

# On Failed Intersubjectivity: Recollections of Loneliness Experiences in Offspring of Holocaust Survivors

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Intergenerational consequences of extensive trauma experienced by parents for the loneliness experienced by their children were explored in 52 adults (26 men and 26 women) who grew up in Holocaust survivor families. These adults, children of mothers who had survived Nazi concentration camps, were recruited from a random nonclinical Israeli sample. A narrative analysis of their recollected accounts of loneliness in childhood and adolescence yielded 4 major categories of loneliness experiences in the context of growing up in Holocaust survivor families: (a) echoes of parental intrusive traumatic memories; (b) echoes of parental numbing and detachment; (c) perceived parents' caregiving style; and (d) social comparison with other families, in particular the lack of grandparents. The echoes of the parental trauma in the recollected loneliness accounts are conceptualized as representing a sense of failed intersubjectivity in these interpersonal processes. The experiences of not being understood by others, not understanding others, and the lack of shared understanding involved in failed intersubjectivity are discussed and related to the importance of opening lines of communication between survivors and their descendants.

**Keywords:** Holocaust survivors, adult offspring, loneliness, emotional trauma, narratives

Acute feelings of loneliness among trauma survivors both in the midst and in the aftermath of the traumatic experiences are well documented in the clinical literature (Dasberg, 1976; Herman, 1997). The aim of the present study is to explore the possible intergenerational consequences of parental trauma on loneliness experienced by children who grew up in survivor families. The intergenerational transmission of diverse traumas to the trauma victims' descendants has been studied among families of Holocaust survivors, Vietnam veterans, and survivors of genocide in Armenia, Cambodia, and others (see Danieli, 1998).

Research on the offspring of Holocaust survivors shows that nonclinical samples of survivors' children score within the normal range (for reviews, see Bar-On, et al., 1998; Felsen, 1998). This conclusion was supported by a highly sophisticated meta-analytic investigation by van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, and Sagi-Schwartz (2003), which found no evidence in nonclinical samples that parents' traumatic Holocaust experiences affected their children's adjustment. These researchers used a broad definition of adjustment that included indicators of posttraumatic stress, other symptomatology, and general mental health. Wiseman

and Barber (2004) contended that the questions that needed to be asked about intergenerational transmission of trauma were the ones in the relational world of the survivors' children.

In this study we explore the echoes of the parental trauma in the subjective loneliness experiences recalled by children raised by parents who suffered the extensive Holocaust trauma. We have chosen the term *echoes* to underscore that we are not dealing with the transmission of the trauma itself, but rather with interpersonal themes and child–parent dynamics in which the echoes of the trauma may play out in the offspring's recollected relational experiences (Wiseman & Barber, 2008).

Loneliness is an affective and cognitive reaction to a threat to social bonds and hence a universal experience inherent in the human condition (Rotenberg, 1999). Although every person may experience loneliness some time in life, at least momentarily, severe and persistent feelings of loneliness can have severe consequences for mental health and wellbeing (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006; McWhirter, 1990). Much research on loneliness has centered on individual differences associated with loneliness in adults (for a review, see Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999). More recent studies have focused on loneliness in childhood and adolescence (for a review, see Perlman & Landolt, 1999).

Rotenberg (1999) considered the parental antecedents of childhood and adolescent loneliness, that is, the "parents' affective states and behavior that affect their children's loneliness" (p. 176). Based on a cross-sectional study he concluded that multiple factors may account for parental antecedents of loneliness in children, including quality of attachment (Cassidy & Berlin, 1999), parenting styles of warmth and involvement, and parents' promotion of peer relationships. Accordingly, we assumed that the characteristics of parenting among Holocaust survivors, whether through attachment or through parenting style, played a role in the loneli-

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ness of their offspring during childhood and adolescence, as did the possibility that the parents themselves suffered from loneliness, making them incapable of promoting peer relationships.

Because loneliness is a subjective feeling, it cannot be observed directly by researchers and clinicians. Therefore, research has relied almost entirely on self-report measures such as the Revised UCLA Loneliness scale (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980) with adults and the Asher Loneliness scale (Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, 1984) with children. A more phenomenological approach, based on narrative analysis of descriptive personal accounts of loneliness experiences, is needed to understand the subjective meanings of loneliness for different people in various contexts (Stokes, 1987; Wiseman, 1995). A phenomenological-structural method was applied by Mikulincer and Segal (1990) in analyzing free descriptions of the causes, feelings, and responses related to particular loneliness episodes experienced by university students. The analysis led to differentiating a number of subtypes of loneliness feelings: social estrangement, paranoid, depressive, and self-focused.

