Reflections on Moral Decision-Making: A Qualitative Analysis of Holocaust Survivors

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Moral Decision-Making
- Contrary to past theories of moral development, contemporary perspectives emphasize the role of emotion in moral decision-making.
- The Social Intuitionist Model (Haidt, 2001) suggests that moral decision-making is influenced by both intra and inter psychological processes.
- Views reasoning as a post-hoc, justification process
- Requires emotional regulation

Trauma & Moral Decision-Making
- Haidt's (2001) theory was based on the analysis of people who suffered from physical trauma and showed that trauma survivors have difficult integrating their emotions into morally-relevant decisions.
- Psychoanalytic theorists have also focused on the moral decision-making of trauma survivors, positing that guilt can overwhelm Holocaust Survivors and motivate their moral decision-making.
- Survivor syndrome is dictated by an omnipotent fantasy which is characterized by the feeling that the survivor controls the fate of other people.

Research Question
- How do Holocaust Survivors make morally-relevant decisions?

Exemplars of Themes
- Compassion (n=4): Be compassionate, to have, uh, compassion, for other people, try to help, wherever you can. I try to be helpful.
- Fairness/Justice (n=3): I got a letter from Germany that they want me to testify against Fritz Fegelein. There were maybe a dozen people, each from a different country, and we all testify.
- Fairness/Egalitarianism (n=3): I would not refuse anybody who needs help, never! If I can...Indian, Chinese, Black or White; we should all treat everybody equally.
- Holocaust Vigilance (n=3): We survivors feel obligated...we must promote tolerance and help ensure that the act of hatred never happens again.
- Identity (n=3): I mentioned I speak...survivors help humanity, where Hitler and collaborators destroyed humanity. This is part of my mission.
- Other-Preservation (n=3): I had a friend who was dying. What can I give him? I found an egg, a raw egg, but maybe it’ll help him. I didn’t keep it.
- Reciprocity (n=2): I think I should help you, I should help you, and vice versa, she helped me to survive and I helped her to survive.
- Religion/Spirituality (n=3): I have one thing in my policy. If I’m nice to people and if I help people, God helps me.
- Self-Preservation (n=2): I have to put the knife right through his heart...otherwise, we all three gonna get killed.
- Relationship-Preference/Community (n=2): If I wouldn’t be married and have my two kids...I would shout loud..., but I couldn’t do that, I don’t care what happens to me, but I don’t do that when I count my children and my wife.
- Duty/Reverence (n=1): He helped a great deal...I said that maybe one day in my life, I could be kind and do something too, like him.

Discussion
- Compassion, the only theme that was endorsed by all the participants and the only theme the requires emotion (Haidt, 2003), cooccurred with every theme. The integration of compassion with other themes contradicts extant theories on moral decision-making and trauma survivors (Damasio, 1994; Haidt, 2001; Efton & Granberg, 2008).
- The disparity between the results of this study and those of other work (e.g., Haidt, 2007) might be due to methodological differences in the investigation of moral decision-making as it phenomenologically occurs during reflection and moral decision-making as it is scientifically measured.
- Psychoanalytic theory about the moral decision-making of Holocaust Survivors seems to have overestimated the impact of guilt and shame avoidance.
- The iterative narration and processing over time might increase the awareness of the role of emotions in moral decision-making.
- Further research might investigate the phenomenon of moral decision-making and the use of narratives in trauma recovery.

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Participants (N = 4)
- Selected from a larger sample of 40 members of the Speaker’s Bureau at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York.
- 2 Females and 2 Males

Method
- Each participant was interviewed independently by two members of the research team, with the exception of one survivor who was interviewed with her husband.
- Interviews were conducted by a female faculty member in Counseling Psychology and seven graduate students.
- Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol which did not include questions about moral decision-making.
- Interview times ranged from 134 to 191 minutes.
- Interviews were transcribed and verified to make sure that they were completely consistent with the audio-recordings.

Codings
- Interviews were initially analyzed and coded using grounded theory as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967).
- Two independent coders reviewed each transcript for instances of moral decision-making, chunking passages that showed evidence of values or beliefs that pertained to: (a) regulating selfishness in social circumstances and/or (b) evaluations of circumstances, actions or people that had a valence of right or wrong or good or bad.
- Instances of moral decision-making were then coded into themes by the two independent coders, who then met to reach consensus on the overall themes.
- These codes were audited by an independent member of the research team.
- The two primary, independent coders agreed on 83% of instances; the auditor agreed with 95% of the total instances.

Frequencies of Themes Identified

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequent Cooccurrence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duty/Reverence</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness/Egalitarianism</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness/Justice</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holocaust Vigilance</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-Preservation</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Preference</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion/Spirituality</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Preservation</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compassion occurred with every other theme at least twice, totaling 43 cooccurrences overall.