment orientations – the systematic pattern of relational expectations, emotions, and behaviors that results from a particular history of attachment experiences (11). Initially, attachment research was based on Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall's (12) typology of attachment patterns in infancy as well as Hazan and Shaver's (13) conceptualization of parallel adult styles in romantic relationships. However, subsequent studies (e.g., 14) revealed that attachment patterns are best conceptualized as regions in a two dimensional space. The first orientation is known as attachment anxiety. It reflects the degree to which a person worries that relationship partners will not be available in times of need and is afraid of rejection or abandonment. The second orientation is referred to as attachment-related avoidance. It encompasses the extent to which a person distrusts the good will of the relationship partner and in so doing strives to maintain behavioral independence and emotional distance. People who score low on both orientations are classified as secure or having a secure attachment style. The two orientations can be measured with reliable and valid self-report scales, and are associated in theoretically predictable ways with various aspects of personal adjustment and relationship quality (for a review, see 15). Attachment orientations are initially formed in interactions with primary caregivers during early childhood, as a large body of research has shown (16). However, Bowlby (6) claimed that impactful interactions with others throughout life can alter a person's working models and move the person from one region of the two-dimensional space into another. Moreover, although a person's attachment orientation is often conceptualized as a single global orientation towards close relationships, it is actually rooted in a complex network of cognitive and affective processes and mental representations. This includes many episodic, context-related, and relationship-specific (as well as general) attachment representations (11). In fact, many studies indicate that a person's attachment orientation can change depending on context and recent experience (17).

PARENT ATTACHMENT ORIENTATIONS AND THE EFFECTS ON THEIR CHILDREN

The main focus of attachment theory is on modelling the making and breaking of relationships. As such, it

contains descriptions and explanations of determinants and effects of affective bonds between children and their caregivers, and of the separation or loss of attachment figures (2, 12). For instance, Bar-On et al. (18) found that the attachment style is affected by the age of the child at separation from the caregivers, while Shechory and Sommerfeld (19) found that the attachment style is affected by the age of the child at separation from the caregivers and from the length of time that the child is separated from his caregivers. Data analyses showed that children removed from their homes at a later age suffered from higher levels of anxiety, depression and social problems compared to children taken from their homes at the age of 7 or less. It was also found that a prolonged stay (over 2 years) in residential care was related to higher levels of anxiety and depression (19).

In a meta-analysis of the first 18 studies with the new assessment for adult attachment (20) involving a total of 854 families, van IJzendoorn (21) found that in about 75% of the cases, infant attachment security/insecurity with the parent was predicted on the basis of the security/insecurity of current parent mental representations of their childhood attachment experiences (22). That is, parents with an insecure view of their own childhood attachment experiences even before the birth of their child (4, 23-25) appeared to build an anxious attachment relationship with their infant. This was measured through the Strange Situation procedure, a standard observation instrument for assessing the security of attachment relationships for 1 to 2 year olds (12). In addition, parent attachment security has been found to be predictive of behavior towards the child (4, 26, 27). For instance, securely attached mothers, as compared to insecure mothers, appeared to show more warmth and supportiveness during a challenging activity and to provide clearer and more helpful assistance which encouraged learning and mastery in their children (21). At the same time, insecure mothers, in particular those still preoccupied with their own attachment experiences, appear to switch between overprotecting their children and inviting role reversal and parentification on the part of their children. Many parents seem to repeat their childhood attachment experiences in relating to their own children, thus stimulating the transmission of secure and insecure attachment across generations.