Hymel and her collaborators (Hymel, Tarulli, Hayden Thomson, & Terrell-Deutsch, 1999) adopted a qualitative strategy for analyzing children's own personal narratives and accounts of situations in their lives that give rise to loneliness and their understanding and experience of it. This strategy incorporated the children's own voices about their loneliness experiences. The researchers found that children described loneliness in affective and cognitive terms and associated it with a variety of interpersonal contexts or causes, such as loss, dislocation, temporary absence, conflict, rejection, broken loyalties, exclusion, and being ignored.

The need for narrative methodology in the study of loneliness is further underscored in considering such a complex phenomenon as intergenerational transmission of trauma and particularly when attempting to capture the subjective experiences and sensitivities of Holocaust descendants (Bar-On, 1995; Wiseman, Metzl, & Barber, 2006). Rather than relying on self-report measures, we set out to examine the narrative accounts of retrospectively recollected loneliness experiences among a nonclinical sample of Holocaust survivors' offspring. In collecting these accounts, we focused on the adult offspring's recalled loneliness experiences from their childhood and adolescence while living at home with their survivor parents. The rationale relied on a large epidemiological study, which showed that although adult offspring of Holocaust survivors did not report more current psychiatric disorders than those who were not the offspring of Holocaust survivors, they did report greater rates of psychiatric distress in their past (Schwartz, Dohrenwend, & Levav, 1994). The researchers contended that these past rates did not represent ongoing vulnerabilities or current generalized deficits, but rather reflected the greater distress experienced by survivors' children in the past while living at home with their parents. Hence, our focus is on the survivors' children retrospective accounts of loneliness episodes in childhood and adolescence in the context of parent-child interpersonal processes.

In applying a narrative analysis to the loneliness accounts of the offspring of Holocaust survivors, four questions were formulated: (a) What kind of situations aroused loneliness in the offspring during their childhood and adolescence?; (b) How were the parents perceived by the child in these recalled loneliness accounts?; (c) What kinds or categories of loneliness did the offspring experience in the context of being raised by survivor parents?; and (d)

What are the subjective meanings of these loneliness experiences for the sons and daughters of the survivors?

## Method

### *Participants*

The sample comprised 52 offspring of Holocaust survivors (26 men and 26 women) born to mothers who had survived the Nazi concentration camps. This nonclinical sample was recruited from a random sample of Israeli-born Jewish men and women whose parents immigrated to Israel from the countries of Eastern Europe after 1945 (Wiseman, Metzl, et al., 2006). Recruitment from a random and nonclinical sample of Holocaust survivor offspring was intended to represent nonselected offspring that have been found to score in the normal range of psychopathology compared to selected and clinical samples of offspring (Felsen, 1998; Sagi-Schwartz et al., 2003; Solomon, 1998; van IJzendoorn et al., 2003). Specifically, the inclusion criterion for our study, namely the mother having survived a Nazi concentration camp, was intended to reduce somewhat the heterogeneity in the mothers' Holocaust experiences (Danieli, 1983). Regarding the fathers, 67% were also of a Holocaust background (37% were also concentration camp survivors). At the time of the study the participants ranged in age from 31 to 46 years ( $M = 39.35$ ,  $SD = 3.43$ ) and the mean number of years of education was  $M = 15.12$  ( $SD = 2.49$ ). Of the participants, 94.2% were married with children, and the mean number of children was 2.75 ( $SD = .87$ ).

### *Measure*

#### *RAP and Loneliness Episode Interview*

The recollected loneliness accounts were obtained by means of the Relationship Anecdotes Paradigm (RAP) interview developed by Luborsky (1998) as a method to elicit relational narratives outside of psychotherapy sessions for application of the Core Conflictual Relationship Theme method (CCRT; Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1998). Instructions for the RAP interview are: "Please tell me some incidents or events, each involving yourself in relation to another person" Each account has to be about "a specific event that was personally important or a problem to you in some way" (Luborsky, 1998, p. 110). For each specific incident, the interviewee is asked to say when it occurred and to identify the other person involved, to relate something the other person said or did and something the interviewee said or did, and to indicate what happened in the end. The total time for each RAP interview, which usually covers 10 such incidents, is 30 to 50 min. In the present study, interviewees were asked to tell two stories about meaningful interpersonal interactions with each of the following five significant others: mother, father, spouse/partner, same-sex friend, and child (Wiseman, Metzl, et al., 2006). In addition, after the interviewee completed recounting the 10 stories we asked him or her to tell us an 11th story (M. Mikulincer, personal communication, October 1996). The instructions were: "Now I will ask you for an 11th story in which I would like you to recount an episode of loneliness during childhood/adolescence in the context of the family."

