

**ERD 2018**  
**6<sup>th</sup> International Conference – “Education, Reflection,  
Development, Sixth Edition”**

**PERCEIVED MORAL LESSONS DERIVED FROM HOLOCAUST  
LEARNING PROGRAM**

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*Abstract*

The Second World War (1939-1945) is considered to have been one of the largest, most important and influential historical events for humanity in the twentieth century. Possibly it is also the most terrible of all. During the war and especially between 1941-1945 another horrifying and despicable event occurred – The Jewish Holocaust. It was a premeditated and systematic murder of more than six million Jews perpetrated by the Nazis under the leadership and vision of their leader, the Fuhrer, Adolph Hitler. The aim of this research was to identify the moral lessons that the students perceived they had learned from their Holocaust Learning Program. 102 participants male and female, students in three Israeli high-schools responded to the Perceived Lessons Learned Questionnaire at the end of the program. The results revealed that the highest level of agreement in the perceived lessons list was assigned to the lesson "it is important to learn about the moral dilemmas of the Holocaust". The results for the different categories of moral lessons indicate the extent of agreement with "humanist-liberal" moral lessons was much higher in comparison with the extent of agreement with "nationalist-utilitarian" moral lessons. In addition, significant differences were found between boys and girls in relation to the extent of agreement with "nationalist-utilitarian" lessons. Boys expressed a significantly higher extent of agreement than the girls with these lessons.

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**Keywords:** Moral dilemmas, moral attitudes, moral lessons.



## 1. Introduction

The Second World War (1939-1945) is considered to have been one of the largest, most important and influential historical events for humanity in the twentieth century. Possibly it is also the most terrible of all. During the war and especially between 1941-1945 another horrifying and despicable event occurred - the Holocaust. This phenomenon that caused unimaginable suffering to the Jews and other people in Europe involved the premeditated and systematic murder of more than six million Jews and people from other races and nations, perpetrated by the Nazis under the leadership and vision of their leader, the Fuhrer, Adolph Hitler (Greif, Weitz, & Machman, 1983; Barley, 2007).

Although the Holocaust ended with the surrender of Nazi Germany on 9th May 1945, it continues to influence and occupy the Jewish people and the State of Israel in various educational, social, and cultural dimensions until today. Without a doubt, it will continue to engage and influence Jews and Israelis for many generations to come (Weitz, 1997). This is the reason why from the early days of the State of Israel, which was established in 1948, the Holocaust was conceived as a fundamental event that defined the nature of Israeli society at different levels. It therefore also had a major influence on the Israeli education system, although its appearance and content in education has altered over the years (Machman, 1998).

The inter-generational trauma of Holocaust is well-described by the following words:

"Among the generations of Holocaust survivors, the children of the survivors, their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, there is an inter-generational transmission of trauma and memory. This trauma has most central significance for each generation and it influences a variety of areas and levels" (Fuchs, 2009, p. 12).

Most of the Jewish residents of the Land of Israel before 1950 arrived from Europe and they had relatives who had remained in Europe during the war, most of them in countries which were occupied by the Nazis. Consequently, by the early 1950s, most of the Jews living in the State of Israel had relatives who had been murdered in the Holocaust or were themselves survivors (Steev, 2002). Second generation descendants of the survivors lived in and grew up in the new Israeli society that was being created. It was very different from the society in which their parents had lived in Europe before the Second World War. For them, the Holocaust was more a sort of myth than the continuous daily reality of the past and present endured by their parents - the generation of the survivors for whom the Holocaust never really ended. This family background shaped and continues to shape the children's perception of their reality. The difficult events of the Holocaust, which were experienced to a different extent and at different strengths through the medium of their parents, never disappeared and continue to be influential till today (Bar-On, 1994). These influences were explained most succinctly by Gampel (2005):

"The Holocaust changed the meaning of our history, its effects are revealed in the long term, dispersed in space and time like 'radioactive fallout'; The parents who are Holocaust survivors, their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren cannot defend their children from their own anxieties" (p. 13).

In Israel the issue of the Holocaust is an important unifying element, held in consensus by all parts of the Jewish society as part of the national ethos (Gottwein, 1998). In addition, Israelis encounter the

subject of the Holocaust in many ways from early childhood, especially in school but also in their life as adults (Machman, 1998).

Occupation with moral questions from the period of the Holocaust has constituted the foundation for work on contemporary moral questions in Holocaust learning. For example, in the Israel Defence Force (IDF) Holocaust events serve as a means to learn national and universal humanist lessons. In other words, the memory of the Holocaust is used in the IDF to deliver both national and universal messages. Research has shown that the IDF has demonstrated much more sensitivity for injury to Arab citizens as an outcome of Holocaust learning (Ganor 2006). According to this research, IDF soldiers and officers report that the trauma of the Holocaust does not allow them to be insensitive to enemy civilian populations and this influences their discretion and decisions in their operational activities and in warfare. This research also found that IDF soldiers who are second generation Holocaust survivors are those who have brought about the change in the IDF's attitude towards the Holocaust. They have influenced its perception to the extent that the Holocaust has an influence on the military code of ethics, reinforcing humanist values. Soldiers who had a personal link to the Holocaust were found to hold more universal viewpoints. Contrastingly, soldiers who did not have such a personal link to the Holocaust were found to have stronger national viewpoints (Ibid). In another study by Davidovich, Amir and Hessel (2011) concerning the journeys of the IDF soldiers to Poland as part of the "Witnesses in Uniform" program, it was found that universal values were strengthened among the soldiers. In contrast, particular values such as Jewish-Zionist identity, national pride and the significance of Jewish symbols were not developed as a result of these journeys. The participants in the journey noted that it had strong significance for them as soldiers, officers and as human beings. On the basis of these results it was natural to assume that all kinds of moral lessons would be perceived by the present study participants as a result of their participation in the Holocaust Learning Program.

