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Free will in total institutions: The case of choice inside Nazi death camps



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ABSTRACT

Nazi death camps, as any total institutions, were designed to deny any free will or choice from inmates. Furthermore, former inmates in such extreme conditions often account for their own actions and behavior in such settings as inevitable (“I had no other choice”). This study examines the questions of free will vs. determinism in death camps from a descriptive-phenomenological perspective. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 20 former death camp inmates. The following themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of the data: the ‘selection’ experience; ‘borrowed time’ perception; and the experience of ‘nothingness’. A conceptual model grounded in these data was developed to illustrate the inmate’s lived experience of choice in the reality of the camps. Analysis of the model indicates that under the extreme conditions of the death camp, free will and existence are interchangeable: “I choose – therefore I am”.

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1. Introduction

Is the person an autonomous entity who genuinely chooses how to act from among multiple possible options or is behavior the inevitable product of a causal chain set into motion without one’s own choice? (Baumeister, 2008). At the core of this study lays the question of free will and its psychological causes. The question has meaningful implications on social behavior and moral responsibility: decreased belief in free will results in antisocial behavior (Rigoni, Kuhm, Gaudino, Sartori, & Brass, 2012).

The issue of choice and its implications on behavior are dramatized within the context of total institutions, where one social order is imposed to dominate one’s entire being: It undercuts the resident’s individuality and it disregards his or her dignity. Total institutions subject the individual to a regimented pattern of life that has little or nothing to do with the person’s own desires or inclinations and designed to prevent escape (Goffman, 1961). Nazi death camps are one type of total institution (Goffman, 1961), where the general context of genocide directed at inmates (mostly Jewish) alongside with degraded identity (Hantman & Solomon, 2007; Kimron & Cohen, 2012) created what has been described as the “diminished self” (Langer, 1991).

The current study uses a descriptive-phenomenological perspective to provide an insider’s conceptualization of what we may term from the outside as “choice and responsibility” within Nazi death camps. Inside accounts of the reality of the camps vary from referring to people as ‘animals’ who did what they had to do to survive (no-choice) a deterministic approach, to referring to people as ‘human-beings’ who maintained some degree of control and freedom of choice in spite

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of the extreme social environment. We explore the meaning of choice in such settings, specifically how it is structured and conceptualized in the lived experience of death camp survivors. Answer to this question in the particular context of total institutions can shed some additional light on the free will vs. determinism discussion.

1.1. Freedom and responsibility

Free will is seen by many as the “core conception” by which western societies articulate their ideas of justice and accountability (Smilansky, 2002). However there is no agreement as to whether behavior is determined or free. Many philosophers of science argue that freedom of choice is an illusion, and that everything that happened was inevitable, and nothing else was ever possible (Crick, 1994; Smilansky, 2000, 2002; Wegner, 2002). At the other extreme, existentialists argue in favor of human freedom. For them people are always, inevitably free. Life is characterized by the experience of making choices, and at each choice point one could have chosen differently than he actually did. When people say they could not help acting as they did, they are engaging in self-deception (bad faith), because they could actually have acted otherwise (Baumeister, 2008; Sartre, 2007).

This philosophical dilemma has meaningful implications on men’s moral responsibility and feeling of being capable of exerting controls over one’s own behavior (Rigoni et al., 2012). Research has confirmed the antisocial effects of reduced belief in free will. These effects include increased aggression toward other innocent persons and reduced helpfulness toward needy strangers (Baumeister, Masicampo, & DeWall, 2009). Disbelief in free will seems to make people less likely to think for themselves, as reflected in greater conformity to other people’s judgments (Alquist, Ainsworth, & Baumeister, 2013) and lesser willingness to articulate personal lessons from their own guilty misbehaviors (Stillman & Baumeister, 2010). Moreover, when people reflect on their past misdeeds and feel guilty, they prefer deterministic views over any belief in free will (Stillman & Baumeister, 2010), presumably because such views reduce guilt by making people think their misdeeds were inevitable and they could not help acting as they did. On the other hand, the benefits of believing in free will have been generally associated with better adaptation to social norms and order (Leotti, Iyengar, & Ochsner, 2010; Stillman et al., 2010).

The associations between free will and behavior have been examined along three different dimensions: the descriptive, the substantive, and the prescriptive (Nichols, 2006). The current study follows the descriptive path, and aims to explore the emic and experiential aspects of choice and responsibility. We wanted to explore freedom and responsibility in the context of Nazi death camps, an extreme total institution (Goffman, 1961) designed to diminish and annihilate one’s freedom of choice and sense of responsibility.

1.2. Death camps

Death camps were total institutions built by Nazi Germany during the Second World War (1939–45) to systematically annihilate millions by gassing and by extreme work under starvation. While there were victims from many groups, Jews were the main targets. This genocide of the Jewish people was the Third Reich’s “Final Solution to the Jewish question” (Friedlander, 2007). The terms extermination camp (Vernichtungslager) and death camp (Todeslager) are interchangeably used, each referring to camps whose primary function was genocide, not punish for crimes or containing political prisoners, but for the systematic killing of the inmates. Nazi Germany (1933–45) built the most infamous extermination camps in Occupied Poland. Most Holocaust historians identify six German Nazi extermination camps, all in occupied Poland; two, Chełmno and the Auschwitz, in the western Polish areas annexed by Nazi Germany (October 1939), four, Bełżec, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Treblinka, in the General Government (German-occupied) area (Michman, 1998). In Auschwitz–Birkenau and Majdanek, which were Concentration–extermination camps, some prisoners were selected for slave labor, instead of immediate death; they were kept alive as camp inmates, available to work wherever the Nazis required (Friedlander, 2007). This population is the target population of current study, as they have experienced life under slave labor in the greater context of death camps.

1.3. Freedom and choice inside Nazi death camps

Understanding of the discrete and self-contained (Langer, 1975) reality of the death camps is limited because of its unique nature. Researchers used constructed terms such as “culture of terror” (Tausig, 1987), “mutualism,” and “co-creation” during “deep conflict” (Keesing, 1987) to elaborate on self-perception inside the camps. From the psychological standpoint, life in the camps resulted in a reduction of the consciously recognized sphere of identity (Krystal, 1984). The situation required unquestionable determination to overcome a lost sense of wholeness and to create more adequate self-representations (Ewing, 1991). According to Lifton (1986), the difficulty of this task resulted in psychological splitting among the victims. Intra-psychic forms of coping, such as depersonalization, desensitization, and distancing helped resolve severely disturbed person–environment relationships for camp inmates (Cohen, 1953; Frankl, 1984; Pawelczynska, 1980). Dissimulation and psychic numbing, or impairment in symbolization functions, provided a protective shell (Gill, 1988) or defensive armor (Kogon, 1980). Decision making in continually unpredictable situations, despite the fear of initiative (Frankl, 1984), in the interest of achieving a balance between dissociation and the maintenance of reality, was crucial in avoiding “musselmann” status. Musselmann are described as having “given up,” (Kogon, 1980; Luchterhand, 1980; Pawelczynska, 1980; Tillion,

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