

# Seventy years later: Survival and memories

## Psychological characteristics of Holocaust survivors

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### Introduction

Seventy years have passed since the mass extermination of European Jews during World War II, which was one of the most radical social tragedies in contemporary history. During the Holocaust there was an absolute disruption of the life experience of adults and children (Safford, 1995).

Due to the fact that the Holocaust is a prototypical example of genocide and a traumatic event which has contemporary implications, study of pre-Holocaust experiences of the Holocaust survivors is important to understand the factors that contributed to the survival and resistance, and therefore important to the study of public health.

### The Present Study

The aim of this study is to examine the long-term effects of pre-Holocaust experiences on the mental & physical health, and personality resources of the survivors long time after the war.

Hypotheses:

Holocaust survivors will report a lower physical and mental health, higher levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance, more general and negative childhood memories, and lower conceptual levels in their maternal representations than their counterparts in the control group.

The relationship between attachment style and the quality of autobiographical memories will be moderated by the participant's group.

### Method

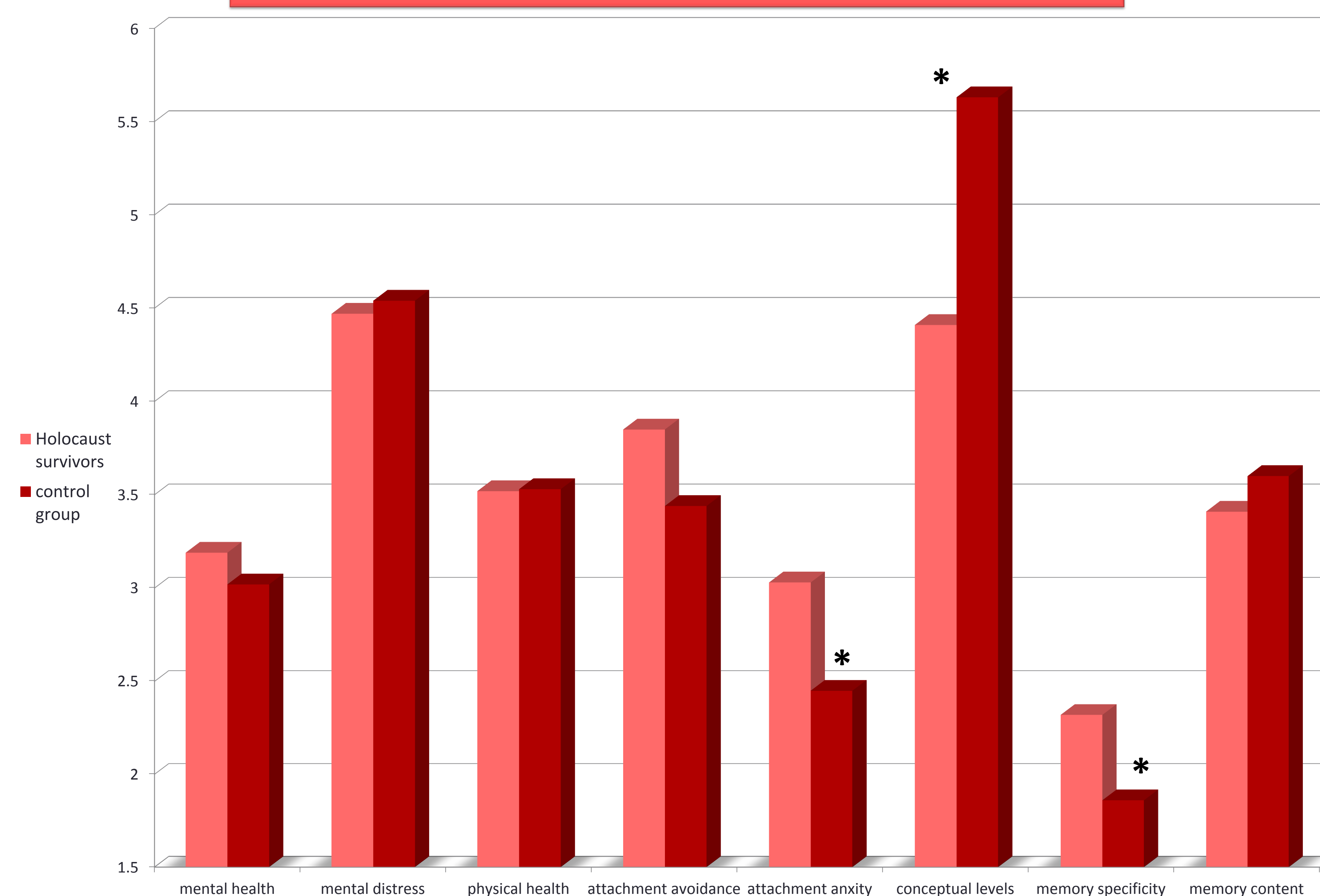
The study sample included 103 participants aged 79 to 97 ( $M = 86.3$ ,  $SD = 4.22$ ).

- Study group: Holocaust survivors ( $N = 51$ ).
- Control group: Not Holocaust survivors ( $N = 52$ ).

### Materials

- MHI - Mental Health Inventory (Veit & Ware, 1983).
- ORI - Object Representation Inventory (Blatt, Wein, Chevron, & Quinla, 1979).
- ECR - Experiences in Close Relationships scale (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998).
- AMT - Autobiographical Memory Test (Williams & Broadbent, 1986).
- SRH - Self-Rated Health (Mossey & Shapiro, 1982).

### Results



A Bonferroni's correction was used due to the high number of t-test. Participants in the two groups did not differ in terms of physical and mental health.

