

# **“And the Ones that Survived had Hope”: Resilience in Holocaust Survivors**

**Melissa L. Morgan**

**Veronica Franco**

**Erick Felix**

**Nicole M. Ramirez**

University of California Santa Barbara

## **Abstract**

The current study uses a strengths-based lens to explore the resilience narratives of five Holocaust survivors and their perspectives on experiences of resilience during and after the Holocaust. Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), transcripts of one to one-and-a-half hour interviews were analyzed by a team of three researchers. Overarching emergent themes of meaning included: Definition of Resilience, Adversities, Attitude After Overcoming Adversity, Method of Resilience, Adhering to Cultural Values, and Beliefs About Others' Experience of Resilience. Subthemes and tertiary categories also evolved and are discussed. Findings are interpreted with the acknowledgement of systemic oppression and overcoming, including participants' development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1975/2000), both relevant to the interpretation of recovery from human-created oppression through a social justice lens. Implications for current societal circumstances and issues are discussed.

*Keywords: Holocaust, survivors, qualitative, phenomenological, resilience*

## **Resilience in Holocaust Survivors: Lessons from Those who Survived Genocide**

Surviving the Holocaust as a victim of human-created oppression and living to serve the world through an investment in social justice lens characterizes many survivor stories. However, most extant literature on Holocaust survivors, particularly that prior to the past couple of decades, focuses on adversities such as concentration encampment and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Kuch & Cox, 1992), as well as the difficulties faced by survivors immediately after their release (Kahana et al., 2007). In the 1970's and 1980's, research started to shift to the longer-term psychological effects of trauma endured by survivors (Barel et al., 2010; Kahana et al., 1997). Most recently, studies have looked at the effects on survivors as they age. Long-term effects for survivors often include continued triggering from the trauma, nightmares, hypervigilance, survivor's guilt and grief (Kellerman, 2009), in addition to normal aging challenges (Kahana et al., 2007). While such studies have been informative, there is a need to learn more about strengths and the social justice service, or 'giving back to the world' characterizing many such individuals.

In addition to the plethora of findings about long-term deficits, Holocaust survivors have been found to have significant resilience (Glickman et al., 2003; Shmotkin et al., 2011). Resilience has been defined as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, including trauma, tragedy, threats, or other significant sources of stress—such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors (APA, n.d.). Adversities involve risk, or exposure to difficulties that can interfere with development (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). There has been an increasing interest in the contextual and cultural circumstances that promote resilience (Kirmayer et al., 2011; Theron, 2016; Ungar, 2011). Specifically, family cohesiveness, unity, interpersonal relationships, and autonomy are cultural factors and values that have been found to be passed down to subsequent generations of families of Holocaust survivors (Chaitin, 2002).

Inquiry into the experiences of Holocaust survivors has often been characterized by stories of purpose and hope (Greene, 2002). As famously documented by Victor Frankl (1984), many concentration camp prisoners were able to find meaning in everyday life despite the misery and horror through which they were living (Greene, 2002). Just as Frankl was able to attach meaning to occurrences and create hope within the concentration camp where he was housed, others also found things to attach meaning to for survival (Frankl, 1984). Meaning making is defined as the forming and reforming of intentionality and significance attributed to actions or events, and is essential for adult development (Carlsen, 1988). Testimonies from Holocaust survivors have often recounted atrocities experienced with a more meaningful framing. For example, some in the camps assigned meaning to death as an escape from suffering while other survivors conceptualized survival as important in order to fulfill their families' wishes for them (Ayalon et al., 2007).

The resilience of Holocaust survivors is exemplified by their ability to live relatively normal lives in their later years, reporting satisfaction with job situations and interpersonal relationships (Shanan, 1988), being well adjusted both in physical health and cognitive functioning (Barel et al., 2010), and often succeeding in compartmentalizing the trauma they experienced in order to function well in their family as partners, parents, and grandparents (Shmotkin et al., 2011). These traits are seen as adaptive and a means to survive the traumatic experiences not only from the period of the Holocaust but also afterwards (Shanan, 1988).

Other types of responses to the adversities of the Holocaust also have been indicated as helpful in survivor resilience: choosing to live, focusing on basic needs, living for and protecting family, friendships, caring for others, community work, and artistic endeavors (Greene, 2010). Family values, religious beliefs, and social support (Hollander-Goldfein et al., 2012) also have been found helpful in processes of overcoming. In contrast, some have felt their survival of the Holocaust was entirely based on luck and they were simply fortunate to have survived such an atrocity (Ayalon et al., 2007).