The RAP interview was previously applied in a study on anger and guilt in the narratives about recalled interactions between

children of Holocaust survivors and their parents (Wiseman, Metzl, et al., 2006). In the present study the narrative analysis was applied to the loneliness accounts (*the 11th story*) as well as to the narratives in the RAP interview about interactions with mother and father (four out of the requested 10 stories). With regard to the narratives on parents that were told in response to the general RAP instructions, the judges first identified those that included loneliness feelings (see Procedure section). These were then analyzed together with the loneliness accounts that were elicited toward the end of the RAP interview.

### Procedure

The RAP interviews were conducted in the participants' homes (except in a few cases in which the participants preferred to be interviewed in an office at the university). All the interviewees gave informed consent for their participation in the study. They signed a consent form before they completed the study protocol and were assured their anonymity would be maintained. The interviews were audiotaped, the tapes were fully transcribed verbatim by research assistants, and the transcripts were compared to the audiotaped interviews to check for accuracy. Two raters were trained to bracket the transcribed RAP interviews into relationship narratives, indicating the beginning and ending of each narrative. They also marked the significant other in the narrative (Wiseman, Metzl, et al., 2006). The length of the loneliness accounts (*the 11th story*) ranged from 12 lines to four double-spaced pages, with a mean length of about 28 lines. Further information on the RAP method of interviewing and the relational narratives that it yields can be found in Luborsky and Crits-Christoph (1998).

The narrative analysis of the loneliness stories that was conducted involved three stages. First, the narratives about the parents that were told as part of the RAP interviews were examined to identify narratives involving experiences in which the narrator indicated loneliness feelings. We considered indications of loneliness in the stories that were explicit (e.g., "I felt lonely"; "alone") as well as those that were implicit or could be inferred (e.g., "I felt neglected"; "no one to talk to"; "I felt distant"; "longing for closeness"; "longing for understanding"). These identified loneliness stories were included with the recalled accounts of loneliness in the context of the family, which were specifically elicited in the 11th story. Four judges read all the narratives and made independent notes on the loneliness themes and content categories that emerged from the overall pool of loneliness narratives.

The second stage involved two primary judges, each meeting with one of the two other judges in two rounds; they examined all the notes and decided upon categories and core loneliness themes. In the third stage, the material from the previous rounds was integrated by the two primary judges, who also formulated the final list of categories and themes across all cases (Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). In addition, in accordance with the Consensual Qualitative Research method (Hill et al., 1997, 2005), a cross analysis included coding the frequency of occurrence of the categories.

### Results

Analysis of the narratives of recalled loneliness experiences led to the identification of four core categories of loneliness. Table 1

Table 1  
*Loneliness Categories, Narrators' Experiences, Illustrative Phrases, and Frequencies*

Categories of loneliness	Narrators' experience of parent in relation to self/illustrative phrase	Frequency (%)
Direct manifestations of echoes of the parent's trauma		
Echoes of parental intrusive traumatic memories	Carrying the burden of the parent's intrusive traumatic memories "Why does she have to suffer . . . why can't she break away from it . . . it is also very difficult for me."	13 (25)
Echoes of parental numbing and detachment	Preoccupied and distant parent "Their response was very cold and unenthusiastic . . . I decided to detach from them."	3 (6)
Indirect manifestations of echoes of the parent's trauma		
Perceived parents' caregiving style in the loneliness experiences		
Parent's inability to provide physical and emotional care	Deficient parental care and feeling abandoned "Mother disappears on you . . . she wanted to give but was incapable . . . you feel hurt . . . neglected."	2 (4)
Being left alone prematurely to manage on one's own	Temporary lack of parental care and protection "There was no one to turn to . . . I was anxious . . . I felt lonely."	28 (54)
Role reversal and the wish to be understood	Need to protect anxious parent at the expense of one's own needs "Her words (it is very dangerous) completely paralyzed me . . . I wanted for once . . . that she would understand me."	25 (48)
Frustrated need for open communication	Lack of sharing of personal thoughts and feelings "My mother never asked me how was your day . . . I lacked a sympathetic ear."	12 (23)
Social comparison with other families and especially not having grandparents	Lack of kin social support in comparison to other children "Kids said they were going to their grandparents . . . I felt different . . . a sense of loneliness . . . other homes full of life."	10 (19)

presents a summary of these loneliness categories, the narrators' experience of the parent in relation to the self, a corresponding illustrative phrase taken from the narratives, and the frequency (i.e., number of participants) and percentage of occurrence of each category in the narratives. As can be seen in Table 1, loneliness related to direct manifestations of the parents' posttraumatic responses was distinguished from loneliness related to indirect manifestations of having been raised by survivor parents. The last category referred to loneliness stemming from social comparison with other families, especially with regard to the child not having grandparents or extended families, as these had perished in the Holocaust. Below each category is defined, and illustrated by the narrative that best depicts the core themes. Pseudonyms have been assigned to the sons and daughters who related these narratives.