HOLOCAUST, ATTACHMENT, AND COPING

In the two decades following WWII, evidence emerged that Holocaust trauma and its consequences not only affected Holocaust survivors (HS) themselves, but persisted among

their offspring (HSO). Therapists have since outlined this concept “Second Generation Syndrome” (SGS), suggesting that HS children exhibit clinical symptoms. Recent studies indicate that several affective disorders, most of which fall into the normal range of personality and behavior classifications, clearly distinguish between HSO and control groups. They mainly consist of an orientation to post-traumatic disorder (28, 29), difficulties in separation-individuation (30), difficulties in coping under pressure, personality problems, neurotic conflicts, anxiety, and depression (31). Moreover, adolescents in families where both parents were HSO perceived their mothers as less accepting and less encouraging independence, and reported less positive self-perceptions than their counterparts. They also perceived their fathers as less accepting and less encouraging independence and showed higher levels of ambivalent attachment style, than their counterparts (32). Juni (33) found that primary trauma responses and pervasive attitudes of survivors are shown to have harmful ramifications on their children’s personality and worldview as well as on their interpersonal and theistic object relations. However, these studies have yet to produce conclusive findings. One explanation for this inconsistency may relate to the fact that both the Second Generation and Holocaust survivors cannot be considered homogeneous groups (34, 35). In fact, the term “Second Generation,” referring to children born after 1945 with at least one HS parent, encompasses a range of diverse personal situations and subgroups.

Recognizing Second Generation heterogeneity, researchers have started using cross-sectional methods of study. These findings confirm that the SGS is more clearly identifiable when HSO subgroups are examined. Solomon (36) argued that some Second Generation groups experienced a greater sense of devastation even more their own HS parents. This may emphasize that research based on a differential distinction between subgroups of the Second Generation can provide clearer evidence of SGS.

Scharf (32) found differences in functioning between HSO adults and a control group. HS mother background was associated with higher levels of psychological distress and less positive parenting representations. Adolescents with two HSO parents perceived their mothers as less accepting and less encouraging of independence, reporting less positive self-perceptions than their counterparts. They also perceived their fathers as less accepting and less encouraging of independence, showed higher levels of ambivalent attachment style, and, according to peer evaluation, demonstrated poorer adjustment during basic military training than fellow recruits from the one-parent

HSO group. Danieli (37) and Freyburg (38) found that HS mothers were described by their offspring as closed, depressed, anxious, uncommunicative, and detached. Pilsen-Yagil (39) found that SG perceived their mothers as less supportive as compared to a control group. Fathers were described as passive, hard-working but distant, not present to meet the demands of their children, overbearing, and suffering from unpredictable tantrums (40).

These descriptions led us to speculate that HS mother perception of their child’s emotional signaling was impaired, and, as a result, appropriate responses to their attachment needs were compromised. Therefore, we assume that these behaviors could lead to the development of avoidance attachment orientations in their offspring.

A survey of literature shows that studies have been conducted on SG attachment orientation, but it was not examined as a function of HS parent age during the Holocaust, gender, and survival situation (alone or with relatives). This research is, therefore, an attempt to fill a problematic gap in the literature.

HYPOTHESES

1. According to Bowlby’s theory (2), proximity to a significant “other” increases the capability to regulate difficult emotions. Therefore, Holocaust survivors who were accompanied by a significant “other” should be less traumatized than a lone survivor completely self-reliant during the war. That is, the mere fact of closeness to a significant person in difficult times allows for the greater experience of security, fairness, and ability to trust other people. Conversely, a solitary individual without the option of depending on someone else may be able to develop other skills such as self-reliance and emotional detachment (i.e., extreme vigilance as a survival mechanism). It can be assumed that people who survived the Holocaust alone were more vulnerable than those with accompaniment. Therefore, we hypothesized that the parents’ survival situation (alone or accompanied by a significant other) affected the way they bonded with their children.

2. According to Bowlby’s theory (2), the attachment styles shaped into internal working models constitute the internalization of attachment experiences with the caregiver. Thus, the presence or absence of the caregiver will be more significant at early ages. Consequently, we assume that an association between age of parent during the Holocaust, survival situation (alone or with a significant other), and avoidance attachment orientation of offspring will be found. It can be posited that greater youth of parent during the

Holocaust will translate into higher levels of avoidance for offspring.

