Overview

The psychosocial investigation of the Holocaust over four decades of published writings has not, to date, generated a unified framework within which to assess the impact of the Holocaust on survivors and the effects on subsequent generations. Thus, educators are faced with the challenge of introducing Holocaust survivors and their testimonies in the classroom without an integrated model to guide their strategies in teaching the Holocaust in the 21st century.

The findings of the Transcending Trauma Project address this need for a focused inquiry into coping strategies and the quality of adaptation that Holocaust survivors exhibit that includes an examination of postwar responses in light of pre-war life experiences. The primary goal of the project is the development of an integrated model of coping with extreme trauma. The secondary goal of the project is greater understanding of the process by which Jewish identity is transmitted from generation to generation.

The Transcending Trauma Project has conducted over 250 intensive life histories over the past four years and to date over 150 interviews have been analyzed according to ethnographic research protocols. The population under study involves three generations of Holocaust survivor families, their children, grandchildren and extended family members. Our expanded view provides important interpretation of the narratives of the survivor family experience.

Our presentation, in addition to describing the rationale, methodology, and goals of the Transcending Trauma Project, also highlights excerpts from our transcripts to feature: a) key psychological dimensions of coping, b) intergenerational transmission of identity, c) faith systems and religious belief, d) pivotal memories and their impact. Evidence generated by the life histories conducted by the Transcending Trauma Project reveal that stories about life before the war and survivor experiences during the war raise more than just existential questions about life. The findings reveal that the messages underlying the memories shared by survivors about coping, identity, faith, and meaning can become incorporated into lessons about life that educators can adapt to their classroom needs. The educational impact of Holocaust testimonies is strengthened, we feel, by our expanded view that includes the totality of the survivors’ experiences.

Methodology
Towards this end, the Transcending Trauma Project of PENN Council for Relationships has embarked upon a large-scale interview based project that is guided by a multidimensional perspective. The data gathering and data analysis procedures were designed to shed light upon the positive adaptation as well as the negative consequences that survivors and their families experience in the aftermath of World War II. We have found that when we ask introspective questions of survivors and their children, we get self-revealing answers which tell us more about the coping process after extreme trauma than we could ever speculate or theorize.

The Transcending Trauma Project began as a study group in 1988 following a conference sponsored by PENN Council on the topic of intergenerational transmission in survivor families. After the conference, a group of attendees formed a study group to pursue the topic in greater depth. Today, this study group serves as the core of the Transcending Trauma research team which includes trained mental health specialists and other professionals from related fields. Approximately one third of the members are children of survivors. Our common link is our interest in this topic and our commitment to a broader and deeper understanding of the impact of extreme trauma. For three years, the study group read and discussed a variety of published works in the field of Holocaust studies and from the trauma literature. The result of these exchanges was a growing sense of frustration with the limitation of these bodies of scholarship.

The primary goal that emerged was the initiation of a research project that would develop a model addressing resilience, i.e. the ability of people to cope and adapt after extreme trauma. Our approach was designed in direct contrast to those existing models that focus on the negative effects of the Holocaust and trauma. A secondary goal was an investigation of the intergenerational transmission of Jewish identity. It was discovered that how survivors expressed their Jewish identity and how they decided to raise their children often reflected a very conscious decision after the war. Their willingness to pass on a positive Jewish identity could no longer be taken for granted, given the powerful impact of the events of their recent history.

In order to accomplish the primary and secondary goals the project team conducted interviews to collect intensive life histories that included full narratives of life before, during, and after the war. Simultaneously, we probed the inner experiences of the survivor -- what were their thoughts and feelings as they were living through the events of their lives. Through overlapping questions, we also explored the impact of significant relationships in the survivor’s life. For example, we asked: “What did your father say about moving to a ghetto?” or “How did your sister react when it looked as if you would be separated?” Many of the survivors interviewed said that the questions we asked them had never been posed before, and many commented on the importance of being asked about their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and opinions.

Currently, we are involved in the first phase of the analysis process. Phase I involves the in-depth analysis of each interview by a triad, a team of three researchers. Each triad
analyzes all the interviews in the family unit. Each interview is read, reviewed and grouped according to the 46 categories of the project’s Protocol for Analysis. Once the data are organized and summarized, we extract the psychological themes within each category, such as communication style, quality of relationships, and meaning systems. The development of themes is based on team consensus for each interview, until all the interviews that are part of one family unit are completed.

Phase II involves the comparison of themes across individuals and across families, specifically to identify varied coping and adaptation styles. By comparing and contrasting individuals and families, interesting patterns begin to emerge. What is most striking is the continuum of responses reported by the interviewees. While logic tells us this is not surprising, it is often ignored by researchers who make generalizations based on group means at the expense of articulating the range of individual differences. Moreover, we find it imperative to acknowledge the multiple influences that were already in operation for individuals and their families prior to the war. Again, this may seem obvious, but the literature on the Holocaust and trauma in general treats survivors’ lives as if they began after the traumatic event. Indeed, far too little attention has been paid to the correlation between the survivors’ lives and their personalities before World War II.