While there is a large amount of extant literature on Holocaust survivors in general, less research has been conducted with older survivors, indeed some of the remaining few who are living. Even less of this research has been conducted from a strengths-based perspective, highlighting the fortitude and persistence of such individuals. The lack of a strengths-based foci becomes a social justice issue in that what is published shapes our images of the subject matter. Specifically, reading only about damage and not about strengths of Holocaust Survivors shapes how we frame and think about the experiences of these oppressed individuals. We have much to learn from the strengths of these individuals, particularly in light of our recent struggles in the United States around who we are as a nation and issues of racial justice. While we never want to discount the oppression, it is important to acknowledge and learn from the strengths that allow them to overcome and to use this information to empower communities that continue to be oppressed (Solomon, 1987). In understanding how these Holocaust survivors were able to overcome adversities we can develop a deeper understanding of how to support communities and individuals who continue to experience oppression.

Qualitative research allows for an in-depth look at the narratives and recounting of the participants, with the goal of understanding the phenomenon of resilience through their voices. More specifically, qualitative approaches provide a detailed examination of individuals' subjective human experiences that may not be assessed through objective measures. Thus, our methodology itself becomes a social justice choice. Choosing a method that centers the person's voice helps to avoid the epistemological violence that can occur from using the more top-down, traditional and prescribed ways of studying a topic which unfortunately may perpetuate deficit thinking about certain groups of people (Barker et al., 2003; Teo, 2010).

The current study explores the lived experiences of Holocaust survivors in their eighties and nineties using the phenomenological approach of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), (Smith, 2004). We addressed the research question: How do Holocaust survivors experience and understand their overcoming of adversities and their resilience, and what are the long term impacts of this?

## Methods

### Researchers' Positionality

The first author is a cisgender, female, Counseling Psychology faculty member, trained in a social justice and strengths-based perspective. She identifies as Latina (mixed European and Mexican) and has engaged in and taught qualitative inquiry for many years. She developed a relationship with the local Jewish Federation when she was asked to help evaluate an agency program (Morgan Consoli et al., 2017). She has devoted her career to teaching and studying multicultural and social justice issues. The second author is a cisgender, female, doctoral student in Counseling Psychology who identifies as a Latinx woman. Subsequent authors are doctoral students in Counseling Psychology. They identify, respectively, as a cisgender, Latinx male of Mexican descent and a biracial, Latinx, cisgender woman of Mexican and European descent. All have been trained from a social justice and strengths-based perspective. None of the authors have Jewish backgrounds.

The first three authors formed a team that analyzed the transcribed interviews of Holocaust survivors. Prior to the start of analysis, the analysis team discussed their preconceived notions and beliefs related to relevant study topics (i.e. resilience, Holocaust, etc.), as is called for in qualitative work to share the lenses through which the data will be viewed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Analysis team members expressed a consensus in the belief that everyone has the capacity to be resilient but it varies based on life experience and environment and that human-created oppression may create unique ways of overcoming and making meaning of what happened. Perspectives on and experience with the Jewish population varied with some members disclosing they had always viewed Jewish people in positions of power and as spiritual people. One member disclosed having little experience with Jewish people while growing up, and had viewed them as more educated and as social justice advocates. Given the

age of participants, members believed they may have had time to process the experience and attribute meaning to some of the atrocities experienced.

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited through a local Jewish Federation Program with whom our research team had previously worked. This program paired Holocaust survivors with at-risk youth in a mentoring program (see Morgan Consoli et al., 2017). Potential participants were provided information about the study through the federation and encouraged to contact the researchers for an opportunity to share their experiences overcoming adversities through the Holocaust. All five resulting participants (4 female; 1 male), were Holocaust survivors between the ages of 80 and 92-years-old, thus they were young children when the Holocaust occurred. Given its emphasis on depth and the lived experiences of individuals, IPA studies suggest that an acceptable sample size is between three and six participants (Smith et al., 2009), as IPA's primary approach is to provide a detailed and concentrated account of human phenomena (Smith et al., 2009). All were active members in their Jewish community federation. The inclusion criteria for participants were that they identified as Holocaust survivors and were interested in sharing their experiences around resilience. Brief participant descriptions follow.

#### ***Participant One***

Participant One is an 82-year-old Jewish woman who was born in Poland and was forced to leave her family during the war. She and her relatives witnessed many atrocities as she moved around Europe. After the war she moved to Canada and obtained a master's degree and worked in a public service job. She married, and described bringing up "a successful family of three well-educated children and six grandchildren."

