Concentration Camps Interpreted

Theoretical Discourse Compared with Personal Experience at Concentration Camp Memorial Museums

Kimberly Longfellow
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I affirm that I have maintained the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code
Concentration Camps Interpreted: Theoretical Discourse and Personal Experiences at Concentration Camp Memorial Museums

In 1966 Theodor Adorno stated, “Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again Auschwitz.” The Holocaust has been credited as an event of such magnitude that it has caused a fundamental break in previously constructed self-identities and narratives, and has facilitated interdisciplinary debate on how a trauma of this scale should be remembered. One way that information about the Holocaust has been communicated is through converting former concentration camp sites into memorial museums. Despite the plethora of discourse analyzing and interpreting concentration camp memorial museums, the vast majority of this past research has come from the so-called “memory elites,” that is to say, curators, museum directors, and scholars (Schuman, Corning, and Schwartz: 2012: 452). In this way, few have discussed the interpretation of these concentration camp memorial museums with the actual visitors of the museums. This gap in the research begs the question of if these museums are being consumed in the way predicted in the theoretical discourse.

While this study will discuss the many debates that have gone into the organization and construction of many concentration camp memorial museums, the primary focus on this research is seeing how the visitors themselves interact with, interpret, and remember these museums. By conducting ethnographic interviews with American millennials, I hope to perform an evaluative study on Holocaust concentration camp memorial museums, ultimately addressing the following questions: How do differential modes of conveying information (i.e. through written text, photographs, and physical reminders) impact the visitor’s consumption of the material, and which of these factors remains most salient in their memories after their visit? Are visitors able to emotionally engage with the memorial museum? Perhaps most importantly, how does visiting
a concentration camp memorial museum impact their collective cultural memories of the Holocaust?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theories of Collective Memory

Despite the increased interest in the Sociology of Memory during the “Memory Boom” of the 1970s, the idea of memory as a social process has been discussed since the early 1900s. French sociological theorist Maurice Halbwachs ([1950] 1992) discusses in his book *On Collective Memory* that memory is not a completely individual process; rather, events are preserved as memories after a social discursive process. The specific events that attain significance (as opposed to fading out of memory and into obscurity) are determined by the present societal needs.

The idea of collective memory processes has continued to be discussed into the 1990s and 2000s by scholars such as Jan Assmann and Jeffery Olick. Olick (2011) and Assmann (2011A; 2011B) divide Halbwachs’ idea of collective memory into two categories: communicative memory and cultural memory. Communicative memory resembles the Halbwachsian conception of memory, referring to memories that have a “limited temporal horizon” (Assmann 2011: 212-213). These memories originate in personally experienced events and become viewed as significant throughout social discursive practices. Because communicative memory has this limited temporal horizon, communicative memories of events disappear when the people who experienced them are deceased. Assmann’s idea of cultural memory refers to memories that are passed down through multiple generations. Cultural memory can also be thought of as historical or social “knowledge.”

Theories of Knowledge
This idea of collective cultural memory is highly evocative of the theories of Hungarian sociologist Karl Mannheim and his writings on the sociology of knowledge. In his writing on “The Sociological Problem of Generations” Mannheim ([1927/1928] 2011) discusses the ways in which knowledge persists throughout the constant appearance of young people and disappearance of older people. Mannheim makes a distinction between “personally acquired memories” and “appropriated memories,” stating that while people do acquire memories based on their own experiences, there is a social mechanism for passing along memories and knowledge indirectly gathered (i.e. via historical education, stories, traditions, etc.). Mannheim (1927/1928: 93) also posits that younger people, specifically between the ages of 17-25 are “fresh contacts” with events. That is to say, events experienced during this time are more likely to become viewed as significant. He names this period the “critical period” of adolescence. While many studies have tested and affirmed the importance of this age range in forming memories (Schuman and Scott 1985; Schuman and Rodgers: 2004; Corning: 2010; Schuman and Corning: 2012), other studies have also maintained the importance of other demographic factors such as gender, education, and region of residence (Larson and Lizardo: 2007; Griffen: 2004).

