

Resilient Remembrance: Former "Ostarbeiter" Remember

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Abstract

The experience of "Ostarbeiter" – forced laborers primarily from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union during their time in Nazi Germany 1939-45 – was marked by immense hardship and trauma. The study explores the cultural, and individual factors that shape the resilience strategies employed by the subjects; thus, it shows how these strategies are expressed through metaphorical concepts with an emotional orientation. The research evaluates the resilience strategies employed by the subjects, which are drawn from their metaphorical concepts, according to the following models: Adler's (role of self-efficacy), Cyrulnik's (role of community), and Frankl's (role of sense in life). The metaphor analysis is based on the conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) proposed by Lakoff and Johnson. The present study explores the notion of resilience and coping strategies among former Ukrainian and Russian "Ostarbeiter" in Muenster through published in-depth interviews conducted 60 years later. The analysis of these interviews reveals the sustainability of these strategies, thus providing a compelling argument for incorporating resilience training in contemporary war and conflict contexts.

Keywords: memory, metaphors, NS-Regime, Ostarbeiter, resilience.

Introduction

The "Ostarbeiter" programs, initiated by the National Socialists after 1941, forcibly brought millions of individuals from Eastern Europe to work in Germany's war economy. The workers in question were subjected to appalling conditions, encompassing forced labor, malnutrition, and incessant surveillance. Despite the challenges, the subjects employed various strategies to ensure their survival and dignity. Nevertheless, the young slave workers from Ukraine, Russia, and other countries found ways to cope with these challenges and traumas, developing resilience strategies in the process.

The study defines resilience as the capacity to categorize, articulate, and transform exceptional situations based on belonging to a family or community, coherence, and self-efficacy by applying coping strategies (Lazarus, 1999). By Adler's theory of compensation, the experience of self-efficacy has been demonstrated to facilitate overcoming experiences of powerlessness through the mechanisms of cooperation and solidarity (Adler, 1931). During Adler's research, developing trust and cooperation in

prison life was a highly beneficial aspect of the program. However, it should be noted that the individual in question was a man of sound judgment who placed a high value on the community. It is therefore surprising to learn that he would have supported a scheme for temporary pardons that would release dangerous criminals, as also the imprisoned slave worker was supposed to be, back into society for longer or shorter periods (Bottome, 1939). It is, therefore, evident that this specific resilience strategy is contingent upon membership of a group or community, thereby engendering a sense of belonging.

Cyrułnik's (2009) perspective is informed by his personal history, including the deportation of his parents to a concentration camp during the Second World War, from which they never returned. This experience has led him to work with children who have been subjected to abuse, neglect, war, and genocide. In his view, resilience is the ability to thrive and develop positively despite adverse circumstances. He conceptualizes this as a process that involves emotional support through positive social feedback from peers and mentors, the ability to recall emotionally significant events, and the capacity to transform these experiences into appropriate stories and narratives within the respective cultural context (McAdams, 1993). This ability is predicated on a subjective internal theory of life that provides meaning, even without external influences (Frankl, 1964).

Frankl's observations of inmates in a concentration camp revealed that those who survived were able to connect with a purpose in life and feel positive about it. They then immersed themselves in imagining that purpose in their own way, such as conversing with an (imagined) loved one. As Frankl posited, the manner in which a prisoner conceptualized the future exerted a significant influence on his longevity. The following text is intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the subject matter.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The present study is based on a series of theoretical models, the aim of which is to evaluate written memories and archived interviews with Russian and Ukrainian people who remembered the time of forced labor in Münster 60 years later. The study focuses on the resilience strategies employed by these individuals (Interview-Archive 2005/2006, Karpow, 2002; Jakobi & Kenkmann, 2003; Schwarze, 1999, 2005). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), these strategies are metaphorical concepts and expressions of complex emotions (Lindquist, 2021). As metaphors facilitate comprehension of abstract concepts and perform abstract reasoning, they also render abstract emotions comprehensible as mappings across conceptual domains (source- and target domain) grounded in the body and everyday experience and knowledge (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). These emotions are mostly unconscious and automatic and primarily based on correspondences in experiences, rather than on similarity. Therefore, the research answers the following research questions:

1. How do the interviews and letters remember the situation as forced laborers?
2. How do they describe this situation metaphorically?
3. How do they characterize their coping strategies?
4. How do they benefit from these experiences and strategies 60 years later?
5. How do they cope with setbacks and disappointments?