#### ***Participant Two***

Participant Two is a Jewish woman in her eighties who described herself as "from a family full of doctors." After living through the war from the age of four, she came to U.S.A. from Europe at 11-years-old, where she attended school for the first time, and learned to speak English. During the Holocaust, she was separated from her father who was taken to the Russian Army as a physician, and she went with her mother and uncle to hide in a bunker. Her family was reunited in Poland post-war. She continued on to live in the U.S.A.

#### ***Participant Three***

Participant Three is a 92-year-old Jewish woman born in Germany. She and her family fled to a Jewish suburb in the U.S.A. at the age of 12 during the war. She lived in a small apartment with her mother and brother. She attended a Jewish grade school and high school. Upon graduation she attended a fashion school, got married and moved to the West Coast of the U.S.A. Her grandparents and grandparents' family were all killed during the Holocaust. She has six grandchildren.

#### ***Participant Four***

Participant Four is a 92-year-old female who grew up in a "well-off" family in Poland. She was in elementary school when the Nazis came to power. Her family was forced to flee and move around Europe multiple times during the war. They eventually fled to the U.S.A. in 1941 and she attended a university in New York City, then obtained graduate education. She worked in international social service positions for her entire career. She stated that all of her relatives "became professors."

#### ***Participant Five***

Participant Five is an 81-year-old Jewish man who was born in Germany. When very young, his family sent him on a Kindertransport to Scotland, where he was adopted by a family. The family was later reunited in Bolivia, and moved to the U.S.A. when he was 15 years old. His family was working class and they worked a lot. He attended community college and a university for a few years and became a professional. He married and has children and grandchildren. His aunt died in Auschwitz in a gas chamber, and he lost contact with his father.

## **Procedures**

Interested participants contacted the researchers and individuals meeting criteria were invited to participate in an in-person interview. One of the researchers interviewed the participants at the local Jewish community center or at the individual's home, depending on the preference of the participant (some had more difficulty getting out and about so it was deemed important to go to them in some cases). The researcher reviewed the consent form prior to beginning the interview and answered any questions. Participants were also asked to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire (see below). Interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours and were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. Interviews were conducted by the first author or by a trained doctoral student. Participants were not given monetary compensation but were provided refreshments during their interviews and thanked for their participation. The research project was approved by the university Internal Review Board.

## **Materials**

### ***Demographic Questionnaire***

A brief demographic questionnaire was developed for the purposes of the study. The demographic questionnaire asked questions on age, gender, education, and occupation.

### ***Semi-structured interview***

The semi-structured interview protocol and all questions within it were open-ended, allowing participants to generate discussion about their experiences and understanding of resilience, as well as allowing for the researcher to follow up on relevant topics. Questions were developed by the researchers for this study based on previous literature on resilience (Morgan Consoli et al., 2017; Morgan Consoli & Gonzales, 2017, Morgan Consoli et al., 2019; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Ungar, 2011). Questions included participant's definitions of and views on resilience, how they overcame adversities and made meaning out of their experiences, as well as the presence of resilience in the rest of their lives (See Appendix A).

## **Design and Analysis**

The underlying research paradigm for the selected qualitative approach of IPA was social constructivist. Social constructivism aims to understand participants' subjective experiences, asserts that there are multiple realities shaped by our contextualized experiences, and affirms that meaning is co-constructed through researcher-participant interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). IPA grew out of qualitative studies in a healthcare setting with a primary goal of exploring how individuals assign meaning to their experiences (Smith et al, 2009). The overall goal of IPA is to explore in-depth how participants make sense of their personal and social worlds and is rooted in the belief that individuals are meaning makers of their lived experiences that are informed by their social and historical contexts (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). A salient tenet of IPA is the elicitation of personal accounts of specific group members that are immersed in their relational, social, and cultural worlds (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). IPA is an interpretative approach and engages in double hermeneutics, emphasizing that as the researchers are making sense of the participants' experience, the participants themselves are also making sense of their own lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This allows the researchers to pay attention to participants' processes of meaning-making in their own personal and social worlds (Smith et al., 2009). Using IPA, the researchers intended to create a platform to give voice to the Holocaust survivor participants and make sense of their overcoming of adversities and resilience.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the team members. All team members received training in qualitative coding by the first author, who has had several years of experience using IPA's data analysis method. The training consisted of team members practicing coding and discussing how codes were derived as a group with the first author. IPA research is integrative and inductive, thus analysis emerges through the interpretation of participants' experiences while conducting data analysis within each case and across cases (Smith et al., 2009). Steps taken in analysis included line-by-line analysis, in which the researchers immersed themselves in the data