METHOD

PROCEDURE

Most of the participants completed the questionnaires individually at meetings or conferences. At the same time, questionnaires were also distributed at conferences or meetings dealing with the Holocaust. They were also identified by the “snow ball” method, whereby the researcher contacted several participants and through them reached additional participants, since we wanted to reach participants who do not participate in conferences or meetings. However, organizations dealing with pathological cases were excluded. Participants who received the questionnaires by mail received also a letter with the invitation to participate in the research. They were told that the goal of the study was to understand better the Second Generation Syndrome. They were asked to answer the questions sincerely and honestly. The instructions were written in the questionnaires themselves; however, respondents were given the possibility of asking questions or e-mailing the researchers regarding the clarity of the instructions. Respondents returned the completed questionnaires in a sealed envelope with no identifying details. In this way anonymity was maintained. The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Bar-Ilan University, which also conform to those of the American Psychological Association.

SAMPLE

The sample included 180 HSO adult, who provided reports of their lives and the lives of their parents. Of the sample, 142 participants (78.9%) had two survivor parents, while 38 (21.1%) had a single parent survivor. Some participants lacked the requested information about their parents (two mothers and 12 fathers).

Participants were 23-64 years old ($M=51.47$, $Sd=7.30$): 125 females (69.4%) and 55 males (30.6%). Most were Israeli born ($N=147$, 81.7%), while others were born elsewhere ($N=33$, 19.3%). Their education levels were high school ($N=29$, 17.6%), BA ($N=91$, 55.1%), MA, PhD ($N=45$, 27.3%). Most lived in cities ($N=143$, 86.7%), while others resided in rural areas ($N=22$, 13.3%). Most participants were married ($N=135$, 77.1%), while others were single ($N=18$, 10.3%) or divorced/widowed ($N=22$, 12.6%).

Parent age during the Holocaust ranged up to 48 years old: the average for mothers was 16.48 years ($Sd=7.79$) and for fathers 21.68 years ($Sd=8.44$). Of them, 103 mothers

(57.2%) and 62 fathers (34.4%) were still alive. Most mothers ($N=128$, 85.3%) and most fathers ($N=127$, 81.4%) had a high school education, while others had academic education. In terms of health, 99 mothers (55%) and 99 (55%) fathers had a chronic illness, while 21 mothers (11.7%) and 10 fathers (5.6%) experienced psychiatric illnesses.

INSTRUMENTS

The Socio-demographic questionnaire was divided into two parts:

Information about the HSO (Holocaust survival offspring): age, gender, education, marital status, children, birth order position, and questions about psychological treatments. Two remaining sections of the questions focused on the subject’s mother and father: their country of birth, age during the Holocaust, location during the Holocaust, lost relatives during the war, accompaniment during the Holocaust (alone or with relatives), and experience with mental treatments. There were two versions of the socio-demographic questionnaire, with the second containing a greater number of socio-demographic questions.

The Attachment orientations were evaluated by using the questionnaire “**Experience in Close Relationships**” (14). This questionnaire is considered the most updated and accepted for evaluation of attachment anxiety and avoidance. There are 36 items in the questionnaire, 18 items measure the tendency to attachment anxiety and the other 18 items measure the tendency to attachment avoidance. For each item respondents rated how much the item describes their feelings in close relationships on a scale of 1 – “completely untrue” to 7 - “very true.” The questionnaire was translated into Hebrew by three bilingual psychologists and was found valid and reliable (41). On this basis, we calculated two scores by averaging items of each scale. In the current research the Cronbach’s alpha measurement was calculated for 18 items checking for attachment avoidance (.87) as well as for items checking attachment anxiety (.90). In both cases the reliability coefficient was high and indicates internal consistency.

