The Psychological Effects of Starvation in the Holocaust: The Dehumanization and Deterioration of its Victims

Kelly Young
Emerson College
honors review

This paper was previously published on chchonors.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Young-Kelly-The-Psychological-Effects-of-Starvation-in-the-Holocaust.pdf

honors review

The Psychological Effects of Starvation in the Holocaust: The Dehumanization and Deterioration of its Victims

Kelly Young, Emerson College

Abstract

My paper exposes the inherent link between the intense starvation implemented by the Nazi regime in concentration camps during the Holocaust and the psychological state of the victims of the camp system. Explored in this essay are the deteriorative and dehumanizing effects that starvation played on the mind of the camp prisoner.

In this paper, I explore the widespread and intense malnutrition among the prisoners that led to cognitive decay such as comprehension complications and loss of concentration. I also examine the cognitive and psychological processes that led to acts of desperation, such as cannibalism, as well as the specifically psychological effects of starvation, including depression, anxiety, apathy or loss of motivation, and feelings of lessening self-worth. I discuss starvation’s role in the Nazi goal of mass extermination and its place in the camp structure, and I analyze the complications that starvation places upon the formation and maintenance of prisoner relationships. A close study of this method of Nazi dehumanization directly exposes the link between the physical and psychological factors of the concentration camp system and the connection to the lack of resistance and general sense of submission among the prisoners.

Throughout my analysis I often reference Doctor Ancel Keys’ experiment with men who volunteered to participate in controlled starvation at the University of Minnesota Memorial Football Stadium in 1944. By
The Psychological Effects of Starvation in the Holocaust: The Dehumanization and Deterioration of its Victims

applying the information obtained from this experiment on the effects of starvation to my study on starvation’s psychological implications in the Holocaust, the extremity and severity of starvation’s toll on human life is recognizable.

Introduction

The Holocaust victim’s experiences of physical torture reflects dehumanization as a Nazi tactic within the concentration camps of Germany during World War II. Physical and psychological warfare are linked to many victims’ visible symptoms of detrimental psychological states. This suggests a psychological reasoning behind the general lack of resistance and stoic submission of the prisoners. Of the numerous Nazi dehumanization methods, I will focus most specifically upon starvation as a seemingly physical device that caused devastating psychological deterioration for its victims.

I will observe that beyond the somatic results, widespread and intense malnutrition among the prisoners led to comprehension complications and loss of concentration (including a shift in focus). I will also examine the cognitive and psychological processes behind acts of desperation, such as cannibalism, as well as the specifically psychological effects of starvation, including depression, anxiety, apathy or loss of motivation, and feelings of lessening self-worth. I will explore starvation’s role in the Nazi goal of mass extermination, its place in camp structure, and its complication of the formation and maintenance of prisoner relationships. A close study of this method of Nazi dehumanization will directly expose the link between the physical and psychological factors of the concentration camp system and the connection to the lack of resistance and general submission among the prisoners.


Keys’ goal was to obtain scientific data on the effects of starvation - as information in this field was lacking in the 1940s – so that his research might be used to create and enhance hunger relief programs for the starving people of war devastated countries (Tucker 82).

Apart from starvation, the psychological trauma experienced by concentration camp victims was not experienced by the volunteers in Keys’ experiment; unlike Holocaust victims, these subjects participated voluntarily and were treated humanely. However, the study does mirror
the psychological results of hunger and shed light on the effects of starvation endured by Holocaust victims.

Nazi concentration camps are infamous for their conditions and the effects this environment had upon prisoners. The concentration camp system inevitably lead to depression, passivity, and helplessness, as well as a shift in “motive hierarchies” that cause self-related goals and preservation to rise above concern for others (Staub 164, 38). Starvation played a part in this system, however, the psychological effects of starvation that will be explored in this study overlap with other sources of psychological stress. For example, the numbered tattoos assigned to the concentration camp prisoners caused dehumanization and a decrease in self-esteem. Self-perception suffers in humans when one is lumped in with a group and is not able to discriminate as effectively, while deprivation of individuality leads of passivity (Staub 42, 164-165). Uncertainty faced by prisoners about their fate will be analyzed later as pertaining to increased submission to the authority of the camp system. It is also logical to infer that victims would have suffered severe psychological deterioration in the face of rape and the witness of death and brutality. There are obviously psychological implications derived from areas other than starvation.