by reading and rereading transcripts and making sense of the emerging narrative of the participant. Researchers then began initial coding as a research team emphasizing “convergence and divergence, commonality and nuance” (Smith et al, 2009, p.80), within each case and then across cases. This process led to coding dialogues between researchers, on the coded data, and on participants’ knowledge that reflected the meanings of their lived experiences given their contexts. The final step included the organization of analysis from initial steps to final steps.

This iterative process led to the creation of an interpretation that encompassed all data relevant to the topic of study. Researchers engaged in dialogue and reflexivity throughout each stage of the analysis. A unique approach to IPA is the focus on what each theme may mean for participants, given their individual contexts (Smith et al., 2009). Analysis team members rotated facilitation of analysis meetings to assist in the prevention of groupthink, and make sure discussions adhered to the data. A faculty member from another university, highly trained in qualitative inquiry, served as the external auditor reviewing the coding and accounts of overcoming adversities to ensure they logically reflected the data. The external auditor provided feedback to the researchers, such as suggestions for clarifications of theme names and definitions, that the analysis team discussed and integrated into the coding scheme. Unfortunately, it was not possible to follow up with participants for their feedback on interpretations, however, as per the method, many clarifications and meaning checks were made during the interviews. The final interpretative themes and narrative are a representation of the researchers’ examination of overcoming of adversities resulting from the Holocaust.

## Results

While many discussed the specific adversities they faced, it is beyond the space allotted for this paper to go into details of all such adversities. In general, they faced adversities such as experiencing constant physical danger, losing family, and migrating to a new country or joining a new family. In all of these adversities they discussed an underlying, ever-present fear. Four superordinate interpretive themes emerged across participant responses: 1) Attitude After Overcoming Adversity; 2) Method of Resilience; 3) Adhering to Cultural Values; and 4) Beliefs About Others’ Experience of Resilience. In addition, subthemes themes emerged around overcoming adversities and resilience (see Table 1 for an overview of all themes). In the following section, definitions and descriptions of themes are presented along with significant quotes from participants. One to three participant excerpts are provided to illustrate and support each theme, as recommended by Smith et al., (2009).

### Attitude After Overcoming Adversity

A salient theme across participant responses involved participant perceptions of others facing an adversity in life. Participants described having lived through the Holocaust shifted their perceptions of how they view resilience. One female participant described her attitude about resilience as:

My attitude about resilience... in all honesty, I think it’s (going through Holocaust) made me a little bit judgmental. Uh, in that, I don’t like it when people, um, you know, kind of, whine about hardships they’ve had and why they behave a certain way. I think I’m not very nice about that... It’s just, when people feel that they’ve been wronged and they make a very big deal out of it, and it doesn’t, you know, they don’t improve themselves because of this attitude, I’m not very nice about how I look at it.

### Method of Resilience

Participants described various ways in which they were able to overcome life challenges. Most participants shared a variety of strategies they integrated within their lives that helped them overcome and be active members within their family and communities. Some included their personal lens of viewing the world, creating meaning, and having hope and other strategies included a shared narrative around remaining silent about the Holocaust and having to rely on themselves.

**Choosing Resilience.** This subtheme was defined as participants selecting a lens through which they view the world after having faced an adversity. A female participant described this as, "Well you know it's kind of a way of life. I mean you... accept what you can do and what you can't do. Accept what you have and what you don't have. So, it's just like a coping mechanism." Another female participant stated, "Well, you figure if you can survive that, you can survive anything else and do better." A third female participant described her resilience as being strong:

Kind of a strength. Um, to see the synagogue in the neighborhood burning, or hundreds of people strolling around screaming and yelling, what I had to do is walk through the crowd, but without boots, without having boots, and saying, "well I'm going to my school and my school will be different." It was...the reality was that the school was not different. It was also destroyed on *Kristallnacht*. However, that idea, you know, that you have to have strength, and that was, of course, I went to school and maybe in the Jewish school we also learned that you had to overcome this dilemma.