## **2. Problem Statement**

As far as could be ascertained, previous research has not considered the issue of possible moral lessons learned by the Jewish people from the Holocaust. Furthermore, there has been no study regarding the possible derivation of Holocaust moral lessons from a Holocaust learning program by Israeli high-school students.

## **3. Research Questions**

The research question was: how do research participants relate to different moral lessons which might be derived from their Holocaust learning?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this research was to identify moral lessons that the students perceived they had learned from Holocaust Learning Program

## **5. Research Methods**

### **5.1.Participants.**

The Lessons Learned questionnaire was filled in by 102 participants - Israeli high school students, boys and girls aged 17-18 from three different high schools in Israel. All of them volunteered to participate in the research. They are members of the third and fourth generation after the Holocaust, though they do not all have relations who were survivors or victims of the Holocaust.

### **5.2.Procedure.**

The research was conducted in January 2016, when the participants were in the middle of Grade 12, at the end of the school's Holocaust Learning Program, which included class learning and the journey to Holocaust memorial sites in Poland.

### **5.3.The research tool**

**The research tool** was the Perceived Lessons Learned Questionnaire which was specially developed for this research and based on former questionnaires used for example by Cohen (2004); Kimchi, (2011); Mimouni-Bloch,Rostami, and Bloch, (2012) and Berger (2012). It is a closed- ended questionnaire investigating the participants attitudes towards given moral lessons that might be derived from their Holocaust learning. These lessons are part of Jewish-Israeli discourse over the Holocaust and can be found in literature, newspapers, television, movies and school learning. The lessons are presented as statements to which participants were asked to express their agreement or disagreement on a scale of 1-5-point Likert scale where 1 = not at all agree and 5 = very much agree. There are two kinds of contradict lessons categories: A. Perceived "Humanist-liberal moral lessons", including - "it is important to learn about Holocaust moral dilemmas", "the strong must avoid harming the weak" and "if we lose our morals we may become like the Nazis". B. Perceived "Nationalist-utilitarian moral Lessons", including-"moral dilemmas are not relevant in war situations" and "since the Nazis harmed us, we can harm others".

### **5.4.Data analysis**

The different lessons were first analysed separately for each item and then sorted into categories according to similar characteristics, in order to create a higher level of analysis. Data analysis first used descriptive statistics to describe the distribution (in percentages) of the factors perceived by the participants as influencing their moral attitudes for the individual items. Additionally, the central tendency index (mean) and standard deviation (SD) were calculated for the responses to each of the items in this questionnaire. Secondly, inferential statistics were deduced using t-tests. This was done to find significant differences between possible moderators (participant's gender, having relatives who were Holocaust victims or survivors and participation in the journey to Poland) and the way in which these potential moderators moderated the categories of perceived moral lessons which were assembled from the individual items. Cohens`d size effect was calculated to measure the size effect of the significant differences.

### 5.5. Research limitations

This was an exploratory research which as far as we could ascertain was the first study investigated Israeli high school students perceived moral lessons from Holocaust Learning Program. Therefore, there were no other results from similar research studies that we could compare with our results. This limitation could be overcome by future research.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Analysis of moral lessons items

The first step of data analysis related to participants' perceptions of particular moral lessons learned from the program, shown in Table 1.

**Table 01.** Extent of agreement with the different perceived lessons

The Lesson	No agreement 1	Slight agreement 2	Medium agreement 3	Strong agreement 4	Strongest agreement 5	%	N	Mean	SD
1. It's important to learn about Holocaust moral dilemmas		1.96%	4.90%	31.37%	61.76%	100	102	<b>4.53</b>	.69
2. The strong must avoid harming the weak	1.96%	3.92%	11.76%	47.06%	35.29%	100	102	<b>4.10</b>	.90
3. If we lose our morals, we may become like the Nazis	9.80%	19.61%	17.65%	28.43%	24.51%	100	102	<b>3.38</b>	1.31
4. Moral dilemmas are not relevant in war situations	20.59%	30.39%	34.31%	13.73%	.98%	100	102	<b>2.44</b>	1.00
5. Since the Nazis harmed us, we can harm others	59.80%	30.39%	7.84%	1.96%		100	102	<b>1.52</b>	.73

The results indicate that the highest level of agreement was with the lesson "it is important to learn about the moral dilemmas of the Holocaust", the second was "the strong must avoid harming the weak" and the third was "if we lose our morals we may become like the Nazis". The lowest level of agreement ("slight agreement") was with the lesson "moral dilemmas are not relevant in war situations". The lesson "since the Nazis harmed us, we can harm others" was not awarded any agreement.

