



# Psychological vulnerability and resilience of Holocaust survivors engaged in creative art

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## ABSTRACT

Although evidence demonstrates that engagement in art promotes favorable coping with trauma, this subject is underexplored among Holocaust survivors. Thus, the present study explored whether Holocaust survivors engaged in art differed from survivors not engaged in art in various markers of psychological vulnerability and resilience. The study further included non-Holocaust survivor comparisons, some engaged in art and some not, in order to assess whether engagement in art among Holocaust survivors relates to a unique psychological profile beyond art engagement in general. A sample of 154 community-dwelling older adults (mean age = 81.67,  $SD = 5.33$ , range = 73–97) reported exposure to the Holocaust, current engagement in art, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, general psychological distress, resilience and subjective perceptions of age and aging. Holocaust survivors (regardless of whether they engaged in art or not) reported higher PTSD symptoms relative to comparisons. However, Holocaust survivors who engaged in art reported higher resilience than all other groups (survivors not engaged in art and comparisons engaged and not engaged in art). To the best of our knowledge, these findings are the first quantitative evidence pointing toward a link between engagement in art and positive coping with the Holocaust. These findings have important implications for clinicians working with Holocaust survivors.

## 1. Introduction

Engagement in art through literary, visual, and the performing arts has been recognized as reparative in the face of traumatic exposure (Laub and Podell, 1995; Richman, 2006; Metz and Morrell, 2008; Forgeard, 2013; Peleg et al., 2014; Richman, 2014; Fisher and Gilboa, 2016). The creative processes involved in engagement in art have been understood to provide opportunity to find meaning, to mourn, to bring order into emotional chaos and to regain a sense of continuity and integration (Metz and Morrell, 2008; Richman, 2014). Imagination and fantasy, especially when it is educated through continuous practice of art engagement, may enhance psychological well-being and augment coping strategies that promote adaptive resilience (Thomson, 2017). Together with this, engagement in art has been found to endorse high flow experiences, a variable with positive effects on well-being, as it creates both an internal sense of control and a simultaneous feeling of freedom (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Thompson and Jaque, 2016).

### 1.1. Holocaust survivors

Holocaust survivors experienced one of the most prolonged, massive

and horrific of man-made catastrophes in human history (e.g., Shmotkin et al., 2011). Survivors still living today were children or adolescents when their lives were overwhelmed by the horrors of the Holocaust. Thus, during their most formative years, these child-survivors were repeatedly exposed to terrible deprivations, cruelty, torture, and starvation (e.g., Durst, 2003). The psychological scars left by these shattering early life experiences have been profound and enduring for many, if not all of these child survivors (Lev-Wiesel and Amir, 2000). Although evidence demonstrates the relevance of engagement in art to favorable coping with a traumatic past, the evocation of resilience through spontaneous artistic engagement is an understudied area in the literature on the long-term effects of the Holocaust. Therefore, the current study compared Holocaust survivors who engage in art with survivors who do not engage in art, as well as with comparisons who do and do not engage in art.

Old community-dwelling Holocaust survivors have generally been found to demonstrate a general resilience, as they do not differ from comparisons in many areas of functioning (Barel et al., 2010; Shrira et al., 2010, 2011). With this, a large array of studies focusing on the impact of the Holocaust has suggested that decades after the trauma, psychological vulnerability, such as symptoms of posttraumatic stress

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disorder (PTSD) and depression, still prevail among survivors (for reviews, see [Kellermann, 2009](#); [Shmotkin et al., 2011](#)).

Mental health research of the psychological aftermath of the Holocaust has traditionally focused on pathogenic consequences. Relatively few studies relate to salutogenic factors promoting strength and more positive coping (for a review, see [Ayalon, 2005](#)). Moreover, as the challenges of old age have been found to heighten trauma-related vulnerabilities ([Shmotkin and Lomranz, 1998](#); [Hantman and Solomon, 2007](#)), when exploring differences between groups of Holocaust survivors engaging in art, survivors who do not engage in art, and comparisons, perceptions of aging becomes a highly relevant area to be incorporated. Therefore, the present study explored PTSD and other symptoms of psychological distress, but also resilience and subjective perceptions of age and aging held by Holocaust survivors engaging in art, survivors who do not engage in art, and comparisons.

### 1.2. Engagement in art

It should be noted that the aforementioned literature regarding the positive psychological effects of art engagement may suggest that the very inclination towards art, even prior to – or during experiences of adversity such as the Holocaust, may serve as a buffer to potential harmful emotional effects. In the case of the present study, however, the vast majority of survivors had been children or infants during the Holocaust, and so focus was directed towards art engagement in the present, and there was no query about art-engagement prior to or during the Holocaust.

Furthermore, in the present study, the focus is on spontaneous, self-initiated art engagement, including both professional and nonprofessional engagement, throughout different periods of life and for different lengths of time and different levels of investment. It should be noted that this is quite different from art engagement within the structure of art therapy, where other elements such as the therapeutic relationship may have an effect.