**Creating Meaning.** This subtheme includes participants' descriptions of making a useful and important life. For example, one female participant described creating meaning as, "Well, be a good citizen. Contribute to the community. Be a responsible spouse, a responsible parent." Another female participant shared that she created meaning in her life "...partly by forgetting difficulties, adversities. For many years and just going with life and doing things that are useful for humanity." A male participant stated:

You know, okay, there are two aspects to your life, is to be successful for yourself, but I also felt that a lot of the things I did was related to making it a better world and that's a cliché, you know. So that's what I recall because none of my work was about making money. It happened that I did make money because, but the fact was, making something interesting and worthwhile... that's maybe what I meant.

**Silence About Holocaust.** The subtheme of Silence About Holocaust was defined as survivors remaining quiet about their experiences in the Holocaust to better deal with them. For example, a male participant shared, "On purpose, I put it in the background and not thought about it [sic]. That was important to me." A female participant noted, "I don't know whether that's good or not... when I was raising my family. I did not talk about the Holocaust because I wanted them to have a normal life. I didn't want them to feel guilty or anything or feel sorry – I don't want people to feel sorry for me – so in a way, maybe I am to blame, that it's like denying this happened." Another female participant shared, "I never talked for 20-30 years about my experiences, and I lived in foreign countries, and nobody ever asked me, you know, and I just dealt with the present and the future."

**Receiving Support.** Receiving Support was defined by the researchers as having others assist them to overcome their adversities. A male participant stated that what helped in overcoming was, "Security, both mental, physical, and love. You know, love or friendship, maybe, and understanding above all that. Understanding of other people and what they came through, which is very difficult because somebody who hasn't gone through tragedies or difficulties often cannot really understand them." A female participant shared, "when people go through this huge thing and you know it's kind of like this collective trauma because everyone is going through something similar, everyone is going through the same thing and in some ways can help in the sense of coping because other people know, they all went through it."

**Being Accepting.** This subtheme encompassed participants' descriptions of a process of coming to terms with one's situation. A female participant depicted this in the following way, "I tried to accept it. There were a few things that I can't quite forgive, for what happened to most of my family. That's one aspect...but most of it, I just tried to live a normal life." Another female participant stated:

Not to know the language, I also had a new mother. We had no money. We were very poor and that was hard to take, you know, not to have anything, when we always had before, and to decide in your mind you will accept all that there is, all these hardships and you go on. You go on with your wish, your determination. I had a focus. I had a very strong focus.

Another female participant stated, about the acceptance of other survivors in her family:

Well, they absolutely couldn't cope with what was demanded of their... they had very low class work, maybe in a factory. My aunt, who was a Jewish princess, worked in a factory gluing wallets, you know, I mean, very demeaning kind of work. Uh, but being that she had a lot of other Jews, refugees there that became her friends; they all coped together, but maybe such a person that was alone, having to do the job that had not support, that had no support, maybe, from home or from herself couldn't cope with it.

**Experiencing Luck.** This subtheme depicts the belief by some survivors that overcoming Holocaust adversities can be partially fortuitous. For example, a male participant stated simply, "I could move on with life and I'm very lucky because I survived." Relatedly, another female participant stated:

So, we were one of 10% of survivors in this one bunker in (geographic location). So, there was a lot of luck, too. There was planning, but there was luck, too. A lot of these things, a lot of people were hiding, they planned on it, but they were found out. We were lucky not to be found out.

**Relying on Yourself.** The subtheme of Relying on Yourself was defined as "survival being up to the individual." This was exemplified by one female participant who stated very directly, "It's up to you to survive." Another male participant noted:

I have to deal with things, obviously we all have problems, and we deal with them. I have to solve it myself. I don't think anybody can help, you know, sometimes friends, or family, can give you advice, but I believe very much that basically that, you, yourself, have to solve problems and obviously we all have problems.

**Having Hope.** This subtheme of Having Hope was defined as looking beyond the present. A female participant stated, "We knew that we would be liberated...and we hoped they would find our families...you know it wasn't always true, but they had hope. Hope was a big thing." Another female participant stated:

You know and, I think when you read the history of some of the survivors...why did some survive, and some didn't? ...because of the resiliency. Because some of them gave up. And the ones that survived had hope.

### **Adhering to Cultural Values**

Participants described cultural values they adhered to that informed their resilience. Many shared the belief of having to move forward, obtaining education, and having a routine as cultural values that were part of their upbringing. This theme included subthemes of Persevering, Bettering Self, Discipline, and a tertiary theme under Persevering by Doing What You Have to Do.

