

Educational and Occupational Achievement of Adult Children of Holocaust Survivors

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This paper explores the educational and occupational achievements of adult children of Jewish Holocaust survivors, compared to those of two control groups. It intersects two areas of inquiry: a concern with second generation effects of severe victimization, specifically the Holocaust; and a concern with the study of the role of the family in the status attainment process in North America. A strength of this study regarding the first area is that it is based on a non-clinical non-self-selected sample.

We wish to examine whether children of survivors have lower levels of educational and occupational achievement, due to their parents' experiences. This might be true because of the lower post-war occupational status of the survivor parents themselves, as well as psychological and cultural traits of the parents – impairment in some form – which might adversely affect their children's achievement levels.

Holocaust survivors faced a dual set of problems in establishing themselves in the New World. One was the difficulty which faces any impoverished immigrant group forced to adapt to a new society, language and work environment. The second was the unique set of burdens of the Holocaust trauma, with its documented toll on the physical and mental health of survivors (Eitinger, 1973; Matussek, 1975; Eaton, Sigal and Weinfeld, 1982). Evidence from the few non-clinical studies which have been made suggests that these effects may have led to slightly lower levels of occupational status and/or income for Jewish and non-Jewish survivor families (Eitinger and Strom, 1973; Weinfeld, Sigal and Eaton, 1981). These findings are not contradicted by journalistic accounts which report major economic – usually entrepreneurial – success for some survivor families (Epstein, 1979; Rabinowitz, 1976).

Studies of status attainment have highlighted the role of class background and social psychological factors in influencing achievement. Even controlling for social class, we know that cognitive abilities, and non-cognitive personality traits such as aspirations, self-confidence and self-esteem, influence an individual's achievement (Jencks, 1979). Canadian research has led to similar findings, including the significance of others, especially parents, in making educational and career choices (Porter, Porter and Blishen, 1982). Other studies have noted the importance of a stable and tranquil home environment for children's success in school (Rutter and Madge, 1976).

What of the psychological climate in survivor households? Clinical reports have described pressures from survivor parents for the achievement of their children, often as compensation for the privation they themselves experienced during the war. Similarly, there are reports of parental sacrifices to facilitate their children's achievements, which may be associated with subsequent guilt feelings in the children (Russell, 1980).

On the other hand, one might hypothesize that excessive parental pressure to achieve, as well as any other patterns of parental preoccupation or strained relations deriving from the Holocaust, might prove counterproductive to creating a domestic environment supportive of achievement.

We might indicate at this point that the extensive literature which has focused on explaining Jewish educational and occupational achievement vis-à-vis other groups is tangential to our interest here (Glazer, 1958; Rosen, 1959; Slater, 1969). All our respondents, survivor children and controls, are native-born Ashkenazi Jews; our concern is with variation within this Jewish group, based on experienced parental trauma.

Methods

Data

The data for this study were taken from a survey designed to study the second generation effects of the Holocaust on a non-clinical sample of adult children of Holocaust survivors. The objective of the sampling design was to generate a random sample of the following three groups of native-born Ashkenazi Jews aged 19–36 in Montreal:

- (a) children of Holocaust survivors (COS);
- (b) children of immigrant parents who did not experience the Holocaust (COI);
- (c) children of native-born (North America) parents (CON).

A COS was defined as any respondent who had at least one parent who spent part of World War II living in Nazi-occupied Europe, thus including people whose parents had been in concentration camps, labor camps, ghettos, in hiding, passing as Gentiles, or in resistance groups. We are well aware that this category includes within it a wide variety of experiences, which may well reflect not only the unpredictable events of the Holocaust period but also personality-based coping styles of exposed individuals during and after these events (Sigal, Weinfeld, and Eaton, 1985). However, our assumption in this study, and one which is found in a variety of other studies, is that a broad category of survivors of Nazi persecution does include within it a sufficiently homogeneous group, at least regarding levels of trauma, compared to other samples of Jews.