This raises the question of whether contemporary people in their “critical periods” will view these appropriated memories of events occurring before their time with emotional significance. In terms of the Holocaust, can the organization of memorial museums elicit emotional engagement with the material, even if the visitors have no personal connection or experience with it?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Memorial Museums and the Debates Surrounding Them
One of the vehicles developed to create and codify collective cultural memories of the Holocaust have been museums at the sites of former concentration camps. Paul Williams (2007: 8) in his book *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* defines memorial museums as “a specific kind of museum dedicated to a historic event commemorating mass suffering of some kind.” These museums are of particular interest especially to scholars of the sociology of memory in that they are sites of trauma that actively seek to form and shape collective cultural memories of an event.

Despite the morbid nature of these sites, they attract massive numbers of visitors each year. The memorial museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau attracts over 750,000 visitors per year, Dachau attracts over 900,000, and Majdanek attracts over 300,000 (Lennon and Foley 2000:28). With such high visitation regarding a topic viewed as a trauma of the highest degree, memorial museums at the location of former concentration camps have been under heavy academic scrutiny. As knowledge about the Holocaust increasingly relies on academic sources as opposed to direct communication with eyewitnesses, there is an intense desire to portray the material “correctly” so that future generations possess the “right” self-identity and collective narrative.

*Debates Surrounding Concentration Camp Memorial Museums*

There exists an intense desire to preserve the raw emotion connected to the Holocaust and to prevent future generations from becoming ambivalent. Some theorists have credited the goals of concentration camp memorial museums to include “re-traumatizing” the visitors in such a way that the Holocaust will remain a salient part of their collective cultural memories, and prevent genocides of the scale of the Holocaust from occurring again (Andermann 2012; Mazrui 2013).

When faced with a trauma of the scale of the Holocaust, there have even been debates about the effectiveness of using traditional museal methods to convey information. Lennon and
Foley (2000: 31) have argued that traditional museum organization “condones the feeling that one can stand back from the past and be ‘educated’ about it.” This distance from the subject material prevents the viewer from developing this personal and emotional engagement with the material that is so deeply desired. This doubt in the effectiveness of traditional methods of museum-organization and the desire to avoid emotional estrangement from the Holocaust over time has led to innovative organizations when constructing concentration camp memorial museums.

Although Paul Williams (2007:6) claims that there is no uniform or orthodox kind of Holocaust memorial museum, similar debates have reappeared discussing the similar methods used to convey information in these kinds of museums. Namely, methods used to convey information in concentration camp memorial museums can be divided into one of three major categories: Linguistic, Photographic, or Physical Media. Each of these methods has been discussed and critiqued for its efficacy by scholars, and each presents its own unique benefits and limitations. The slight nuances in which each of these methods are used is thought to evoke strongly differing reactions by the audience.

*Debates regarding linguistic methods of conveying information*

Linguistic methods of conveying information refer to written signs and placards around the museum in addition to any written pamphlets distributed to visitors. In many ways, written explanations are useful in that they provide a clear context through which large amount of factual information can be presented, and the possibility for written testimonies from victims or other eyewitnesses to be accessible to the visitors.

Scholarly debates have also arisen simply because of the limitations of language. Several scholars have noted the vast differences in mental images and emotions that are evoked by subtle
variations in wording and framing (Schuman, Corning, and Schwartz: 2012; Schiffrin 2001). The inherent selectively in language can also often raise questions of who or what group is responsible for writing the narrative used in the museum, and more so, what narratives are excluded from the story. If indeed museums are perceived as way of conveying “true” information, this can create a narrative that excludes other seemingly important perspectives. Lennon and Foley (2008:28) also raise the question of whether words and language are strong enough to “adequately convey the horrors of the camps.” If words cannot truly convey this emotional connection, visitors can be left with the “factual” information but fail to emotionally engage with the material, thus potentially diminishing the long-term impact of the memorial museum on their collective cultural memories of the Holocaust.

Photography as a means of communicating information

In addition to written media, many memorial museums utilize photography in order to visually convey information to the audience. These photographs often connect viewers to the experiences of the generations before them, as they can function as a shocking way to convey the “reality” of the death camps (Hirsch 1997; Lennon and Foley 2000; Williams 2007).

There is, however, concern that repetitively showing the same images will reduce this shock value over time (Lennon and Foley 2000; Williams 2007; Andermann 2012). There are also debates about the “improper” use of photography, such as displaying photographs of victims without context or information about their fate (Andermann 2012; Sturken 2015). In this way, scholars fear that fascination with the victims’ appearances becomes a morbid form of voyeurism.