**Persevering.** The subtheme of Persevering was defined as moving forward in the face of difficulties. A female participant noted, "Well you know, it's like, you know, just keep persevering." Another female participant said, "Well, to me, it means that, after overcoming difficulties, to not worry about it, and just keep up with life. Make the best of life, you know?" Yet another female participant described survival as, "Overcome, to overcome things, events, happenings, life's uh, life's experiences, to overcome them, and to go on with whatever you have to go on with to live."

Within the subtheme of Persevering, a tertiary theme emerged, Doing What You Have to Do. This tertiary theme was defined as participants' seeing overcoming as necessary. A female participant put this simply: "Well you know, we just sometimes have to do what you have to do." Another female participant said, "So, you did what you had to do. It wasn't a matter of you know ... "I can't do this" or you know or, "I need help." A male participant said:

They just worked all their lives. There wasn't any question about it. I started, when we got to Memphis, I was fifteen almost sixteen and I started a paper route. I would get up at 3:30 in the morning and deliver



papers to the ... and then after that I worked in a clothing store and hardware store, so I basically worked the whole time. So, you know, you did what you had to do. It wasn't a matter of we had a choice.

**Bettering Self.** This subtheme was defined as the process of self-improvement being a part of overcoming adversities, often through education. A female participant stated, "Also, you know when you make goals in life. You want an education...you want a better life for yourself." Another female participant noted, "My parents believed in education. That's part of the whole practice, believing in education and getting ahead," the same participant also shared "Yeah, I think that was very important for my family. Education is very important. For most Jewish families it is. When we came to the United States, getting ahead meant education and that's what we instilled in our kids."

**Having Discipline.** The last subtheme within the theme of Adhering to Cultural Values was Having Discipline and was defined as keeping a daily routine of life. A female participant noted, "I don't know how much resilience you have in a bunker because you're really not in control of anything. Yeah, I guess you control your behavior, but you had to." Another female participant described this as, "I feel that I am still disciplined. I don't think I am obedient. But I am still disciplined, and I still always have been disciplined. For instance, every day I go in the swimming pool in the morning, and I work out. That's a certain discipline." Another female participant noted:

I had to learn to let all that go and there I had every day, and that kind of a strength I think was born into German children. Obedience, discipline, meant you overcame things. It wasn't a soft way; it was a rather hard way that you overcame things. Obedience and discipline were the utmost importance, and I think that kind of thing is positive, and it is negative. Helped, however, helped me forever to overcome many things that got lost, that were no more, that I had to get adjusted to.

### **Beliefs About Others' Experience of Resilience**

The last superordinate theme is Beliefs About Others' Experience of Resilience. This theme was defined by the researchers as "perception participants had of other survivors who they did not see as resilient." It included the subthemes of Difficulties Adapting to Life After Holocaust Blaming Others After Holocaust, and Staying in Survivor Enclave.

**Difficulties Adapting to Life After the Holocaust.** This subtheme was used to classify when participants talked about those who were not able to overcome adversities. For example, two female participants shared, "A lot of survivors that just fall apart... fall apart and also, they put a lot of blame on their children and on others. They can't cope" and "Well, they lack their will to forget to past and look into the future, you know, work on themselves. There is life beyond tragedy, losing a loved one." Another female participant stated:

A number of people who were refugees, who came to America, could not cope, could not cope, with the hard life that they had here. It was during the time of the depression still and right after the depression; committed suicide. There was, you know, my family talked of some people that committed suicide, who couldn't bear it, or some went back to Germany after the war.

**Blaming Others After Holocaust.** This subtheme was described as participants describing other Holocaust survivors experience around surviving, but not being able to move emotionally past the Holocaust.

This female participant described:

For instance, there was one woman that asked to share a room with me in a hotel when we went to visit the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C. She was a survivor, and its true you know, um, she was in a concentration camp and she suffered but she talked and talked obscenely... and she had one son and she couldn't get along with her son because of all of the blame she put on everybody else and she has a difficult time... always angry, lashing out... a difficult time to accept... to make peace with yourself.

**Staying in Survivor Enclave.** This subtheme was defined by the researchers as surrounding self with only survivors. A female participant noted:

You know another thing that I noticed is...there's a group of people living in (other state), and they were Holocaust survivors. And it's like... they all stuck together all the time. They didn't go out of that circle to embrace normal experiences. You know Holocaust survivors are different...and there were times when the general population didn't want to hear the stories...and if you dwell on it all the time... in fact I think there was a film at (local university) once we went to see and it showed... ..and every year all these Holocaust survivors would meet, and they just lived among themselves. They didn't try to adapt, you know like you move somewhere, you got to learn to adapt to your environment, and they rejected that. So, their whole life was like rehashing the experiences of the Holocaust.