We selected Jewish sounding names from electoral lists to construct a multistage probability sample drawn from 16 census tracts. These tracts have been demonstrated (Torczyner, 1976) to contain the majority of the Jews in Montreal. Tracts containing fewer than 5% of the Jews were eliminated. Jews with non-Jewish sounding names are missed by this method. However, this name recognition technique has been shown to generate samples of Jews comparable to those generated by random sampling (Himmelfarb, Loar and Mott, 1983). A phone call, preceded by a letter, was used to determine whether persons selected in this way met our criteria for inclusion in the study, to which of the three groups they belonged, and to arrange a time and a place for the interview with those respondents who agreed to participate.

When at least one parent was a survivor of Nazi persecution, the respondent was assigned to group COS. If one parent was an immigrant but did not personally experience the Nazi persecution, and the other native-born, the respondent was assigned to group COI.

We obtained a total of 527 respondents of which 242 were COS, 76 were COI, and

209 were CON. Respondents were told in advance about the rather lengthy questionnaire involved. Comparing those who agreed to participate with those who declined, and eliminating potential respondents who could not be reached, had moved, were disqualified on the criteria, etc., we had a total of 378 refusals, for an overall participation rate of 58.4%.

Measures

Occupational status was measured by the Blishen index, computed on the basis of the 1971 census data for Canada (Blishen and McRoberts, 1976). The index is derived from equations linking average income and educational levels associated with given occupations. Respondents identified their own and their parents' occupations, and these were assigned the appropriate Blishen scores.

Educational achievement was measured by the response to the question "What is the highest level of education you (or your father, mother) have completed". Response categories were: none, elementary/primary, secondary/high school, post high school/junior college, Bachelor's, Master's, Doctorate, Professional degree.

Findings

Respondents' Educational and Occupational Attainments

Table 1 presents the educational attainment levels for our three groups of respondents. We note that 62% of the COS claim at least a Bachelor's degree, compared to 47% of the COI and 55% of the CON. Indeed, the COS and CON distributions are similar, while the smaller COI group has significantly lower levels of educational achievement. It is clear that all three sub-groups of the sample represent an educated, middle class group. COS are clearly comparable to, if not above, the other two groups in educational attainment.

Table 2 focuses on those 75 respondents who were still studying at some level and who reported on their future occupation. While the higher expectations of the COS are striking, the small sub-sample size militates against finding statistical significance for this difference.

Table 3 presents a distribution of Blishen occupation rank for the three groups, which indicates no difference among them.

Parental Educational and Occupational Profile

Tables 4 and 5 present the educational attainment levels for respondents' fathers and mothers. The total sample frequencies, when compared with those in Tables 1 and 3, attest to both the social and economic transformations in post-war Canada and the dramatic inter-generational mobility of North American Jews – but this is not the focus of our study. COS parents had low levels of educational attainment, particularly when compared to the CON. While 7% of the COS fathers had a Bachelor's degree

TABLE 1. RESPONDENT'S EDUCATION, BY GROUP (PERCENTAGES)

Highest level of education completed	Group ^{a, b}			
	COS	COI	CON	Total
N	242	76	209	527
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Elementary-primary	1.7	2.6	1.4	1.7
Secondary-high school	10.7	26.3	15.8	15.0
Post high school-Cegep	25.2	23.7	27.3	25.8
Bachelors or equivalent	47.1	26.3	44.0	42.9
Masters or equivalent	9.1	14.5	7.7	9.3
Doctorate or equivalent	5.4	5.3	3.8	4.7
Professional degree	0.4	1.3	0.0	0.4
Other	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.2

a. Chi Sq. = 23.4, $p = .054$.

b. In this and the following tables:

COS = children of Holocaust survivors;

COI = children of immigrant parents who did not experience the Holocaust;

CON = children of native born (North America) parents.

TABLE 2. FUTURE OCCUPATION OF RESPONDENTS STILL STUDYING, BY GROUP (PERCENTAGES)

Expected future occupation of full time students ^a	Group ^b			
	COS	COI	CON	Total
N	33	6	36	75
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
3.	0.0	0.0	2.8	1.3
4.	3.0	0.0	5.6	4.0
5.	9.1	0.0	22.2	14.7
6.	33.3	83.3	41.7	41.3
7.	54.5	16.7	27.8	38.7

a. Occupational rank according to Blishen scale.

b. Chi Sq. = 11.7, $p = .16$.

or higher, that was the case for 12.7% of COI fathers and 21.9% of the CON fathers. Even greater gaps are found for maternal educational levels: 46.4% of COS mothers claimed elementary schooling or less, compared to only 17% for CON.