Physical objects as a means of conveying information
The last medium frequently used at concentration camp memorial museums in order to convey information is the use of physical objects. This can include personal effects of the victims such as wallets, ID cards, and watches, transformed into reverent artifacts standing in for the absence of the victims’ bodies (Sturken 205: 483-484). Physical objects can also include human remains, such as the human hair of Holocaust victims displayed at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp memorial museum (Lennon and Foley 2000). Lastly, physical objects can also include preserved and replicated structures from the concentration camps.

While physical objects allow visitors to move in the same physical space as the victim, the items and manner in which they are displayed have also been subject to heavy academic scrutiny. Despite the rooms at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the display of human remains is often viewed as a taboo that is “offensive to the memory of the dead” (Rosenfeld qtd. in Williams 2007: 39). The reconstruction of buildings also raises questions of authenticity, and many theorists have expressed concern about visitors becoming confused between the reality and reconstruction (Lennon and Foley 2000: 50).

By allowing the visitor to move in and around spaces physically associated with the victim, the visitor theoretically can link their appropriated memories of the Holocaust (that have been learned through indirect academic experiences) with the personally acquired memories of being in that same physical realm; however, as one can see, there are still thorny questions of ethics and authenticity around which museum curators and directors feel they must tread carefully in the fear that “getting it wrong” will negatively impact the visitors’ experience and subsequent collective cultural memories.

Current Gaps in the Research
One can clearly see that the elements composing many concentration camp memorial museums has been subject to intense academic scrutiny for fear that the visitors’ interpretations of the museums and subsequent collective cultural memories will be “negatively” affected; however, few of these scholars have gathered data directly from the viewers themselves. Instead, most of this research has arisen out of theoretical speculation on visitors’ reactions. This raises important questions of whether the viewers consume material as critically as the theorists studying them. One can also question which elements of the memorial museum make the largest impact on the viewer, and which remain salient in their memories months and years after visiting. If certain aspects of the museum do not make a last impact on viewers, are they “worth” the intense academic scrutiny? Lastly, one can question how great of an impact these memorial museums have on the visitors’ collective cultural memories of the Holocaust to the extent that is often the goal of museum curators and designers. The proposed study represents an insightful look into theories of collective memory, theories of knowledge, theories of tourism, and theories of mass media.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to answer these questions, I will be conducting between 15 and 20 ethnographic interviews with American millennials who have visited a Holocaust concentration camp memorial museum. Interviews will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes. Participants will be selected through snowball sampling, with an original sample group being selected by the interviewer. At the conclusion of each interview, participants will be asked if they know of any other individuals who have visited a Holocaust concentration camp memorial museum. All participants will be primarily contacted via e-mail asking if they would be interested in participating in this study, and they shall be provided with a full description of the study topic.
At the interview, the interviewer will read the Verbal Consent script (see Appendix 1). If the participant consents, the interviewer will begin the interview process, guided by the Interview Question Guideline (see Appendix 2).

American millennials represent an interesting demographic for several reasons. Firstly, they are within Mannheim’s critical period, and thus are visiting a concentration camp memorial museum during a potentially significant phase of the memory formation process. Secondly, as millennials they are situated in such a point in time that they have not directly experienced World War II and may or may not have had a personal connection to someone who has experienced World War II or the Holocaust. American millennials in particular are of interest specifically because they have increased geographical distance from the primary battleground of World War II. In this way, the majority of their knowledge is most likely from academic/non-direct sources. Therefore, I will hopefully have an interesting diversity of participants with personal contact to the Holocaust (simulating communicative memory) and those with no personal contact to the Holocaust (simulating future generations with only cultural memory).

Methods for Analyzing Data

In order to analyze the data, I will refer to the stages described in the Princeton University guide for writing Sociology Theses. This will involve transcribing the interviews and then reviewing the transcriptions, making notes of potential trends. I will then analyze the data for responses to my initial three research questions: what prompted visitors to visit the museum, were they able to emotionally engage in the memorial museum, and if the visit affected the visitors’ perceptions of the Holocaust.