The type of art included in the study spread across a wide range of different art forms. No doubt there are substantial differences in engaging different kinds of art modalities, with this, common to all art engagement are certain core elements, such as flow, creativity and self-expression, and it is these elements, as will be further shown, which are related to in the literature regarding the psychological positive effects of art engagement.

Following will be presented what may be presently found in research literature most relevant to the association between each of the above mentioned markers of psychological vulnerability, resilience and aging perceptions, and the potential positive effects of artistic engagement among elderly survivors.

### 1.3. PTSD and general psychological distress

Holocaust survivors engaged in art may manifest lower psychological distress in general and lower PTSD symptoms in particular. Personal expression through art engagement can connect to the working through of traumatic memories. Memory traces of traumatic experiences are typically without temporal narrative organization, and may be stored in a nonverbal realm beyond the reach of verbal probes ([Greenberg and Van der Kolk, 1987](#); [Brewin et al., 1996](#)). The use of art may therefore become significantly important in working through traumatic experience, due to its quality of being both nonverbal and at the same time, a conscious deliberate act. Art may serve as a bridge, on the one hand inducing nonverbal access to traumatic memories and on the other hand, through more conscious attention, transferring these into visual images, which are more integrated with other information in autobiographical memory, and therefore more verbally accessible ([Greenberg and Van der Kolk, 1987](#); [Crenshaw, 2006](#); [Gantt and Tinnin, 2009](#)).

### 1.4. Resilience

As will be shown, a relation may also be drawn between art engagement and higher resilience among Holocaust survivors. Resilience is conceptualized in various ways but, essentially, refers to a dynamic process leading to positive adaptation in the face of significant adversity (e.g., [Luthar et al., 2000](#)). Whether resilience necessitates the absence of functional impairment or psychopathology, or whether impairment and successful adjustment may co-exist within this construct, remains an unresolved question among researchers ([Southwick et al., 2014](#)). Furthermore, as a complex construct, resilience may have specific meaning depending on personal and environmental context, and there are likely numerous types of resilience ([Southwick et al., 2014](#)).

[Metzl and Morrell \(2008\)](#) point to important links between conceptualizations of creativity, which plays a major part in art engagement, and resilience, and suggest a model, which incorporates the role of personal creativity as a major factor in processes of resilience. The traits of flexibility, the ability to withstand ambiguity and create alternative goals to a set path, which are central to creative adaptation and performance, can be linked, they argue, to resilience as the capacity to adapt and re-bounce. Indeed, studies have found a positive relationship between creativity and flexible cognitive control and modulation ([Meneely and Portillo, 2005](#); [Zabelina and Robinson, 2010](#)), creative people were found to be more open and accommodating of new experiences and ideas ([Feist, 1998](#); [Sternberg, 2006](#)) and to have higher tolerance of ambiguity ([Csikszentmihalyi, 1996](#)).

### 1.5. Perceptions of aging

As will be shown, relation may also be drawn between engagement in art and more positive perceptions of aging among Holocaust survivors. Subjective perceptions of aging include various types of evaluations ([Diehl et al., 2014](#)), but two frequently assessed perceptions include subjective successful aging and subjective age. The former refers to one's perception of how well one is aging when considering various physical and psychosocial domains ([Martin et al., 2015](#)), and the latter refers to one's evaluation of how old one perceives oneself to be ([Kotter-Grühn et al., 2015](#)). Older adults, who perceive themselves to age successfully and who hold a youthful identity, manifest favorable physical and mental functioning (for a review see, [Wurm et al., 2017](#)).

There is an expanding body of work, including anecdotal reports, empirical studies, and program evaluations that point to quality of life and health enhancing benefits of the arts for older people ([Fraser et al., 2015](#)). In a review of studies on the enhancement of healthy aging in older adults through active participation in various participatory art forms ([Noice et al., 2013](#)), overwhelmingly positive cognitive/affective/quality-of-life outcomes were revealed. In a qualitative study ([Fisher and Specht, 1999](#)), examining the meanings older people attached to creative activity such as engagement in art, findings indicated that this contributed to successful aging by fostering a sense of competence, purpose, and growth. Artistic engagement was also perceived as facilitating successful aging by encouraging the development of problem-solving skills, motivation, and perceptions that translate into a practical creativity in the way these individuals manage their everyday lives. In the case of elderly survivors of trauma, relating engagement in art to successful aging is particularly significant, as exposure to traumatic events has been shown to hamper successful aging ([Pietrzak et al., 2014](#); [Bodner et al., 2018](#)), and links have been found between PTSD, lower posttraumatic growth, and reports of older subjective age ([Solomon et al., 2009](#); [Avidor et al., 2014](#); [Palgi, 2016](#)).

### 1.6. Holocaust survivors and engagement in art

As aforementioned, it is relatively unknown if and how Holocaust survivors' vulnerability and resilience are related to engagement in art. One of the few studies to explore the psychological meaning of

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