Continuum of Qualitative Family Relationships

The most significant trend that has emerged thus far is the connection between pre-war and postwar family relationships. We have observed that the qualitative relationship dynamics between the survivor and his or her parents are often recapitulated in the qualitative relationship dynamics between the survivor and his or her children. We have also observed that for survivor families with strong positive relationships, there seems to be a pattern of continuity in lifestyle and values from the first to the second generation. In contrast, for survivor families with problematic relationships, a striking pattern of discontinuity in these realms is noted. This observation is not about love and loyalty, factors which seem to be strong in survivor families even when the family relationships are troubled. It is about the quality of relatedness between parent and child, from generation to generation, including: 1. emotional expressiveness vs. emotional constriction, 2. empathy vs. narcissism, 3. altruism vs. selfishness, 4. validation vs. criticism, and 5. closeness vs. distance. The Transcending Trauma findings highlight that it is not specific positive or negative events that necessarily determine the quality of family relationships, or where a family falls on the continuum of possible behaviors. Rather, the correlation is between the quality of the connection family members experience and the ways in which significant events are handled.

For educators, as for clinicians and researchers it is striking to see similar parenting styles described across three generations of Holocaust survivor families. Mainly, the traumatic effects of the Holocaust lead to the unstated assumption that the continuity between generations has been disrupted. We find, in contrast, that Holocaust survivor families know and live the legacies of their families of origin. The analyses of the three generations of life histories conducted by the Transcending Trauma team reveal strong
threads that bind survivors to their lives before the war, thus highlighting the ongoing positive and negative influences of their pre-war experiences. A survivor's experience of positive qualitative relationships before the war, we content, correlates with his or her ability to modulate the impact of the post-trauma symptoms for the sake of the new family. While the existing Holocaust literature would have us believe that the continuity of normalcy in family life would not be possible, we find that many survivor families are extraordinary in terms of their capacity to create a nurturing family environment and be successful in the world. This is demonstrated in a wide range of behaviors, and we have explored some of these arenas. In the remainder of this paper, we describe the themes of: faith, transmission of Jewish identity, pivotal narratives, and family legacies and belief systems.

Faith

Little focus has been directed toward the ways in which survivors think about faith after the Holocaust. Why did some Jews sustain their faith after the horrors they endured, while others did not? Most important for our project is the question of the role that belief and practice of Judaism played in helping survivors rebuild their lives after the war. How did their belief system give meaning to their own survival when those they loved did not survive?

Questions of faith were explored in interviews with 85 survivors as part of the Transcending Trauma Project in an attempt to understand how the Holocaust changed, diminished, or strengthened the survivor’s pre-war belief system. The survivors whom we interviewed came from a wide spectrum of religious backgrounds pre-war, including secular, cultural, assimilated, and Orthodox Jews. However, the majority, approximately 68% of the total, came from what we may term “traditional homes”, i.e. their parents were traditional, observant Jews who believed in G-d, kept Shabbat and kashrut, and were fairly regular in synagogue attendance. Post-war, 49% of survivors we interviewed said that they believe in G-d after the Holocaust. Another 42%, while not clearly stating their belief in G-d, or while expressing it in more ambiguous terms, still identified themselves strongly as Jews and were involved in and committed to Jewish practice, synagogue and community to varying degrees. Approximately 8% of the survivors clearly stated that they did not believe in G-d post-Shoah, yet even they remained connected to Jewish community and felt a strong Jewish identity. Slightly more than 1% of the survivors had completely severed connections with the Jewish community and the Jewish religion postwar. In other words, a connection to Judaism, to Jewish belief and to practice is the prevalent response of almost all of the survivors we interviewed. Second, there is evidence from our interviews which suggests that those survivors who report distant, cold, or even abusive relationships with parents pre-war have a greater tendency to abandon their faith in G-d and religious practice. Doba S., for example, survived by hiding as a Gentile during the war. Although she reports a very close relationship with her father, it was not enough to mitigate her mother’s intense disapproval, criticism, physical and emotional abuse. Her mother survived the Holocaust, but her father did not. Her mother continued to be cold and rejecting after the war. Doba, only seventeen at war’s
end, turned to the non-Jewish world for comfort, and married a Gentile Pole she met in a DP camp. She lived with him in Poland for ten years, continuing to hide her Jewish identity. She did not have her two sons circumcised, fearing for their safety. To this day, she feels rejected by the Jewish people and lives a life devoid of Judaism. Third, one’s age at the beginning of the war seems to be an intervening factor in determining postwar belief. Those survivors who were younger children when the Holocaust disrupted their lives were unable to fully benefit from the family’s transmission of a Jewish religious belief system. In two families where we were able to interview sisters who had gone through concentration camp together, we found that the older sibling, who had more years with her parents before the war, had a greater belief and more religious observance postwar than her younger sister, whose belief system was not fully formed at the time of Hitler’s onslaught.