### *Direct Manifestations as Related to Parents' Posttraumatic Responses*

#### *Echoes of Parental Intrusive Traumatic Memories*

Some sons and daughters recalled specific incidents in which they were faced with their parent's intrusive memories, which in turn were associated with their own acute feelings of loneliness. One of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed., text revision [DSM-IV-TR]; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is "intense psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event" (p. 468). In the following account, Rachel refers to loneliness in the context of such internal and external cues.

Rachel: As a child I did not know any details about what and where she was during the Holocaust, only that she went through the Holocaust; but one thing she did disclose and it was engraved in me, that she very much disliked *Lag BaOmer* [a Jewish holiday on which bonfires are lit] because it reminded her of the (concentration) camps. On *Lag BaOmer* she was supposed to go out with us children to celebrate around the fire, like all the parents do on this evening, but she could not go out of the house. My father would always go with us (the children) on that day. You see, it was very unusual for my mother not to go somewhere with my father, because my parents were "like a twosome," they always went everywhere together. And this is why it is engraved so deeply in my memory.

Interviewer: Can you be more specific about what you, as a child, felt in that situation?

Rachel: Her misery, her gloom, why does she have to suffer until this very day, why does she have to carry it . . . why can't she break away from it . . . I really felt sorry for her about the Holocaust, the loneliness . . . she lost everything in the Holocaust, literally everything, all her family. I never had a grandfather, a grandmother, I did not know at all . . . it hurts me. As a child I felt pity for her, I never judged her and I justified her. You see, I tied everything to this concept of loneliness and loss . . . I want her to disconnect from all her sorrow, but I guess it is impossible and it is painful for me."

In her account Rachel appears to associate a strong and overriding sense of loneliness with her mother's immense losses. She expresses a strong wish that her mother could detach herself from her traumatic past but indicates again and again that this is impossible. She appears to alternate between the loneliness of her mother, who cannot disconnect herself from the images of fire

from the concentration camps, and her own loneliness because her mother cannot join them in the celebration around the bonfires. The daughter seems not to differentiate between her mother's experiences and her own. It is unclear where the loneliness feelings of the mother and those of the daughter begin and end. Mother lost everything including her family in the Holocaust, and her daughter did not have grandparents (see later also in a separate category). Consequently, Rachel feels pity for her mother and perhaps also for herself.

In the narrative Rachel is searching for a way to put these difficult feelings into words. This portrayal of loneliness may be related to the traumatic aspects that color the experience, thus making it impossible to differentiate between "figure" and "ground." Blurred feelings regarding loneliness and trauma arise spontaneously in Rachel's narrative when she later mentions a more recent experience of impending disaster in connection with the first Gulf War in 1991. At that time, Iraq was threatening to attack Israel using nonconventional weapons, in particular gas warfare. Though this threat of gas warfare did not materialize, Israel was hit by a sizable number of conventional missiles.

Rachel: Mother had nightmares during that period . . . she kept seeing the gas chambers and the fires in the concentration camps . . . it hurt me to see her so helpless. It was also very difficult for me, I could not help her.

Rachel's account of loneliness is imbued with perceptions of her mother as suffering from intrusive traumatic memories, both in her dreams and in waking life. At the beginning of the interview, Rachel described her strong ties to her mother. Nevertheless, an analysis of her account clearly indicates that both as a child and as an adult she feels that she has been left very much alone to try to cope with her mother's recurrent intrusive memories and distressing dreams. The echoes of the mother's suffering appear to color the daughter's feelings of distress, helplessness and loneliness.

#### *Echoes of Numbing Responsiveness and Detachment*

Some of the more dramatic loneliness descriptions were told by survivors' offspring who felt that their parents could not share their moments of happiness or pride due to the parents' general numbing of feelings and sense of impending disaster.

Jacob: Loneliness in relation to the family? Yes, the moment we decided we were getting married. Of course, her parents welcomed the news with joy; my parents' reaction was like mourning. They accepted it in the end, but I don't know why it was this way. Later on, when we announced that my wife was pregnant; their response was very cold and unenthusiastic. Their message was, don't get too excited, don't count on it, don't get a room ready for the baby. And after the baby was born prematurely and was hospitalized they said, don't get attached to her.

Jacob further describes his parents' recurrent lack of responsiveness and empathy and his responses to this:

Jacob: At first I felt some bitterness over not being understood, and then I became indifferent and perhaps this why I decided to detach myself from them . . . It is not that I was blaming them or angry at them, it really bothered me that they did not support me. But I cannot blame them; I cannot judge them, because of what they went through . . . It is a trauma of inconceivable magnitude.