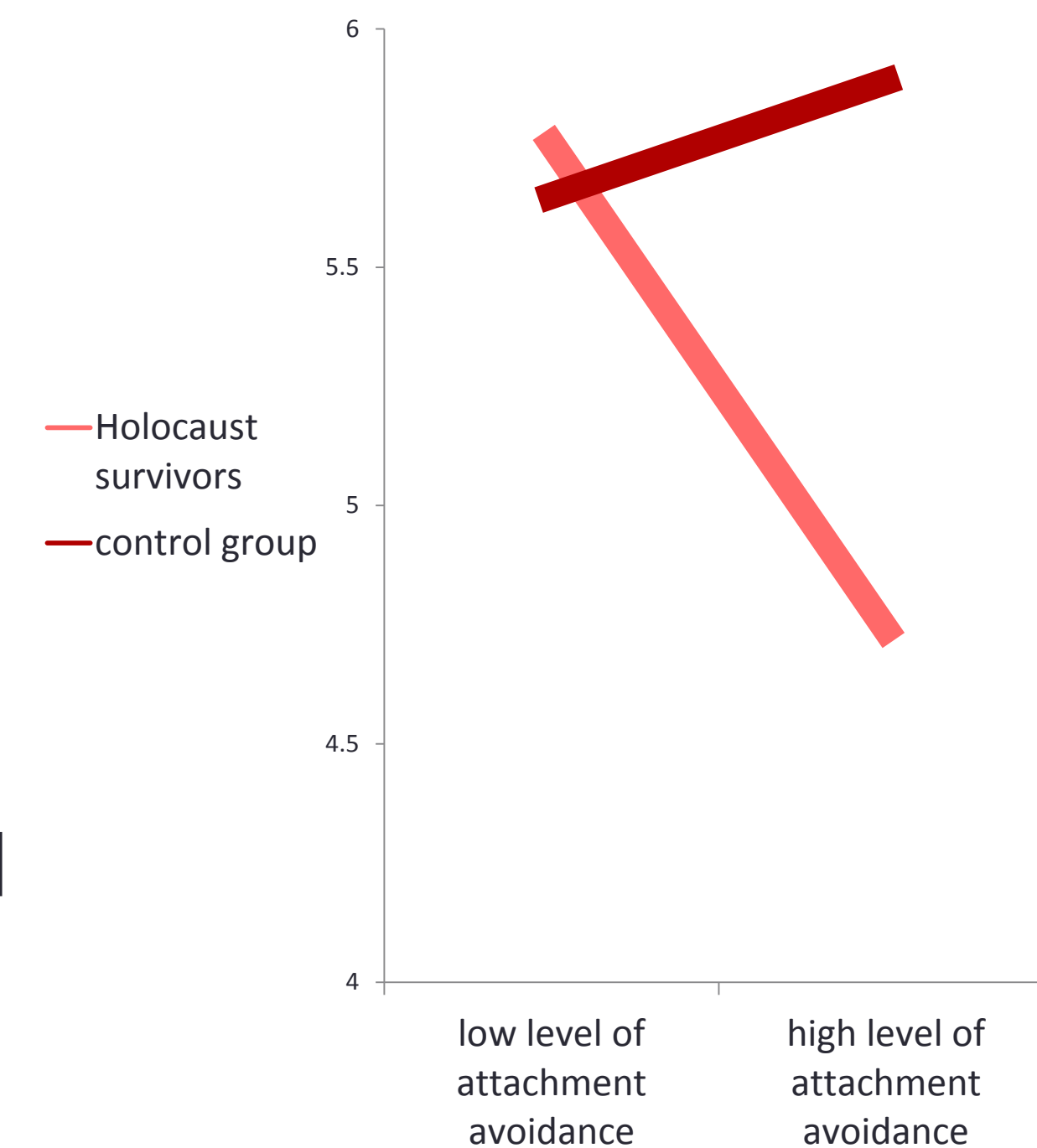
Holocaust survivors have significantly higher levels of attachment anxiety than participants in the control group ( $t(101)=2.909$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Participants in the two groups did not differ in levels of attachment avoidance.

Holocaust survivors revealed significantly more general memories than participants in the control group ( $t(101)=5.56$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Participants in the two groups did not differ in memories content.

Holocaust survivors have significantly lower conceptual levels in their maternal representations than participants in the control group ( $t(101) = -3.24$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

### Results

On top of the above, the test of the interaction between attachment style and participant group revealed a significant effect ( $\beta=-.54$ ,  $B=-.95$ ,  $t=-4.96$ ,  $p<.001$ ). For Holocaust survivors, attachment avoidance had a significant negative effect on the quality of autobiographical memories ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $B = .65$ ,  $t = 2.24$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that their memories' quality was worse while being more avoidantly attached. No interaction effect was detected between attachment avoidance and memories' quality among control group.



### Discussion

The findings indicate that seventy years after the trauma, we found no difference in the parameters of physical and mental health between Holocaust survivors and those who have not experienced these events (Shmotkin, Blumstein, & Modan, 2003a).

Holocaust survivors were found to reveal a higher level of attachment anxiety than the control group. This is consistent with the findings in the literature (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). No differences in the levels of attachment avoidance were detected. Holocaust survivors' autobiographical memories are more general than those of the control group. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that PTSD causes a decrease in the quality of memories (e.g. Sutherland & Bryant, 2007).

No differences were found in the memory contents, and it seems that the Holocaust survivors merge the experiences of the Holocaust in their contemporary life, which is a liberating and healing factor (Danieli, 1985).

The findings support the hypotheses that the conceptual levels in maternal representations decrease due to encounter with trauma (Berant & Hever, 2011).