Tables 6 and 7 present the distributions of the Blishen rank of the socioeconomic status of the respondents' fathers and mothers, measured by their usual or last job. COS and COI fathers and mothers are far more likely to be concentrated in the lower economic status levels. This is to be expected given the educational differences stated earlier.

We might note that for the sample as a whole, the general process of status attain-

TABLE 3. PRESENT OCCUPATION OF RESPONDENTS IN THE LABOR FORCE, BY GROUP (PERCENTAGES)

Present or last full time occupation ^a	Group ^b			
	COS	COI	CON	Total
N	198	63	162	423
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2.	2.0	1.6	1.2	1.7
3.	3.0	3.2	2.5	2.8
4.	10.6	15.9	12.3	12.1
5.	26.3	28.6	27.2	27.0
6.	42.4	36.5	45.7	42.8
7.	15.7	14.3	11.1	13.7

a. Occupational rank according to Blishen scale.

Chi Sq. = 3.9, n.s.

ment varies from what we have come to expect based on other studies in the Blau-Duncan (1967) tradition. We find an essentially negligible impact of parental socioeconomic status (fathers' education and occupation) on educational and occupational achievements of their children, evident from a pattern of low and often insignificant correlation coefficients (not reported here). It may be that for our sample, variance in cognitive skills, non-cognitive personality traits, and aspirations may be determining factors.

The absence of any observable effects of the Holocaust on respondents' occupational and educational achievements was confirmed in two additional ways. A multiple regression analysis (not reported here) in which parental status as COS and COI was a dummy variable revealed no effects, controlling for age, sex, and parental socioeconomic status.

A second confirmation was obtained by a within-group analysis. In an open ended question, respondents had been asked whether and how their parents had been affected by World War II, and the responses were coded and classified. Among the categories which emerged were two which measured general personality traits and psychological symptoms, positive and negative. COS respondents were divided into two groups, those reporting that their parents had negative personality or psychological effects, and those who did not. These two groups were compared for the same set of parental and respondent's socioeconomic status variables (education and occupation). No differences were found on any of the measures.

Discussion

As indicated above, non-clinical studies of survivors themselves have noted higher rates of mortality, morbidity, and mental stress. Clinical studies have documented episodes of parent-child tensions even more fully. Yet our findings suggest that these effects may have been compartmentalized sufficiently by the victims so as not to contribute negative outcomes for their offspring's achievements. What emerges from

TABLE 4. FATHER'S EDUCATION, BY GROUP (PERCENTAGES)

Highest degree received by father	Group ^a			
	COS	COI	CON	Total
N	230	71	202	503
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
None	12.2	18.3	5.9	10.5
Elementary-primary	43.0	43.7	34.7	39.8
Secondary-high school	27.4	21.1	34.2	29.2
Post high school-Cegep	8.3	4.2	3.5	5.8
Bachelors or equivalent	4.3	8.5	14.4	8.9
Masters or equivalent	0.9	1.4	2.5	1.6
Doctorate or equivalent	0.9	2.8	4.5	2.6
Professional degree	0.9	0.0	0.5	0.6
Other	2.2	0.0	0.0	1.0

a. Chi Sq. = 44.9, $p \leq .000$.