FINDINGS

GENDER, MEAN AGE, AND SURVIVAL CONTEXT DURING THE HOLOCAUST

When the mother is the survivor. Tables 1 and 2 present means, standard deviations and the results of the two-way MANCOVA for attachment orientations by mother’s survival situation and her mean age during the war.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and F tests for attachment orientations based on the mother's survival situation and mean age during the Holocaust (N=147)

	With family				Alone			
	Up to 18		19 and above		Up to 18		19 and above	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Anxiety	3.06	1.25	3.47	1.27	3.18	1.26	3.03	1.06
Avoidance	3.07	0.99	3.23	0.84	3.72	1.18	3.55	1.04

*p<.05, **p<.01

Table 2. F tests for attachment orientations based on the mother's survival situation and mean age during the Holocaust (N=147)

	Survival situation		Age		Survival situation X age	
	F	h ²	F	h ²	F	h ²
Anxiety	0.56	0.004	0.23	0.002	1.54	0.01
Avoidance	7.74**	0.05	0.03	0.001	0.98	0.01

*p<.05, **p<.01

F_{companions} (2,141)=4.75, p<.01, h²=.06; F_{age} (2,141)=0.12, n.s., h²=.002; F_{companions x age} (2,140)=1.04, n.s., h²=.02.

The MANCOVA was found significant for the main effect of survival situation (F(2,141)=4.75, p<.01, h²=.06). Univariate analyses showed a significant difference for avoidant attachment orientation. Avoidance was higher among adult children of mothers who were alone during the Holocaust than those with mothers who were accompanied by a significant other. No difference was found in anxious attachment orientation.

When the father is the survivor. Tables 3 and 4 present means, standard deviations and the results of the two-way MANCOVA for attachment orientations by the father's survival situation and mean age during the war.

The MANCOVA was found significant for the main effect of survival situation (F(2,145)=3.43, p<.05, h²=.05). Univariate analyses showed a significant difference for attachment avoidance orientation. Avoidance orientation was higher among offspring of fathers who were alone

Table 3. Means, standard deviations and F tests for attachment orientations based on the father's survival situation and mean age during the Holocaust (N=151)

	With family				Alone			
	Up to 18		19 and above		Up to 18		19 and above	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Anxiety	3.09	1.41	2.95	1.21	3.25	1.35	3.28	1.14
Avoidance	2.96	0.90	3.21	0.88	3.52	1.43	3.51	1.02

*p<.05, **p<.01

Table 4. F tests for attachment orientations based on the father's survival situation and mean age during the Holocaust (N=151)

	Survival situation		Age		Survival situation X age	
	F	h ²	F	h ²	F	h ²
Anxiety	1.11	0.01	0.01	0.001	0.15	0.001
Avoidance	6.63*	0.04	0.14	0.001	0.50	0.003

*p<.05, **p<.01

F_{companions} (2,145)=3.43, p<.05, h²=.05; F_{age} (2,145)=0.09, n.s., h²=.001; F_{companions x age} (2,145)=0.40, n.s., h²=.005

(without a family member) during the Holocaust than among those who were accompanied by a significant other. No differences were found for attachment anxiety orientation. The main effect of parent's age was non-significant for attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety orientations. No differences were found according to the parent's survival situation during the Holocaust (Ghetto, hiding, or Siberia vs. camps). Similarly, no differences were found according to whether one or both parents were in the Holocaust.

In summary, the research results show that offspring of mothers who survived the Holocaust alone have a greater orientation to attachment avoidance than those who survived the Holocaust accompanied by a significant other. Also, offspring of fathers who survived the Holocaust alone showed a greater orientation to attachment avoidance than those who survived the Holocaust in the company of a significant other. That is, offspring of parents (father/mother) who survived the Holocaust on their own have greater avoidance attachment orientation than offspring of parents (father/mother) who survived the Holocaust in the company of a close relative.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of this article is to examine the attachment characteristics of the offspring as a function of the survival situation of their parents (Holocaust survivors). We hypothesized that the parent's survival situation (alone or accompanied by a significant other) affected the way they bonded with their children. We also assume that an association between the age of the parent during the Holocaust, survival situation (alone or with a significant other), and avoidance attachment orientation of offspring will be found.