For many, religious belief helps create meaning from what seems otherwise random and unpredictable in their lives. The Holocaust brought this randomness to a magnitude of immeasurable proportions. How does a survivor of this hellish chapter of Jewish history make sense of the senseless? Our interviews suggest that one way survivors coped with such questions was to change their conception of G-d after the Holocaust. This can be seen as a positive coping tool in the rebuilding of life after the war, an attempt to reconstruct meaning from shattered assumptions. Survivors we interviewed seem to have taken their belief in an interventionist G-d who directly affects their daily existence and made this G-d more distant. But by placing G-d further away from their lives, they do not totally abandon their belief.

**Intergenerational Transmission of Jewish Identity**

Another objective of the Transcending Trauma project has been to track and analyze the transmission of Jewish identity through three generations of Holocaust survivor families. Open-ended questions were asked that focused on the survivors’ current religious affiliation and organizational involvement, as well as the religious affiliation of their parents. In addition, we asked each interviewee to give us a picture of the role, function and influence of Jewish identity and religion, both in their home, their parents’ home, and the homes of their children, if applicable. These questions were asked of the survivors, their spouses, their children and their grandchildren. By starting with the interviewee’s definition of identity, we were then able to track the family dynamics that promote or hinder the transmission of identity to the next generation. In addition, we utilized a Jewish Identity scale to track the beliefs, goals, and practices of the respondent, the respondent’s parents, and of the next generation.

Our preliminary analyses of the interviews have led us to observe that the following factors are key to determining how positive Jewish identity is successfully transmitted to subsequent generations: 1) beliefs and practices are expressed in a positive way, 2) consistency in beliefs and practices prevails, and 3) healthy parent-child relationships are present. These dimensions were assessed in terms of their intensity and consistency. In short, the evidence we bring forward from the interview transcripts shows that a good
relationship that leads to positive expression of identity, coupled with consistency of beliefs and practices on the part of the parents, can help facilitate the successful transmission of Jewish identity. The variables that hinder successful transmission of Jewish identity from parent to child are: ambiguity in the beliefs and practices of the parents, lack of positive expression of identity, and poor parent-child relationships. Other important factors that influence the transmission of Jewish identity are the presence or absence of a supportive community, and the occurrence of pivotal life events.

**Pivotal Narratives**

The transmission of messages and values through the stories that survivors tell of their experiences before and during the war often influence the psychological process of identification that occurs in early childhood. As children listen to their parents' stories, they are reacting not only to the horror and the existential questions about life and death. They are also absorbing the values and beliefs embedded in the stories, thereby making them their own.

By gathering narratives of trauma, we also examine the transmission of cultural values, survival mechanisms, and of pivotal memories. We root our approach in the field of ethnography, sharing the premise that stories in the direct voice of those who actually endured what they are describing can provide insights into the experiential quality of these ordeals, how they are remembered, and what the possibilities might be for transcending them. What is shared may not be new to the survivor, but the act of sharing it is new. Speaking from one’s inner self for the first time is a powerful, often affirming experience. Moreover, when a particular attribute of a survivor parent is clear and emotionally compelling, this attribute can become an organizing value system in the developing identity of the child. The analyses of the intergenerational interviews conducted by the Transcending Trauma Project repeatedly suggest that when the second generation listened to their parents’ traumatic memories, they were not only hearing the story of their parents experiences, but they were also forming an understanding of their parents as people. This process is one we have identified as the transmission of pivotal narratives.

**Conclusion**

As observed in the Transcending Trauma Project, the extreme trauma of the war has left many survivors with an adaptive philosophy of life that encourages making the most out of each moment, appreciating what one has, valuing family relationships beyond all else, seeing life as “a victory over Hitler”, with survival being a challenge to live well and meaningfully.

Understanding the complexities of the issues that face Holocaust survivor families is a difficult and important challenge. Why can some people rebound after devastating ordeals and why do others experience debilitating aftereffects? The ultimate goal of the Transcending Trauma project is to offer an integrated model of survivorship, based on
our findings, to provide assistance and guidance to individuals and communities struggling to reconstruct their lives.

The unified framework for understanding survivorship that we are building, we feel, also offers opportunities for educators to utilize the Transcending Trauma Holocaust family transcripts to prepare innovative materials to convey lessons about coping and continuity. Based on our research findings, some proposals to be explored during our workshop for educators include: a) methodological recommendations for teaching positive
coping as a form of resistance, b) suggestions about focussing our lens on the psychological health of the family system as a new way of addressing Jewish identity and transmission, c) exploring the functional importance of stories and narratives in the development of parenting and pedagogical styles. In the interactive workshop forum we have outlined, we anticipate a new and dynamic synthesis of innovative educational applications of our ongoing Holocaust research.