TABLE 5. MOTHER'S EDUCATION, BY GROUP (PERCENTAGES)

Highest degree received by mother	Group ^a			
	COS	COI	CON	Total
N	233	68	206	507
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
None	8.2	4.4	0.5	4.5
Elementary-primary	38.2	42.6	16.5	30.0
Secondary-high school	37.3	33.8	53.9	43.6
Post high school-Cegep	12.0	11.8	10.7	11.4
Bachelors or equivalent	3.0	4.4	13.1	7.3
Masters or equivalent	0.4	2.9	1.9	1.4
Doctorate or equivalent	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.4
Professional degree	0.0	0.0	1.5	0.6
Other	0.9	0.0	1.0	0.8

a. Chi Sq. = 73.2, $df. = 18$, $p \leq .000$.

these data is that the levels of educational and occupational success enjoyed by the COS and COI respondents is not a direct transmission of high parental socioeconomic status. Indeed, it seems that COS and COI respondents have eliminated in one generation the distributional deficits which characterized their parents' condition. This is even more remarkable for the COS, given the expectation of the additional psychological burdens which might affect the family environment.

One might even speculate as to whether some traits associated with survivor families might be beneficial to the achievement process. We know from Table 8 that 80% (186/242) of COS fathers were identified as having had a full time occupation prior to arrival in North America. Comparing this occupational distribution (Table 8, column 1) with that for fathers' first (Table 8, column 2) and current job (Table 6, column

TABLE 6. FATHER'S PRESENT OCCUPATION, BY GROUP (PERCENTAGES)

Present or last full time occupation ^a	Group ^a			
	COS	COI	CON	Total
N	235	71	206	512
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1.	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.2
2.	26.0	25.4	6.8	18.2
3.	7.2	8.5	4.4	6.3
4.	11.9	19.7	14.6	14.1
5.	11.9	8.5	16.5	13.3
6.	41.3	33.8	49.0	43.4
7.	1.3	4.2	8.7	4.7

a. Occupational rank according to Blishen scale.

b. Chi Sq. = 49.7, $p \leq .000$.

TABLE 7. MOTHER'S PRESENT OCCUPATION, BY GROUP (PERCENTAGES)

Present or last full time occupation ^a	Group ^a			
	COS	COI	CON	Total
N	135	46	122	303
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2.	24.4	17.4	2.5	14.5
3.	12.6	19.6	7.4	11.6
4.	23.7	21.7	20.5	22.1
5.	31.1	34.8	54.9	41.3
6.	6.7	6.5	12.3	8.9
7.	1.5	0.0	1.0	1.7

a. Occupational rank according to Blishen scale.

b. Chi Sq. = 39.7, df. = 10, $p \leq .000$.

1) in North America, we note that the survivors, like many post-war immigrants to Canada, may have experienced an initial drop in occupational status on arrival, which was recouped steadily with the passage of time (Richmond, 1967). Even though this group of fathers remained below CON fathers for their last or current job, they made substantial progress. One might argue that some of the qualities of perseverance, pluck, and luck which enabled COS fathers to survive the war may have continued to affect the quality of their family life, including attitudes transmitted to children.

There is clinical and anecdotal evidence that survivor parents – even more than other Jewish parents – may have driven their children to achieve, sacrificing their own material comforts ‘for the children’. The lingering insecurities of minority status may have added to this need to pressure children toward educational and occupational success. Our survey included questions which measured respondents’ perceptions of parental pressure on them to achieve in various domains, including academic achieve-

TABLE 8. FATHER'S FIRST OCCUPATION, BY GROUP (PERCENTAGES)

Occupation ^a	Before coming to North America	First occupation in North America, by group ^b			
	COS	COS	COI	CON	Total
N	186	231	72	177	480
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1.	3.2	0.9	2.8	2.3	1.7
2.	46.2	53.2	48.6	30.5	44.2
3.	12.4	22.1	22.2	20.9	21.7
4.	18.3	10.8	12.5	18.6	14.0
5.	8.6	5.6	4.2	10.2	7.1
6.	8.6	6.9	6.9	11.3	8.5
7.	2.7	0.4	2.8	6.2	2.9

a. Occupational rank according to Blishen scale.

b. Chi Sq. = 36, $p = .003$.

ment, making the right social contacts, and occupational achievement. We found that 76% of COS respondents reported parental pressure of some type, compared to 66.2% and 68.6% for the COI and CON control groups (chi sq. 4.3, $p = .115$). For those who reported any pressure, there was no difference in the degree of such pressure among the groups, measured in a four point ordinal scale from 'very much' to 'very little'. No differences were found among the three groups in respondent's declared satisfaction with his or her education and occupational achievement, and on psychometric measures of personality traits such as self-esteem and self-confidence, usually associated with achievement.