Initial Results thus Far
Thus far, I have carried out 9 interviews. Despite the small sample size, the sample is relatively diverse. 5 were female, 3 were male, and 1 preferred not to specify a gender. 5 of those interviewed claimed to have no personal/familial connection. Of the 4 who had identified as having a personal/familial connection to the Holocaust, 2 had Jewish heritage (although no family members explicitly confirmed to be in a concentration camp), 1 had a relative in the German army, and 1 had a relative in the American army who worked to liberate concentration camps. 5 different concentration camp memorial museums were represented in the data (at Dachau, Natzweiler-Struthof, Auschwitz, Sachsenhausen, and Neuengamme).

Interesting patterns have already emerged from the data. In terms of why participants chose to visit these sites, many have used the word “obligation,” inferring that even without personal connection, they feel it is something one must do. Similarly, when discussing their emotions while in the memorial museum, many used phrasings implicitly echoing this idea of obligatory emotions such as “obviously I felt sad…” “I mirrored the atmosphere of the camp…” “I don’t want to say “sad” but they were my people, so I guess sad…” and “at first fascinated and then depressed…” Those that did not express these emotions (such as one person who had deeply tried to avoid going on the trip but felt obligated to go or another participant who had been distracted by a previous argument with a friend) described their feelings as “awkward” and other emotions expressing alienation and feelings of “not belonging.” There appears to be very clear norms for acting at concentration camp memorial museums, and a very clear role to perform. In this way it appears either the museums are similarly organized, and/or visitors respond to the subject matter more than they do to the specific memorial museum’s organization.

Perhaps most interesting finding was when participants discussed whether their visit to the concentration camp memorial museum altered the way they thought about the Holocaust.
Despite nearly all participants describing the visit as “fulfilling,” 6 of the 9 interviewed clearly stated that it did not change their perception of the Holocaust or did not change it greatly. The other 3 either stated “yes and no” or expressed lukewarm interest. Those stating that it did not change their view often cited prior knowledge of the Holocaust before visiting the concentration camp memorial museum. However, 6 of the 9 participants expressed that the visit did either confirm what they already knew or made it more “real.” It would appear that a “successful” visit to a concentration camp memorial museum is one that does not conflict with an already established memory narrative. More interviews will be needed to see if these trends persist.
**TIMELINE FOR THE COMPLETION OF THE HONORS THESIS**

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<tr>
<th>Days/Month</th>
<th>Tasks to Complete</th>
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<tr>
<td>Oct. 20(^{\text{th}})-Nov. 20(^{\text{th}})</td>
<td>Compose and submit Institutional Review Board Proposal</td>
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<td>Nov. 1(^{\text{st}}) – Nov. 23(^{\text{rd}})</td>
<td>Compose first draft of Honors Thesis Proposal</td>
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<td>Nov. 23(^{\text{rd}}) – Dec. 6(^{\text{th}})</td>
<td>Edit Honors Thesis Proposal</td>
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<td>Dec. 9(^{\text{th}})</td>
<td>Turn in Sociology Capstone (on same topic)</td>
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<td>Dec. 10(^{\text{th}}) - Feb. 28(^{\text{th}})</td>
<td>Complete additional research according to feedback from Sociology Department</td>
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<td>First week of the semester</td>
<td>Meet with thesis advisor</td>
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<td>Jan. 1(^{\text{st}}) – Feb. 28(^{\text{th}})</td>
<td>Complete interviews (15-20)</td>
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<td>Before spring break</td>
<td>Meet with thesis committee for feedback</td>
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<td>Mar. 1(^{\text{st}}) – Mar. 15(^{\text{th}})</td>
<td>Complete full first draft of Thesis (receive feedback)</td>
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<td>Mar. 15(^{\text{th}})-Apr. 15(^{\text{th}})</td>
<td>Complete second full draft of Thesis (receive feedback)</td>
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<td>Four Weeks before end of Semester</td>
<td>Turn in first official draft to committee for feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two Weeks before end of Semester</td>
<td>Give research presentation to Sociology Department</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finals Week</td>
<td>Write final version of Honors Thesis based on feedback from the Sociology Department</td>
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<tr>
<td>Last Wednesday of Finals Week</td>
<td>Turn in polished Honors Thesis</td>
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APPENDIX 1: VERBAL CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Project: Concentration Camp Memorial Museums: Organization versus Interpretation

Greeting and Purpose of Study
Thank you for participating in my research! As I mentioned in my email this interview is for my Sociology Honors Thesis. I am discussing the organization of concentration camp memorial museums and the way that American millennials interact with them. Previous research has focused on how curators and museum directors organize memorial museums, but few studies have talked with visitors about their experiences. Questions in this survey will include which concentration camp memorial museum you visited, when you visited it, how you felt during and after your visit, and your reflections on the experience. This study is all about your experience so there are no “wrong” answers. If there are any additional points about which you would like to elaborate, please feel free to do so.