**6.2. Analysis of lessons' categories**

The second step of data analysis was to sort the different lessons into the two following categories: A. Perceived Humanist-liberal moral lessons, including – "it is important to learn about Holocaust moral dilemmas", "the strong must avoid harming the weak" and "if we lose our morals we may become like the Nazis". B. Perceived Nationalist-utilitarian moral Lessons, including – "moral dilemmas are not relevant in war situations" and "since the Nazis harmed us, we can harm others". See Table 2.

**Table 02.** The advantages identified by preschool teachers of learning using the project method

Categories of Lessons	N	Mean	SD	Paired Samples t-test (df)
01. A. Humanist-Liberal moral lessons	02. 102	03. 4.00	04. .06	05. -18.36** 06. (101)
07. B. Nationalist-Utilitarian moral lessons	08. 102	09. 1.98	10. .07	

\*\*significant differences p<0.01

**6.3. Gender, the journey to Poland, and having a family relative who was a Holocaust victim or survivor as moderators of the perceived lessons categories**

The third step of data analysis was to look for significant differences between gender, participation in the journey to Poland and having relatives who were Holocaust victims or survivors as moderators of perceived lessons categories. We shall now present the results of this investigation first for the nationalist-utilitarian moral lessons category and then for the humanist-liberal moral lessons category. See Table 3

**Table 03.** Measurement of the difference between perceived nationalist-utilitarian moral lessons as a function of the moderators

Moderators	Section	N	Mean	SD	t-test value (df)
Participant gender	Male	36	2.25	.78	t=2.91** (100)
	Female	66	1.83	.64	
Whether the participant has relatives who were Holocaust victims or survivors	Yes	61	1.91	.69	t=-0.98 (99)
	No	40	2.05	.72	
Whether the participant took part in the journey to Poland	Yes	71	1.89	.67	t=-1.86 (100)
	No	31	2.18	.80	

\*\*significant differences were found in these parameters p<0.01

Significant differences were found between males and females in relation to the extent of agreement with nationalist-utilitarian lessons categories. Males expressed a significantly higher extent of agreement than the females: mean=2.25 among the males in comparison to 1.83 among the females ( $t=2.91$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Cohens'  $d$  size effect between mean results for the moderator "participant's gender" for nationalist- utilitarian moral lessons category is 0.588 (medium size effect). The meaning of these results is that if you are a male than you will be more likely to support nationalist- utilitarian lessons.

No significant differences were found in extent of agreement by the participants with humanist-liberal moral lessons.

## 7. Conclusion

The research aim was to identify the moral lessons that were perceived by the students as acquired as a result of participation in the Holocaust Learning Program. The results reveal that the extent of agreement with humanist-liberal moral lessons was much higher in comparison with the extent of agreement with national-utilitarian moral lessons. These results can be explained in three ways: The first explanation is that contrary to the latest criticism of the journeys to Poland, which claims that they emphasize national values and ignore universal values (Maltz 2016; Starkman & Dattel, 2016) the journey actually does impart universal values. The second explanation is that Jewish-Israeli high-school students or at least those who participated in this research are susceptible to the influence of the Holocaust Learning Program for the acquisition of universal and humanistic values. This explanation is supported by Gutman, (1990a) and Machman (1998), who emphasized the socio-cultural-educational adherence of Jewish people to a tradition of universal moral values and a lifestyle of cohesion, mutual assistance and backing in times of prosperity and of distress. The third explanation is that participation in the research has a significant impact on high school students. This interpretation relies on the fact that the lesson "it's important to learn about holocaust moral dilemmas" was awarded the highest amount of agreement in the part of the questionnaire relating to the lessons learned.

The first conclusion is that the participants preference for the adoption of humanist-liberal lessons acquired from their participation in Holocaust learning confirms the effect of moral education on moral judgment.

A second conclusion is that gender has a significant influence on the students' willingness to adopt nationalist-utilitarian lessons. Boys expressed a significantly higher extent of agreement than the girls with these lessons. These results are supported first by Aleman & Swart (2008) who found gender specificities in moral development and behaviour. A more specific support is provided by the findings of Friesdorf, Gawronski and Conway (2014), who suggested that men showed a stronger preference for utilitarian over deontological judgments than women in deciding between conflicting moral decisions. This conclusion was also based on previous research performed by Conway and Gawronski (2013) who found that the use of a deontological moral approach as the cause of an action depends on its consistency with moral norms while the utilitarian moral approach implies that the morality of an action depends on its consequences. Boys and girls who participated in this research learned the same things and had the same experiences but nevertheless they differ in their level of agreement with nationalist-utilitarian lessons.

The third conclusion is that because of psychological gender differences it is more likely that boys will demonstrate more support for nationalist-utilitarian lessons. This natural tendency seems to be supported by perceived implications of present consideration in the reality of living in Israel which is involved in continues military conflict with some of her neighbour countries.

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