When asked further about his feelings Jacob describes his reserved stance and his lack of open expression of feelings. An



exception is his attachment to his wife, with whom he does share his feelings. Holocaust survivors live their present remembering their past, reminding themselves and their loved ones how fragile reality is. Jacob's parents were only trying to save him from possible disappointment, but their restricted reactions seem to leave him alone and hurt. In response, the son learned not to share his experiences with his parents, and he assumes a distrustful stance toward others.

### *Indirect Manifestations as Related to Having Been Raised by Survivor Parents*

#### *Perceived Parents' Caregiving Style in the Loneliness Experiences*

The sons and daughters often referred to their perceptions of the parenting style they experienced while growing up. In some narratives they perceived their parents in relation to a general depiction of their day-to-day or recurrent interactions. In others, the narrator described a specific memorable encounter concerning feelings of loneliness in childhood and adolescence. Under this broad category, four subcategories emerged (see Table 1).

*Parent's inability to provide physical and emotional care.* David describes in general how his mother was incapable of taking care of him, in terms of basic physical as well as emotional needs. A recurrent childhood experience was his mother's yearly departure, leaving him with the ultimate experience of abandonment: "I don't know a lot of places where . . . once a year, mother disappears on you for a whole month, because she goes away for a whole month." He explains that she left them (her children) to receive treatment that she was entitled to as a Holocaust survivor. Asked about the type of treatment, David replied that his mother's wounds were both physical and emotional. Only later did he learn the reason for his mother's absence. At the time (age 6) he did not know why she disappeared: "Here you are a child and your mother is not there for a whole month, and there is no explanation for it. It is not something you can receive an explanation for at the age of six and understand it. So you are angry, hurt, you feel neglected, it is natural."

The experience of abandonment is related to the mother's need to be taken care of, for her physical and emotional wounds to be treated. She cannot provide care to her children, even though David quite clearly states: "She wanted so much to give, but was incapable." The mother's physical unavailability during the times she left him and her more general emotional unavailability (Cassidy & Berlin, 1999) left the child feeling alone and sad.

*Being left alone prematurely to manage on one's own.* In contrast to the above relatively rare account of feeling abandoned, recollected experiences of being left on one's own that led to feelings of situational loneliness were rather common. These situations were usually described as a blend of fear and loneliness. For the most part, the parents would go out for a few hours in the evening and leave the child without a babysitter or any other caregiver. The experience often meant not only having to deal with one's own fears, but also taking care of a sibling.

Barry recounts the following episode from age 6 when his parents went out to a movie and left him at home for the first time with his younger brother who was around 6 months old.

Barry: It was at night, so frightening! I was so afraid! We lived then at the center of the city and my parents went just a few blocks away to the movie house, and my father hopped back home in the middle of the movie to see how we were. It was night and I was really afraid. I was afraid I would not know what to do if he (the baby brother) woke up, and afraid that something would happen during the hours they were away.

In response to the interviewer's further probing on what he thought and felt at the time, Barry replied: "I thought about why they didn't bring *someone to take care of me*, to attend to me? After all, I am also a young child, and on top of it I have my baby brother! What will I do if he wakes up? I don't remember if I cried or not, but I do remember that I was completely unable to fall asleep until they returned. *It was terrible!* Later on I was fine, but that night."

Another example was a man who described a memory from age 10 or 11 about a specific time his parents went out dancing and left him and his twin sister alone "on a night that it was raining very heavily, with thunder and terrible lightning." It was not so much that he felt scared but rather he felt lonely in need to deal on his own with his twin sister's panic: "She heard the rain, saw the lightning and then heard the thunder and she really panicked and started to throw up. I didn't know what to do . . . There was no one to turn to . . . An hour passed and then another and I was anxious. I managed to calm down the child, but what'll happen if she gets another panic attack . . . ? I felt more lonely than afraid."

In such situations the child must deal with the parent's expectation that he or she can handle being on his or her own and assume the role of a parent (parentification). This may also be colored by the common experience that the parents are going to have fun while the child is being left behind. Yet there is also a sense that the child feels the parents are not aware of the distress their behavior may be causing. Having to manage prematurely on one's own may stand out as failures to provide basic needs for safety and protection, which arouses loneliness feelings. The offspring felt their parents misperceived what tasks were appropriate for such a young child to perform on his or her own (e.g., staying on your own with a baby brother, attending to your sister's panic on a stormy night, preparing a meal on your own at a young age).

*Role-reversal and the wish to be understood.* A central interpersonal dynamic involved the difficulty of the children to assert their independence in light of the parents' anxieties and worries (Wiseman et al., 2002). In response to the parents' overprotective behavior, the child felt obliged to attend to them and their vulnerabilities at the expense of his or her own desires. At such times the child appeared overwhelmed by the parents' perceived verbal and nonverbal expressions of anxiety and fragility. This sense of being overpowered by the parents' overprotective reactions, which was related in the child's mind to the scars the parents carry, was accompanied by feelings of loneliness. The following narrative illustrates the dynamic in which the child is compelled to attend to an anxious mother at the expense of having his own needs attended to.

