

The Body as Narrator: Body-Movement Memory in Life-stories of Holocaust Survivors

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This research explores the interaction between two narrative worlds of substance: Verbal life-stories of holocaust survivors and the body-movement expressions that accompany them. The goal of the research was to observe the way in which survivors' bodies show experiences, memories, and feelings, during the time they recount their life stories. The research seeks to investigate "the motor-corporal imprint" in the life stories of the survivors, and how it is realized through "the body narrator." The memories of the survivors, told through words and the body, enable a deep and fascinating observation of the complete human experience, convincing and unique.

Holocaust survivors today are elderly, who bear severe trauma in their souls and in their bodies, and constitute a living testimony to heroism, endurance and mental strength. The period of old age and the necessity to adapt to external and internal changes constitutes a special challenge for Holocaust survivors. This is the phase of life's closure and the creation of new perspective: who I was in my past and who I am today. The ability to recount one's life story in a full and coherent mode enables the ageing survivors a deep, self-aware, personal observation of their lives. That enables them to grant significance to their memories, renewed understandings of their life experience, and to continue express themselves as active, vibrant and productive. The body, a participant in this process as an active, living, present partner, enables the survivors to empower their human experience and their sense of self-identity. Old age and the Holocaust, feelings and attitude, past and present – all these are interwoven through the words and the body, and produce a fascinating, rich, and coherent personal saga.

The narrative analysis of "The Body Narrator" was enabled by "carnal phenomenology". This approach assumes that the body constitutes the basis for our world experiences through kinesthetic (movement) expression. It examines the centrality of the body in the human experience and the way in which the different experiences are generalized within it, when the "physical view" reflects and shapes the way in which we grasp our existence in the world.

Sixteen Holocaust survivors participated in this study – men and women aged 73 to 93. They were interviewed through an open and unstructured narrative interview, and all interviews were videotaped. The findings of the study identified through the "body narrator" of Holocaust survivors were six major clusters: activity, passivity, arousal, self-reassurance, deadlock and petrification, suffocation.

Activity and passivity represented two different patterns of mental and movement organization, which creates and builds a unique self-identity. Arousal expressed the way the body tells a great excitement accompanied emotional intensity of traumatic memories. Self-reassurance expressed the need to regulate feelings of great pain and loss. Deadlock presented memories of deadlock and petrification as a physical-emotional narrative, which expressed paralyzing fear and horror. Suffocation revealed a feeling of suffocation and strangulation when memories of emotional and physical suffocation were told.

The six clusters indicate the extent that the perception of "the self" of survivors continues to operate and to influence even during the period of old age. The survivors remember, tell, experience, summarize and understand the events of the past, when "the Body Narrator" brings the unique human experience of each and every one of them to the fore, and presents its essentiality, strength and vulnerability. Old age, the Holocaust, joy and suffering, reinforced life events, weakened life events – all these are interwoven, and create a complete and present, rich internal movement. The body, the movement and the verbal stories bring together a whole life, memories and being.

Keywords: trauma, holocaust, narratives, body narrator

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