Indeed, respondents were asked to assess the overall quality of their relationship with their parents, compared to other families, and no differences were found among the three groups. Thus we have no evidence that COS parents used pressure or other psychological ploys to produce greater achievement in their offspring, compensating for their lower socioeconomic status.

One area in which significant differences were found between COS respondents and both control groups, was in the level of Jewish education and religiosity. COS respondents and their parents had received more Jewish schooling (more intensive types and for longer periods of time) and were more religious, as measured in frequency of synagogue attendance. COS reported 34% of their fathers with at least ten years of Jewish education and 38% with frequent attendance at services (at least all major holidays and most Sabbaths), compared to 10% and 21% for CON parents. These same 'more religious' COS compared well with the CON on our measures of achievement.

At first glance, this finding appears puzzling, since we would expect to find religiosity to be negatively associated with educational and occupational achievement. This has long been the conventional wisdom of American Jewish sociology, based on the fact that Reform Jews had higher levels of socioeconomic status than did the Orthodox (Sklare, 1958). Yet recent studies suggest that this gap may be declining for Jews, particularly among the 'modern' Orthodox (Cohen, 1983, p. 87-92). One study of Ameri-

can Catholics found that those with more Catholic education did better socioeconomically than those with less (Greeley and Rossi, 1966). Thus the relation between religiosity and economic achievement may be changing. In this study, it is possible that religion may provide a familial anchor for survivor families which enables them to cope more effectively with the trauma of their Holocaust experience, helping create a stable home environment for the effective nurturance of children.

This study has focused on traits of COS and their parents, trying to account for relatively high levels of COS achievement, given the low parental social status and possibly deleterious effects of the Holocaust on the home environment. However, a macro-historical perspective would frame the issue differently. Much of the observed gap in parental status between COS (and COI) and CON can be attributed simply to the relative – though far from absolute – economic freedom in the New World compared to the Old.

Most of the COS parents lived in the strongly antisemitic East European countries of the pre-war period, which artificially restricted the opportunities available to Jews relative to their talents and drive. These barriers were dramatically reinforced by the Holocaust itself, which for many refugees resulted in stunted or abandoned educational and occupational careers. Emigration to the comparative freedom of North America, where in the post-war years demand for labor was great and entrepreneurial effort could be rewarded, yielded opportunities. The effects of this economic freedom began to operate for COS parents and were realized more fully by the COS themselves.

The impact of economic opportunity may have swamped any residual effects of parental trauma on the economic achievement of their children. Thus the apparent intergenerational mobility demonstrated by our COS may be due more to increased opportunities in an open social structure than to micro-sociological, individual traits.

Other historical evidence suggests that the fact of persecution need not – inevitably – lead to educational or occupational failure. ‘Pariah’ groups such as Jews, Parsis, and Chinese have often been victimized politically or socially while achieving high socio-economic status. The causal nexus can run both ways: minorities may be resented and victimized because of their economic success, or minorities may be economically successful because discrimination either pushes them into a lucrative economic niche (e.g. middleman minority) or just prods them to harder effort (Bonacich, 1973; Light, 1972).

The case of Japanese Canadians interned during the 1940s in Canada also provides support for our findings. The material and psychological distress caused to those who were forcibly resettled has been well documented (Adachi, 1976). Yet the children of many of these Japanese Canadians have been able to prosper despite their psychological baggage; the 1971 census reveals that Japanese Canadians had average annual incomes well above the national average (Li, 1980, p. 365).

Conclusion

In this study we found that any problems of status attainment experienced by survivors of the Holocaust themselves were overcome by their North American offspring. These adult children achieved at levels comparable to those of children of immigrants who had not experienced the Holocaust and of children of native born Ashkenazi

Jews. This finding does not deny the severity of the survivors' experiences and the persistence of traumatic after-effects. It suggests rather that survivor parents seem to have coped with their post-war physical and mental distress in a way which prevented negative consequences for their children's educational and occupational achievement.

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