Joseph recalls an encounter with his mother in which he wanted to ask her permission to go on a youth trip for a few days. He begins his narrative by telling the interviewer that around the age of 13 this became an issue. Due to his mother's anxieties she would not agree, under any circumstances, that he go away on youth trips that involved sleeping away from home for a few days. He recounts the following specific encounter with his mother

around the time he wanted to ask her permission to go on a youth trip to the Sea of Galilee for a few days.

Joseph: I came home and I decided that this time I had to convince her to let me go on a 4-day trip to the Sea of Galilee. The minute I walked into the house, she repeated her usual statement: "It is a good thing you're back. I already started worrying about you." And during this time I said to myself over and over again: "You've got to convince her that you're going on this trip." I sat with her in the living room, and carefully I began saying that today they talked to us about the Sea of Galilee. She looked at me and said: "Really, it is very far, it is very dangerous there". . . . It was as if *her words completely paralyzed me*, even though she did not yet know what I wanted to say to her . . . . *I wanted for once to tell her what I wanted and for her to understand my will or desire, but I gave in.*

Reconstructing the parent-child interaction in Joseph's narrative reveals the following sequence of interpersonal events. Joseph came home determined this time (unlike past attempts) to persuade his mother to give him permission to join his peers on a trip that involved sleeping away from home. However, on entering the house Joseph encountered his mother's "worry script" and "startle script" that brought to the forefront his sense that mother cannot bear her fears of danger to his safety. In response he remained completely unable to voice his original determination to persuade his mother to let him go on the trip ("her words completely paralyzed me"). Faced with his mother's vulnerability, he was left feeling there is no place for his own desires, and his resolution to have his voice heard and understood collapsed. In such parent-child encounters the child is left alone with a whole range of feelings that cannot be openly expressed and shared with the vulnerable parent. These interpersonal dynamics were common in the narratives (see frequency in Table 1). In addition, the parents' overprotective behavior contributed to the child's peer-related loneliness, in that he could not join his peers and his social needs were painfully frustrated. Moreover, in cases like Joseph's, the child did not even share the frustration with his peers as he felt ashamed of his mother's extreme overprotective behavior.

*Frustrated need for open communication.* In most cases the sons and daughters of the survivors perceived their parents as heavily stressing their physical needs, whereas the feeling that the parent's ability to provide emotional support was lacking was more prevalent in the narratives (see Table 1).

Zilla: I never came home and found the house closed, I was not a latch-key child. But my mother never asked me, "How was your day in school?" or "How was it at the youth movement?" She always asked me if I needed money. I didn't lack any clothes, but *I lacked a sympathetic ear*. I had a duvet with a pattern of balls in all kinds of colors and I always told these balls everything I went through . . . . I used to say to myself: "It doesn't matter that my mother won't listen to me, but these balls will always listen to me. I always fought with my mother not to change the duvet, because then I wouldn't have the balls."

In this narrative, the daughter expresses her longing for a different kind of attention from her mother. Her mother's way of caring for her seemed to center around material things (money, clothes), yet Zilla missed the emotional caring and wanted her mother to take an interest in what she went through during the day. The daughter stated that she missed emotional concern, and wanted to be listened to and to be able to share her thoughts and feelings openly. She fought with her mother not to take "the balls"

away from her, but seems to have no hope that her mother can provide her what she is lacking most—a sympathetic ear.

### *Social Comparison With Other Families*

The aspect of social comparison was expressed in the narrators' experience of loneliness as a general sense of their home being different from other homes. This aspect stood out specifically in relation to the size of the extended family in nonsurvivor families. Leah describes how when she was growing up she thought that all families were the same: mother, father, boy, and girl. When she went to school she found out that there were children with really big families, with uncles and aunts, grandfather and grandmother, a discovery that made her feel lonely.

Leah: Suddenly I felt something was really missing in my life. It started in the summer break after first grade, when kids said they were going to their grandfather and grandmother for the vacation . . . . I felt different. I didn't understand the meaning of the concept of grandparents I didn't know there was such a thing, and then I felt I had lost something. There were those that had at least one grandmother or grandfather, they got pocket money and a Hanukkah gift, and these old people sometimes came to school events. *It made me feel a sense of loneliness.* I really liked to go to other homes, there were always many people around and the house was full of life.

The social comparison to other children who could enjoy contact with their grandparents and had lively social networks is associated with feelings of loneliness stemming from the child's sense of deprivation in this respect.