## Discussion

The current study provided insights into how Holocaust survivors were resilient in the face of atrocities and how they think about their own resilience retrospectively. The study is framed through a social justice lens, in that we need to understand not only the deficits created for victims of person-created oppression, but also acknowledge and understand the strengths and perspectives utilized to overcome such oppression. Many findings corroborate those of the few other studies looking at resilience in Holocaust survivors. For example, many adversities emerged for these participants both during and after the Holocaust. Such adversities have been generally outlined previously (Ayalon et al., 2007). Meaning making emerged as a large theme discussed by many participants. The ability to make sense of something, or assign any significance to it, has long been seen as related to hope and necessary to keep moving forward (Snyder, 2002). In fact, many survivors attributed their survival or the survival of others to hope. Hope has been found to be tied to resilience across a range of different populations and circumstances (Panter-Brick & Eggerman, 2012; Satici, 2016; Vartak, 2015). Dr. Viktor Frankl, the famous creator of logotherapy and Holocaust survivor, discussed finding meaning in the smallest acts of kindness or even in little details of nature inside the camp (Frankl, 1984). Indeed, the field of existential psychology emphasizes the importance of meaning making for wellbeing; for the survivors, things like surviving in hopes of seeing their families again or even living a good, successful life after the Holocaust kept them going.

Other current study findings on resilience were more unique and represent novel contributions to the literature. Analysis of the interviews revealed that adherence to cultural values gave many individuals a foundation to cling to while facing their adversities. For example, the valuing of perseverance, discipline and bettering oneself, which was often accomplished through education, or the valuing of family and friend support in which one may develop an extended family, sometimes replacing those who were lost during the Holocaust. Participants *chose* attitudes such as gratefulness and rejection of hatred. While most survivor participants did not mention explicit Jewish values, we interpreted many of their responses as shaped by the valuing of reflection, resilience and social justice in the world.

Another interesting "method" of resilience that was talked about impactfully by some participants was the idea of just surviving through luck, or even that resilience is luck. This finding is related to the research on systemic structures and resilience, or more specifically, the criticism of resilience as being too tied to an individual. The concept that has been called critical resilience, and that we are further developing, therefore seems apt, given that it acknowledges power structures and inequities in systems and entails development of a consciousness about such systems that may lead to growth and a desire for action to change the system (Campa, 2013). Using this framework, we note that Holocaust survivors were completely at the mercy of existing power structures based on their demographic identities. There was nothing they could have done to escape the atrocities, and the recognition of luck or attribution of their survival to luck, then, may be an acknowledgement of this type of overcoming despite extant power structures; thus, critical resilience.

Frankl talks in his book "Man's Search for Meaning" about the only part of the prisoner that the Gestapo could not reach: "a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom" (Frankl, 1984, p. 55). Survivors' consciousness of this, much like the participants in the current study discussed what we labeled as "Choosing Resilience" – or framing things in such a way that you were able to persevere. These outcomes indicate the navigation of power structures and adversity beyond one's control in a critically resilient way. It should be noted at the same time, that the difficulties some survivors had in adjusting after the Holocaust were due to these same power structures and systemic oppression, and not through some choice or lack of choice on their own part. Interestingly, another participant also talked about herself as being more judgmental of others after going through her own hardships. It seems that after overcoming such a severe atrocity, other hardships in life may be handled differently or change one's perception of others going through adversities.

Despite, perhaps, a changed view of surviving adversity, the participant survivors in the current study were recruited through their involvement in giving back to society at the local Jewish Center. Specifically, they were mentoring at-risk Latinx youth through hardships related to discrimination; thus, trying to change future society for the better. As "giving back" and wanting to change or affect the system was an outcome of going through adversity; these individuals were living out the resilient outcomes of developing critical consciousness, or an in-depth understanding of the world, including social and political contradictions and power structures, and the ability and desire to intervene to change it (Freire, 1975), in their lives already, and this is consistent with what they reported – many having lived post-Holocaust lives of giving and service, or "making it a better world." Thus, these individuals were critically resilient, a type of resilience accounting for power dynamics and social, historical, economic and cultural contexts for individuals and which results in a specific type of gains: those that help create a perspective of wanting to give back and help society. Through confronting the human-created adversities (oppression) the survivors seem to have gained critical consciousness (Campa, 2010; Morgan, in press).