The investigation focuses on the nature of problems in the target area, distinguishing between the source and target areas. The text employs a metaphor to elucidate a particular fact. Individuals' habits, or the set of people, things, and activities they choose for themselves, collectively constitute their lifestyle. In this manner, a

position's intrinsic and relational qualities become a unified way of life (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Understanding abstract concepts can be enhanced by utilizing human categories as a reference point. However, the employment of symbols and metaphors, such as depicting peace as a dove, has been demonstrated to be an effective medium for establishing a connection between emotions and the designated target area.

Philosophical Insights

The following considerations emerge when Conceptual Metaphor Analysis (CMA) is applied, with its foundations in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Forced laborers in Germany faced the challenge of resisting dehumanization through forced engagement in meaningless work, and, therefore developed resilience strategies. Adler, Cyrulnik, and Frankl concur with this perspective, asserting that the integration into a community and the discovery of purpose in life empower individuals to assume a role as proactive agents.

The analysis of metaphorical concepts, such as "burnout" or "isolation", demonstrates the potential of metaphors to enhance resilience through transformation (e.g., into "full of energy" or "self-efficacy"). Notably, pastoral experiences substantiate that evaluating metaphorical concepts, including narratives, myths, and rituals, as transformative stories, fosters resilience (Hughes et al., 2022; Nelson, 2009). The utilization of religious metaphors, encompassing the conveyance of biblical connotations, value implications, and existential meaning orientation, constitutes a pivotal criterion in analyzing and transforming emotional narratives and rituals (Apresjan, 1997; Franzenburg, 2022; 2025; Heasly, et al, 2025).

When these criteria are fully considered, such metaphors' resilience-oriented nature becomes apparent. A significant proportion of "Ostarbeiter" also adopted problem-focused coping strategies. These strategies entailed actively addressing the challenges faced by the subjects, including the pursuit of improved working conditions, the initiation of negotiations with superiors, and the enhancement of living conditions. Particularly, the following strategies are remarkable:

In the context of the Soviet "Ostarbeiter ", the collective identity and shared experiences of hardship under Stalinist rule were often drawn upon as a means of everyday coping with desolate working conditions (Binner, 2008; Grinchenko, 2010; Kozlova and others, 2019; Norris and others, 2008). The subjects interviewed recalled their experiences of forced labor in Muenster as being characterized by emotional and physical stress, typified by fear, insecurity, loss, and isolation.

In addition to the fundamental human needs for sustenance and hydration, memories of the past evoke three pivotal aspects of resilience and suffering. Firstly, the experience of community and the absence thereof. Secondly, the experience of purpose in life and the absence of purpose. Thirdly, the experience of self-efficacy and the experience of complete reliance on others. According to the works of Adler (1931), Cyrulnik (2009), and Frankl (1964), the answers to the research questions can be found in the following scheme of resilience strategies:

Community Orientation (Sense of Belonging)

The experience of feeling completely isolated and longing for support from others proved to be of great significance for the young forced workers and the older generation alike. In the face of aerial bombardment and subterranean shelters, the subjects

encountered challenges related to social isolation. They also reported experiencing elevated levels of psychological distress, emotional detachment, a sense of entrapment, and a pervasive sense of despair. However, amidst these challenges, there were also spontaneous acts of solidarity and empathy. The accounts reflect the reality of the lives of the forced laborers, which were characterized by deprivation, control, fear, and hardship. However, they also demonstrate that mutual support was a key aspect of the experience, with the attempt to preserve a shred of dignity under inhumane conditions. The recollections elucidate these experiences and sentiments of absolute isolation using the metaphorical notion of being confined by barriers, gates, and locks, not solely as tangible impediments, but also as symbols of utter desolation and impotence. This elucidates the experience of the surroundings as a prison from which there is no escape and no avenue of evasion. Therefore, the memories illustrate that the imprisoned people wandered around for a considerable period, thus demonstrating their state of disorientation and uncertainty. They were searching for a safe place, which was unavailable. In addition to considerations of safety, the substandard camp conditions (prison, locked gates, "threw together" slabs of reinforced concrete, "garbage dump", "deserted city, no money, plank beds, table made of planks") served to exacerbate feelings of isolation and the sense of being imprisoned. Nevertheless, the metaphorical concept of imprisonment and the experience of isolation were conducive to the development of resilience, as evidenced by the sharing of potatoes and the gathering of corn and the utilization of two 10-liter canisters.