### Discussion

The loneliness feelings that sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors recalled from childhood and adolescence were studied by means of their narratives about interpersonal experiences with their parents. Research on childhood and adolescent loneliness has focused on dissatisfaction in relationships with peers (Asher et al., 1984; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1999) and in relationships with parents (Goossens & Marcoen, 1999). Our approach assumed that growing up with parents who had endured massive trauma would be manifested in the offspring's recalled relational experiences in the context of the survivor family. The four major categories that emerged from the narrative analysis of the loneliness accounts appear to represent varying tones and salience of the echoes of the parental trauma as expressed in the narrator's account. Consequently, the analysis led to distinguishing between loneliness experiences in light of direct manifestations of the trauma in the parents' behaviors and responses to the child and those stemming from indirect manifestations.

Loneliness accounts containing descriptions of parents' responses that resembled specific PTSD symptoms (i.e., direct manifestations) were evident in the first two categories: "Echoes of parental intrusive traumatic memories" and "Echoes of numbing and detachment." In view of these parental behaviors, echoes of the trauma are directly evident in the described subjective feelings of loneliness. Sagi-Schwartz et al. (2003) found in their controlled study of a nonclinical sample that even after more than 50 years female Holocaust survivors, though not generally impaired, showed more signs of traumatic stress and lack of trauma resolution than a comparison group. However, the traumatic effects did

not appear to be passed on to their daughters. More direct manifestations of the parents' traumatic stress reactions that we identified in some narratives do not mean that these reactions were transmitted to the children (i.e., "secondary traumatization"; Mikulincer, 2006), but rather that they are echoed in their subjective loneliness experiences.

The indirect manifestations of the echoes of parental trauma were subsumed under the broad category of parents' perceived caregiving style as represented in the loneliness experiences. The accounts in this category describe loneliness in light of the parents' temporary or ongoing failure to protect and nurture the child and to provide him or her comfort, reassurance, and understanding. Even though children recognize the distinction between being alone and loneliness, the temporary absence of parents has been found to be a frequent interpersonal context in children's accounts of loneliness (Hymel et al., 1999). In the narratives containing specific events of being left alone, the child's experience of being left to deal with a situation for which he or she was ill-prepared was salient. Persistent failure to provide the child physical and/or psychological security and protection (feeling abandoned) was much less common.

Indeed, survivor parents devotedly cared for their children, to the extent of having difficulty separating from the child, especially in adolescence when he or she wanted more freedom to explore away from home. In these situations the child's difficulty in rebelling against the survivor parents' overprotection and the pattern of role reversal in the parent-child relationship (Scharf & Mayseless, 2006; Shafet, 1994) arouse feelings of loneliness in relation to both the parents and the peer group, as the child was unable to join in social activities that stirred their parents' anxieties. Research has shown that parents' overprotective parenting style (Wiseman, Mayseless, & Sharabany, 2006) and nonpromotion of peer relationships (Rotenberg, 1999) contributed to loneliness. In the context of the echoes of trauma, the lack of open communication between children and their parents usually centered on a conflict between the child's desire (usually for independence) and the parent's overprotective responses that did not leave any room for negotiation. Under such circumstances, the parent's fear of impending disaster stands as a barrier to the child's wish to be understood and to express his or her needs openly.

The loneliness in these recalled interactions appeared to be a consequence of two separate types of loneliness: peer-related loneliness and parent-related loneliness (Goosens & Marcoen, 1999). Under the circumstances depicted in the narratives of the sons and daughters, these two types were clearly interrelated. First, the parents' overprotective behavior contributed to peer-related loneliness, in that the child, even if only under these circumstances, was unable to join his peers (e.g., take part in a party or in a youth trip away from home). Second, the parents' vulnerability, which prevented them from being able to relate to the child's desires, contributed to parent-related loneliness, in that the child felt the parents could not see him/her and was incapable of understanding his or her own desires and feelings.

As for the general lack of sharing of emotional experiences with parents, research has shown that individuals who perceive their parents as responsive and high in warmth and involvement report less loneliness in adolescence and adulthood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Rotenberg, 1999). In the loneliness accounts of the offspring of Holocaust survivors, the emphasis on the lack of open commu-

nication may be further amplified by the lack of open intergenerational communication about the Holocaust trauma (Wiseman et al., 2002). Zilla's story about talking to the colored ball pattern on her duvet may not be unique to being raised by survivor parents, but the lack of sharing and openness may well be related to a more general atmosphere of silence in families of survivors of various trauma (Ancharoff, Munroe, & Fisher, 1998; Danieli, 1998; Lev-Wiesel, 2007; Sawada, Chaitin, & Bar-On, 2004).

The last category of loneliness found in the narratives referred to a structural aspect of the survivor family, namely lack of extended family, especially grandparents. This aspect of loneliness, which may be augmented by social comparison, may be found in other family constellations (e.g., being an only child), but in the offspring of survivors it is profoundly related to growing up perceiving the echoes of the massive familial losses. Growing up to parents whose family of origin perished was echoed in some narratives as a burden on the parents that is also felt by the child who absorbed the parents' loneliness. In some narratives this was undifferentiated from the child's feelings of loneliness. In these cases survivor parents may apparently "hand down" their loneliness to their offspring (Lobdell & Perlman, 1986).

