

# **Humor as a Defense Mechanism in the Holocaust**

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## ABSTRACT

### The Purpose of this Study:

The purpose of this study was to investigate and comprehend the types of humor and laughter and the functions they fulfilled in the Holocaust.

### Research Questions:

1. What types of humor were used by Jews in the Holocaust?
2. What functions did humor fulfill for Jews in the Holocaust?

### Conceptual Framework:

Theoretical and practical assumptions concerning the importance of humor and the various functions it fulfills in stressful situations were the starting point for this study. It follows Ziv (1984, 1996), who classifies the functions of humor into five main categories:

1. The aggressive function of humor which includes two types:
  - a. Humor stemming from a sense of superiority
  - b. Humor stemming from frustration
2. The sexual functions of humor
3. The social functions of humor
4. The functions of humor as a defense mechanism which contains two types
  - a. Gallows humor
  - b. Self humor
5. The intellectual functions of humor

Following the content analysis additional types were found;

1. Scatological humor was added to the function of sexual humor
2. Humor about food was added to the function of defense mechanism

The chapter "Interviewees' Opinions about Humor and Laughter in the Holocaust" was also included, since their opinions concerning the importance of humor during the Holocaust did not fit any of the above - mentioned categories.

## Literature Review:

The literature review is divided into two main sections. The first deals with central theories about humor and laughter, including Jewish humor.

The second deals with humor and laughter in the Holocaust as expressed in utterances, episodes and various other means of expression such as: humorous and satirical songs, cabaret and other humorous shows and caricature created during the Holocaust.

## Methodology:

A qualitative - biographical genre paradigm was selected for this study. The data were analyzed quantitatively.

## Population:

84 Holocaust survivors.

Data analysis was done on:

55 Jewish Holocaust survivors (24 men and 31 women).

The following criteria for interviewee selection were employed:

- a. Jews who were teenagers during the Holocaust years.
- b. Those who were in ghettos and/or concentration camps and/or death camps.
- c. Those who used or experienced humor during the Holocaust.

The interviews were conducted only with those survivors who agreed to participate in the study.

## Research Tools:

Biographical interview. The interviews conducted were ethnographic semi-open interviews.

All were both recorded and typed. The interviews were conducted:

- a. With individual Holocaust survivors
- b. Jointly with couples in which both spouses was Holocaust survivors.
- c. With small groups of 3-5 friends who survived the same ghetto or the same concentration camp.

The central question in each of the interviews was: "Can you describe, or tell about, humor in the Holocaust"? Humor was defined as: "Anything that made you laugh or smile during the Holocaust".

## Data Analysis:

The interviews were subjected to three levels of analysis.

- a. At the first level humorous utterances and episodes were located and categorized according to Ziv's categories, functions and types of humor (1984, 1996).
- b. Next, fifteen utterances and episodes of each humor type and function were sampled and given to three independent judges for validation. The judges were asked to determine the extent to which their classification as to the various humor types and functions matched mine.
- c. At the third level a quantitative count of utterances and episodes frequency was conducted and expressed in whole numbers and percentages for the various types and function of humor respectively.

## Findings:

The findings indicate that humor in the Holocaust fulfilled all the functions of humor, but especially that of Defense Mechanism, including its sub types - Self-humor and Gallows humor. Of this:

1. **60%** of all humorous utterances and episode were classified as belonging to the **Defense Mechanism Function**. Within that function:
  - 47%** were classified as **Self-humor**
  - 25%** were classified **Gallows humor**
  - 16%** were classified as **Defense Mechanism**
  - 12%** were classified as connected with **Food**
2. **16%** of all humorous utterances and episode were classified as belonging to the **Aggressive Function of Humor**. Most of them were about "the prominent", Jews holding official jobs. Within that function:
  - 14%** were classified as **Aggressive humor**
  - 57%** were classified as **Aggressive humor stemming from superiority**
  - 29%** were classified as **Aggressive humor stemming from frustration**
3. **12%** of all humorous utterances and episode were classified as belonging to the **Sexual Function of Humor**. Within that function:
  - 52%** were classified as **Sexual humor**
  - 48%** were classified as **Scatological humor**