Meaning Orientation (Sense of Coherence)

A further pivotal experience for the subjects was the feeling of suffering from senseless work and the desire for coherence in their everyday lives. The metaphorical concept of "cold and dark burned down ruins" was employed to elucidate the sentiment experienced during involuntary and futile labor, as well as during unwarranted oppression and disciplinary. The metaphor further serves to illustrate the perpetual state of insecurity, which is characterized by an "invisible cloud of nausea" hovering over the ruins, a "smell of burning" permeating the atmosphere, and the metaphorical implication that the flames consume life itself. The metaphorical situation is analogous to living on a powder keg, where the potential for detonation is ever-present. The following elements are of particular significance: determined tragic fates, long periods of freezing, and warm water that requires no less than an hour to warm up again.

Other elements include "rays of sunshine" in the darkness, "light at the end of the tunnel", "blue, soft snow", a sky no longer "clouded by smoke", snow falling "bluish" and "soft".

Experiences Oriented Towards Self-efficacy

The experience of being entirely reliant on others as an instrument was also a very challenging one. The daily struggle for survival and the profound vulnerability of existence did not permit any consideration of spiritual needs. The metaphorical concept applied in the memories is characterized by the absence of "possessions". Nevertheless, the subjects also remembered the importance of adaptation, solidarity, and minor acts of assistance, perseverance, hope, community, and minor joys. These minor joys included visiting a cafe or playing music together, children building their ice skates or toys out of wood, jam being eaten again after a long time, and a sewing machine dog

regularly bringing food scraps from the slaughterhouse. These memories allowed the subjects to feel as subjects rather than objects. This feeling included the following emotions: „Feeling like a provider for the family, like Gulliver among the Lilliputians, like returning to childhood, and like life getting back on track. The doll was named Greta, and the following was observed: "She was likened to Natasha Rostova at her first ball." The following text is intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the subject matter.

Discussion

The research results from conceptual metaphor analysis are based on 60 years later memories (interviews/ letters) and, thus, explain how people benefit from childhood experiences by interpreting their former resilience strategies. The experience of being isolated, accompanied by a sense of imprisonment, and the concomitant suffering resulting from arduous labor can constitute an ambivalent experience. This is further compounded by the desolate condition of being permanently dependent on others, devoid of material possessions and a sense of personal identity. It is emphasized that survival and perseverance in extreme situations are not solely dependent on external circumstances, but rather, to a significant extent, on intrinsic adaptability, solidarity, creativity, and the capacity to derive joy and hope even from minor sources. Perseverance is frequently an unassuming yet tenacious undertaking, characterized by adversity, trepidation, modest triumphs, and instances of collective humanity. This notion encompasses optimism, cohesion, and a sense of unadulterated exultation reminiscent of childhood. Consequently, the memories are articulated through proverbs, which encapsulate the life experiences of the young forced labourers.

Life is often perceived as an "unenviable fate" or a "difficult fate". The forced worker assimilated this notion over several decades and contemplated and reflected on living with fate as a sustainable coping strategy. This phenomenon can be likened to Frankl's philosophy, which emphasizes maintaining a sense of purpose, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. It is suggested that individuals can derive meaning from life, even when external circumstances seem beyond one's control or when confronted with personal adversity. This notion encompasses the ability to transform a personal misfortune into a triumph and a challenging situation into a human achievement. Moreover, the recollections indicate that, rather than modifying external circumstances, one should focus on self-alteration. This may be achieved by adopting a canine or feline companion or by engaging in futile employment, in which tasks are redefined as personal challenges. Alternatively, the absence of an individual's unique self can be addressed by formulating a kind of *laudatio* or similar resilience strategies.