Theories of loneliness have included psychodynamic, social, cognitive, and more recently attachment theory (reviewed in Heinrich & Gullone, 2006; Perlman & Landolt, 1999). The most suitable conceptualization to capture the essence of our findings on the recollected loneliness experiences of Holocaust survivors' offspring is represented in the proposition that "loneliness is the individual experience of failed intersubjectivity" (Wood, 1986, p. 188). According to Wood, failed intersubjectivity involves the experience of not being understood by others, not understanding others, and the absence of shared understanding. The distinctive features of childhood and adolescent loneliness that emerged from our narrative analysis elucidate and demonstrate this conceptualization of the subjective meaning of loneliness. The children of survivors had loneliness experiences in which they experienced the parent as not understanding them; they did not understand the parent; and they lacked shared understanding.

The painful experience of failed intersubjectivity appeared especially profound in situations that stimulated the parents' fears and anxieties, so that shared understanding became impossible. Situations in which the parents' traumatic memories were salient appeared to make the child feel unable to understand the parent and left alone to deal with the impossible—to make sense of the "indescribable and the undiscussable" (Bar-On, 1999) Holocaust trauma of the parents. Survivor parents found it difficult to communicate openly with their children about their traumatic memories. Hence, the trauma remained unarticulated, leaving the child puzzled by the parents' behavior and reactions (not understanding the parent). Moreover, feeling the burden of the parents' losses and worries, which is an aspect of the role-reversal pattern in the parent-child relationship (Scharf & Mayseless, 2006), exacerbates the child's sense of not being understood by the parent ("that for once she will understand my desire"). Under these circumstances, the children lack opportunities for open transactions and negotiations with their parents, which are often a prerequisite for reaching a sense of shared understanding.

Thus, in the context of direct manifestations of the trauma and indirect manifestations in the parents' behaviors and responses to their child, the lack of open communication about the parents'



traumatic losses ("parents do not tell, and children do not ask," Bar-On, 1996; p. 168) appears to amplify the child's experience of being left all alone to deal with the echoes of the parental trauma. Because these traumas are too painful to discuss openly (Danieli, 1998; Krell, Suedfeld, & Soriano, 2004), the offspring experience their parents' Holocaust losses as a burden and as a barrier to shared understanding.

### *Implications for Practice*

The absence of shared understanding at the heart of some of the narratives can be further understood by examining the other side of the coin of loneliness: experiences of shared meaning and mutuality between offspring and the survivor parents. Recently, with the growing recognition of survivors' need to tell and descendants' need to deal with their parents' traumatic past (Chaitin, 2003), new lines of communication have opened between them. Such experiences of open communication were rare in the narratives from childhood through early adulthood that we collected, but their healing power is becoming more evident among both survivors and their descendants.

Clinicians working with patients who grew up in families that experienced extensive trauma need to be sensitive to the possibility of their patients' vulnerability to failures in intersubjectivity in their past and current relationships. Opportunities for open dialogue and interpersonal negotiation can be provided by different forms of psychotherapy (i.e., individual, family, group) as well as by experiences of empathy and mutuality in the person's current close relationships (Wiseman & Barber, 2004, 2008). Such corrective emotional experiences of shared meaning and understanding are particularly important for those who grew up with a sense of loneliness in the context of the echoes of parental trauma.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

As in any study of retrospective accounts, the narrators' current loneliness with respect to their family of origin and their current close relationships may color their depictions of past experiences of loneliness. Moreover, the present study focused on loneliness in the context of growing up in a Holocaust survivor family without addressing personality variables involved in those experiences (Wiseman, 1997), or the interaction between the participants' personality and growing up in such families (Chaitin, 2003; Perlman, 1988). In addition, our analysis did not yield a differentiation as a function of gender of the offspring. Given that some studies have found gender differences in loneliness (Koenig & Abrams, 1999; Perlman & Landolt, 1999), it would be of interest to address this issue in future research.

Another limitation is that this study needs to be considered within the sociocultural context in which this nonclinical sample of Israeli-born children of survivors grew up (Solomon, 1998). Van IJzendoorn et al.'s (2003) meta-analytic study found no evidence of differences in adjustment between studies on Holocaust survivors' offspring growing up in Israel and in Western Europe or North America. Future studies are needed to address the loneliness experiences of sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors in the sociocultural contexts in which they were raised in North America and other countries. Finally, it would be of interest to study

loneliness among the descendants of victims of other trauma as well as among the descendants of perpetrators.

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