4. **6%** of all humorous utterances and episode were classified under **Social Function of Humor**
5. **6%** of all humorous utterances and episode were classified under **Intellectual Function of Humor**

## Conclusions:

The uniqueness of this study lies in several aspects:

1. For the first time in Israel, Holocaust survivors were asked about "Humor in the Holocaust", a subject that was a taboo until now.
2. The data collected in this study deserve to be referred to as **a document** since it is a product of authentic self-expression of the interviewees, Holocaust survivors.
3. This study enriches the understanding of the methods people developed to cope with intensified stress situations.
  - a. Even in an intensified stress situation like the Holocaust, humor served as a stress reducer, according to the interviewees' testimonies
  - b. Among the interviewed Holocaust survivors who were in a severe state of threat, happiness and satisfaction turned easily to laughter.
  - c. The interviewed Holocaust survivors laughed more than once, especially when they were in horrible situations or confronted with death.
  - d. We may conclude that humor in the Holocaust fulfilled the various functions of humor, and especially that of a defense mechanism through self-humor and gallows humor: this would have been a typical to the Jewish people in situation of stress.
4. According to interviewed Holocaust survivors' testimonies, an individual who had a sense of humor prior to the Holocaust, maintained it during the Holocaust, experienced humor and laughter, and retained his or her sense of humor after the Holocaust.
5. Using humor was not connected to place - ghetto and/or concentration/death camp, but rather to having a sense of humor.
6. The use of humor during the Holocaust did not reduce the objective atrocity and horror. It reduced them subjectively, and facilitated coping with them.

7. Humor was expressed in different modes during the Holocaust. In addition to humorous utterances and episode there were also: humorous songs, humorous reviews and cabarets, and caricature paintings and drawings.

#### Ethics:

1. The interviewees received a thorough explanation as to the purpose of the study.
2. The interviewees were told that the interview would be recorded, transcribed and published.
3. All the interviewees agreed to take part in this study.
4. All the interviewees were asked "Under which name do you want to appear in this study: your full, real name, your first name only, false name, or any other nickname"?

The interviewees consented that their names be used in the study.

If a defense mechanism is masking a serious problem that ought to be addressed, it becomes more harmful than useful. Particularly harmful is a behavior learned to cope with a given circumstance that is no longer present, making the defense mechanism outdated and therefore problematic. Some psychologists classify defense mechanisms as primitive or mature (or less primitive). Primitive defense mechanisms are employed by children and emotionally immature adults. The person developed NPD as a defense mechanism, but now that defense is gone so the brain will try a different form of self defense which could spawn the kind of disorder we've never seen before. And it's likely to be much worse. Is that fair to the narcissist? Defense Mechanism ...Look, without humor we would all have committed suicide. We made fun of everything. What I'm actually saying is that that helped us remain human, even under hard conditions. ... We may conclude that humor in the Holocaust fulfilled the various functions of humor, and especially that of a defense mechanism through self-humor and gallows humor; this would have been a typical to the Jewish people in situation of stress. 4. According to interviewed Holocaust survivors testimonies, an individual who had a sense of humor prior to the Holocaust, maintained it during the Holocaust, experienced humor and laughter, and retained his or her sense of humor after the Holocaust. Now that I'm grown, things have changed a bit and I'm able to handle serious conditions a lot better. I like talking things out, whether it's with friends or family or even at work, but if the conversation starts to become daunting, the humor comes out. I can't even control it sometimes, it's like it's a natural response in a state like that. Luckily it's well received most of the time and I've even been told it's a welcome relief. I know that won't always be the case so I try to be as mindful as possible. I'm not afraid to face the hard stuff. This is a question I get a lot. My answer to that is absolutely not. Just because I don't face it in the moment doesn't mean I shove it down and compartmentalize. I have a specific way of handling stress and rough times that works very well for me.