According to Attachment Theory, in significant interpersonal relationships a major role of the "other" is to help the individual regulate feelings so as to process loss

and attain emotional balance. These core insights that originally derived from the infant-caregiver relationship can be extended to adults and victims of unspeakable trauma such as Holocaust survivors. Therefore, it can be assumed that those Holocaust survivors who survived with the companionship of a close relative may be capable of regulating and processing trauma more effectively than those who survived completely on their own. Indeed, a Holocaust survivor who survived through total self-reliance will understandably be more alert, rely less on others, and even tend to disengage emotionally from individuals. They may well experience difficulties regulating their feelings, processing their trauma, and, consequently, their mourning will be much harder (42). These difficulties may manifest as frightening behaviors to, or feelings of helplessness around, their children (43).

Trachtenberg and Davis (44) claimed that unfinished mourning and grief could affect the integrative functions essential for normal parents. They speculated that the engagement of parents in mourning will generate difficulties in responding with appropriate affect to the needs of children. It followed that a parent who was self-sufficient during the Holocaust may experience greater difficulties with emotional regulation. Therefore, impaired trauma processing may negatively affect the development of stable connections between parent and child.

Moreover, Bakermans-Kranenburg and van IJzendoorn (45) found a relationship between the mother's emotional attachment organization and the pattern of her interactions with the child as well as the child's patterns of attachment to the mother. Mothers with a more secure attachment orientation are more at liberty to detect emotional signals in their children and respond appropriately to their communication needs. In contrast, mothers with more insecure attachment orientation were more predisposed to incorrectly interpret emotional signals as stress, fear, or anxiety. It was also demonstrated that mothers who failed to sufficiently process the experience of childhood loss or trauma were frightened by or engaged in frightening interactions with the child as a result of the uncontrolled flooding of painful past memories (40, 46).

Moreover, Gampel (47) mentioned activating the mechanism of denial as a trauma coping device. This leads to the enactment of "psychological stupor," also expressed in the style of avoidance. "Human robotization" and "automatization" also represent manifestations of this mechanism. These "strategies" are invoked to manage the experience of extreme anxiety and fear so as to preserve

functionality. Vardi (48) noted that some of survivors shuttered themselves in anxieties and conflicts, growing increasingly dependent on their children.

Danieli (37) and Freyburg (38) found that HS mothers were described by their offspring as closed, depressed, anxious, uncommunicative, and detached. Pilsen-Yagil (39) showed that the second generation perceived their mothers as less supportive as compared to a control group. Fathers were described as passive, hard-working but distant, not present to meet the demands of their children, overbearing, and suffering from unpredictable tantrums (40).

One of our most striking findings is the difference between offspring of Holocaust survivor parents who depended on their own resources for survival and those who survived through relying on a companion or a close relative. The first demonstrated greater avoidance attachment orientation than the second. This validity of this finding transcends parent gender, age, and whereabouts of the parents during the Holocaust (i.e., Ghetto, hiding, Siberia, concentration camp).

The research results highlight the basic argument of Attachment Theory: The need for a significant other to help in engendering in the individual a sense of security, emotional regulation, and the ability to cope with difficult times. That is, the role of the significant other can be pivotal to more than feeling regulation. It can determine the impact and aftershocks of different traumatic events. Along with a host of other variables such as age and gender of trauma survivor, the presence of the significant other may mitigate the traumatic scars that will remain in the future.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The exclusive reliance on self-reporting to assess attachment style represents a constraint of methodology that can be overcome with other forms of data elicitation. Additionally, lack of knowledge of parent attachment styles clouds our understanding of the potential diversity or uniformity of parental modes for expressing crucial emotional relationships. Finally, the potential effects of other mediating and moderating variables not measured in this study may play a role in influencing offspring attachment style.

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