"All experiences have already been undergone, and are now consigned to the past and relegated to the realms of memory " is another proverb. The forced worker assimilated a considerable body of knowledge over many years, when they reflected upon and recollected the potency of memories. Therefore, the present situation is reminiscent of Cyrulnik and his theory of resilience, which posits that the formation of memories is contingent upon an emotional response. Memory is a wholly subjective phenomenon, in which only emotionally charged experiences are recalled. Accordingly, the conception of autobiographical memory as a relational memory is predicated upon the notion that the content of such recollections is constituted by the individuals who impart them. As indicated by the metaphorical concepts under discussion, the evaluated

memories are associated with a range of emotions, including those that are traumatic and those that are oriented towards resilience (e.g. helplessness, hopefulness, grief, joy, anger, and contentment).

The proverb "You cannot turn back the clock" is a statement that conveys the idea of living in the present moment, without dwelling on the past or future. Adler's conviction that individuals who question the meaning of life in the present day do so due to the influence of their ancestors, yet are dependent on individual social interests, is recalled by this awareness of the current moment. Adler's theory posits that individuals grappling with inadequate preparation are the primary demographic susceptible to psychological distress, manifesting in physical symptoms or through attempts to evade challenges, thereby opting for a seemingly more straightforward path that does not necessitate active contribution. The memories that have been evaluated serve to emphasize this conviction of appreciating the moment as an opportunity for self-efficacy using emphasis. The capacity to adapt, function positively, and demonstrate competence despite high-risk status, chronic stress, or prolonged or severe trauma (Butler, 1999) underscores the notion of resilience. This concept of resilience, particularly within the contexts of teaching and care, is defined as a capacity or process of adapting to individual (distress) and collective (conflict) challenges (Norris et al., 2008). In order to meet these criteria, individuals need to avoid the development of stress-related mental disorders, adopt healthy behaviors, demonstrate functionality in the home, educational and occupational environments, and maintain a high quality of life (Lazarus, 1999). This form of resilience is augmented by recognizing the characteristics of the stressors, their subsequent evaluation, and the development of effective responses or coping mechanisms. In this context, metaphorical concepts, which combine past and present experiences and expectations for the future into a single image ("peace") and show one thing in the light of another ("sunshine" (external-internal)), facilitate coping strategies by reducing complexity: Complex challenges, such as war or crisis, become objects of reflection and action through comparison and illustration (storm, fire, water). The term 'metaphor' includes all linguistic phenomena in which meaning is transferred (Bruner, 1990; Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 1980). Therefore, it is evident that religious and non-religious metaphors are stylistic figures with grammatical functions that facilitate the construction of an extraordinary resilience-oriented reality. Accordingly, metaphorical language in daily discourse has been demonstrated to facilitate effective communication of subjective emotional states (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Conclusion

Despite the differing emphases in the extant literature, Adler, Cyrulnik, and Frankl concur that a supportive community engenders empathy, understanding, and encouragement; thus, it helps people feel less isolated and more connected through emotional bonds and the exchange of experiences. Instead, it is recommended that they seek mentors or role models who can provide inspiration and support, helping them to overcome challenges and envision a positive future. Adler, Cyrulnik, and Frankl concur with this perspective, asserting that the significance of life is pivotal to personality formation. They contend that identifying and rectifying the fundamental error enables individuals to enhance their circumstances by cultivating a more collaborative and intrepid disposition towards life. It is imperative to avoid provoking "transfers", acting as authorities, or placing others in a position of dependence and irresponsibility.

Memories represent a fundamental form of psychological expression. Such recollections are of particular constraints and the import of situations. The concept of "random memories" is a fallacy; individuals do not encounter an infinite number of impressions, but rather select only those they deem relevant to their situation, regardless of how obscure these may be. It is therefore the case that the aforementioned recollections constitute the particular "life story," a narrative that they iterate to themselves in order to provide both solace and motivation, to focus on their objectives, and to prepare themselves to face the future by drawing on past experiences and a course of action that has been proven to work.

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