### **Delimitations**

As is standard in qualitative research, there are choices we have made that, while not limitations, are more accurately defined as delimitations (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). For example, we engaged in participant recruitment for "Holocaust survivors" as our intention was to focus on those who considered themselves survivors. Therefore, we had participants who had been impacted greatly by the discrimination and oppression against Jewish people during World War II and had considered themselves as survivors though they had not lived directly in the concentration camps. In actuality, there are few survivors of concentration camps still alive at this point.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The framing of these lifelong stories by survivors as critical resilience illustrates a social justice perspective on what it is to overcome extremely adverse oppression, and then move forward in life with a critical consciousness that not all in society acquire in their lifetimes. It is important to note that we are in no way minimizing the adversities faced, saying people *should* be able to overcome all adversities or placing the onus on the participant to overcome, in fact, with critical resilience it is quite the opposite. Through recognizing that these individuals faced atrocities created by other humans that were systematized, we are highlighting the power differences and pressures in place in the world which systemically oppress many marginalized individuals. Indeed, in our modern-day world, with the recent murder of George Floyd and many others along with the discounting of facts and unequal treatment of protesters across racial and political lines, among many other such occurrences, we are seeing systemic oppression continue. Holocaust survivors themselves have commented on the parallels between recent political circumstances and what they witnessed in World War II (Fox-Bevilacqua, 2020), discussing in the interviews the ways they have overcome systemic oppression and a society that turned against them because of their identities during World War II. The current study informs our conceptualization of resilience in the face of human-created oppression and holds many social justice implications for our current times, including that

we should never forget and never cease to learn from these human-created, tragic events in our history. It also reminds us to use a strengths-based and critical lens as psychologists, counselors and educators to view current events and frame our understandings and teaching and provides a call to take action that mirrors and can be incorporated into current societal dynamics. Such perspectives can be used to develop programming for helping survivors of discrimination and oppression, for therapy with clients who suffer discrimination and “isms,” and students who feel out of place in the system in which they find themselves. Finally, these findings remind us that saying nothing about such oppression in our society is equal to supporting the status quo (Prilleltensky, 1989). While these participants have shed light on how they were able to survive such atrocities, no one should have to do this.

### **Author Correspondence**

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Melissa L. Morgan, Ph.D., University of California Santa Barbara, 2141 Education Building, [mmorgan@education.ucsb.edu](mailto:mmorgan@education.ucsb.edu).

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. Many people use the word resilient. What does resilience mean to you?
  - a. What experiences, stories or examples have influenced your understanding of resilience, if any?
2. Based on upon your understanding of resilience, do you consider yourself to be resilient? Why or why not?
3. What do you feel allows people to be able to overcome traumatic events or difficult life situations and to keep going with their lives?
  - a. What do you think motivated you to keep going (e.g. be resilient) in the face of adversity?
4. Do you feel you developed the ability to be resilient (overcome adversity) or that you were born with it? How does it occur?
5. How does resilience become an enduring characteristic of one's life? (i.e., last your entire life in all circumstances? ) Or does it?
  - a. Can you tell me how family and friends (or others) contributed to your resilience
  - b. How, if at all, have friends, family or others exemplified resilience?
  - c. Can you tell me how spirituality or religious beliefs contributed to your resilience?
  - d. Can you tell me how positive attitude contributed to your resilience?
  - e. Can you tell me how cultural beliefs contributed to your resilience
6. What happens to people who are not resilient? Can you provide an example?
7. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that I have not asked you about that you think might be helpful in our study?

**Table 1. Coding Scheme of Super-Ordinate Themes and Subthemes**

<b>Super-Ordinate Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
1. Attitude After Overcoming Adversity	
2. Method of Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Choosing Resilience</li> <li>b. Creating Meaning</li> <li>c. Silence About Holocaust</li> <li>d. Receiving Support</li> <li>e. Being Accepting</li> <li>f. Experiencing Luck</li> <li>g. Relying on Yourself</li> <li>h. Having Hope</li> </ul>
3. Adhering to Cultural Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Persevering</li> <li>b. Bettering Self</li> <li>c. Having Discipline</li> </ul>
4. Beliefs About Others' Experience of Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Not Overcoming</li> <li>b. Blaming Others After Holocaust</li> <li>c. Staying in Survivor Enclave</li> </ul>