The interview should last in duration approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded so that quotes will be accurate. Please notify me if you would prefer your interview not to be audio-recorded for any reason. You are welcome to review the audio recording at any point following the interview.

This interview discusses the Holocaust and your personal experiences visiting concentration camp memorial museums. There are no physical/social risks to participating in this study. Potential risks include potential emotional duress; however, this is balanced by the potential for personal insight and reflection about your past experience. There is no monetary compensation for participating in this survey.

The final version of this Honors Thesis will be read by a panel of professors in the Sociology Department, and if approved, will be available to future sociology undergraduate majors. There is also the potential for the final paper to be presented at future Sociology conferences or published. All information obtained from this interview will be kept confidential in any final or published materials. No identifying information (i.e. name or information that would be clearly identifiable to you) will be shared. All note sheets taken from the interview and audio recordings will be marked only by the date of the survey and your initials.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If at any point you do not wish to answer a question or you wish to withdraw from the survey, you are free to do so without any negative consequences.

By answering these questions you have indicated your consent to participate in this research. Do you consent to having the interview audio recorded? Do you have any additional questions about the interview?
APPENDIX 2: ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Groundwork
   a. What concentration camp memorial museum did you visit?

   b. When did you visit it?

   c. Why did you go there? (i.e. school-related trip, family trip, individual trip, etc.)

   d. How old were you when you were there?

   e. Who was with you at the time?

   f. Do you have any kind of personal connection to the Holocaust? (i.e. family members who were in Europe at the time; family members in concentration camps; Jewish heritage; etc.)

      Circle One: Yes / No

      (Note: do not ask follow-up questions unless the participant willingly volunteers to elaborate).

2. Describing the Museum
   a. From what you recall, could you describe the museum from what you recall?

   Prompt as Needed:
      i. How would you describe the layout of the museum?

      ii. What language were most of the signs written in?

      iii. Did you have an audio guide?

      iv. Did you have a tour guide?

3. Describing the Experience
   a. Could you please describe your own experience from what you remember?
Prompt as needed:
   i.  How long did you spend there?

   ii. Would you have liked to spend more/less time there?

   iii. Where do you think you spent the most time in the museum?

   iv.  What was the atmosphere in the museum?

4. Memories Later
   a.  Now that it’s been X number of months/years later, can you still recall any particular parts of the museum?

Prompt as Needed:
   i.  artwork?

   ii. pictures?

   iii. physical objects?

   iv. written items?

   v. other visitors’ behavior?

5. Emotions
   a.  Do you remember what you were feeling while you in the museum?

Prompt as Needed:
   i.  Can you recall what you felt the rest of the day?

   ii. How do you feel about the visit now?

(Note: If participant appears visibly distressed by discussing their emotional state, remind them that they are under no obligation to answer any question, and that they may skip a question or withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequence.)

6. Critiques
a. As you recall your experience, was there anything you felt that was not effectively presented?

Prompt as Needed:
   i. Did you have problems with the layout?
   ii. Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
   iii. How did other people act around the museum?

7. Summing Up the Experience

   a. Do you think this experience changed the way you think about the Holocaust?

Prompt as Needed:
   i. In what ways did it change/not change the way you think about the Holocaust?
   ii. How would you “sum up” this experience?

8. Do you have any additional remarks or comments about your experience?

Concluding Remarks
Once more, thank you for participating in my research! If you have any additional questions about this research, feel free to contact me via e-mail at longki01@gettysburg or you can contact the Gettysburg College Institutional Review Board via e-mail at irb@gettysburg.edu or by phone at (717) 337-6820. Please call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone else.

(If student appears distressed) If you continue to feel distressed in any way after participating in this research, feel free to contact Gettysburg College Counseling Services at 717-337-6960, or seek information on their website found on the Gettysburg College website.
References


Additional Sources Consulted