I aim to analyze the psychological effects of starvation with full acknowledgement that these were probably the results of a combination of many sources of stress and cruelty. For the sake of conciseness, in this study I will generally attempt to isolate the analysis to starvation. Every concentration camp prisoner experienced starvation, therefore a study of this aspect of the brutal camp system will be sure to illuminate the psychological plight of its victims.

Physical Effects of Starvation

Rations in the camps were extremely small. Dorian Kurz, a survivor of Belsen, remembers her ration of “three-quarters of a liter of watery soup...And three and a half centimeters of bread a day and... some kind of an ersatz coffee” (US Holocaust Memorial Museum). Likewise, Elie Wiesel, a survivor of Buna and Auschwitz, records in his autobiography that he received black coffee in the morning, soup at noon, and “bread and something” in the evening (Wiesel 40). Obviously, this sudden drop in calories, vitamins, and proteins caused extreme weight loss. Keys’ experimental tests also show that starvation causes one’s heart rates and temperatures to drop (Tucker 135). Thus, starvation causes excessive weight loss, malnutrition, and a decrease in pulse and temperature.

Additionally, Marasmus Kwashiorkor is another prominent effect of starvation on prisoners. Marasmas Kwashiorkor is “a condition in
The Psychological Effects of Starvation in the Holocaust: The Dehumanization and Deterioration of its Victims

which there is a deficiency of both calories and protein, with severe tissue wasting, loss of subcutaneous fat, and usually dehydration” (Dorland’s Medical Dictionary). The condition caused fatigue, decreased muscle mass, and increased chance of disease due to a decaying immune system (A.D.A.M. Medical Encyclopedia).

Starvation is also linked to countless other diseases, including amenorrhea, or a loss of menstruation (Tucker 191), typhus, and dysentery (Robbin 237). In spite of fatigue, weakness, and a decaying immune system, Keys believed that the human body is extremely resilient in the face of starvation (Tucker 182). But how resilient is the mind?

Cognitive Effects of Starvation

Malnutrition has greatly detrimental effects on general cognition. The U.S. National Library of Medicine defines malnutrition as, “the condition that occurs when your body does not get enough nutrients” and refers to starvation as “a form of malnutrition” (A.D.A.M. Medical Encyclopedia). Keys, in examining his starving subjects, determined that the intellective performance of the subjects did not change during starvation, but that calculations took a longer amount of time to complete (Tucker 150, 180).

A reason for the longer time necessary for calculations can be explained by Nevin S. Scrimshaw, Director of Food and Nutrition Programme for Human and Social Development of the United Nations, Tokyo, who states that iron deficiency is to blame for cognitive deterioration (Scrimshaw 8). Additionally, a deprivation of the B-12 vitamin can also cause “cognitive impairment” (C Durand, 2). A lack of B-12 Vitamin absorption can cause pernicious anemia (C Durand 1), which is a decrease in red blood cells; the symptoms include problems concentrating and confusion (A.D.A.M. Medical Encyclopedia).

Perhaps one of the most obvious results of this cognitive impairment during the starvation process is a shift in concentration and focus toward food. Keys’ starvation experiment shows a drop in sex drive, mental alertness, concentration, and comprehension during the starvation phase, while appetite and hunger drive increased rapidly (Tucker 125). Diminishing concentration gives way to thoughts of food, which become the dominant priority and almost exclusive focus of the starving subject’s mind. In Doctor Keys’ experiment, one of the subjects collected cookbooks and stared at pictures of food “with almost pornographic fascination” (Tucker 123), while another subject describes his actions as determined by an “overbearing perversion to food” (Tucker 139). Dorian Kurz remembers the effect of this cognitive shift: “Most of our time during the day…was spent talking about food because there was not very
much to eat and we were hungry much of the time, almost all the time” (US Holocaust Memorial Museum). Food was the dominant focus of the internal life; starvation shifted focus and rearranged priority so that survival was the dominant goal.

This shift also explains why, in Wiesel’s account, a man crawled for food from the cauldron of soup while the camp was being bombed and all prisoners were commanded to stay in the barracks. According to Wiesel, this man illegally crawled toward the cauldron, risking his life in the face of both the bombs and the SS guards who were commanded to shoot any prisoners spotted outside the barracks. (Wiesel explains that this order was not to protect prisoners from the bombing, but to discourage them from escaping: “As it was relatively easy to escape during the bombing – the guards left their lookout posts and the electric current was cut off in the barbed-wire fences – the SS had orders to kill anyone found outside the blocks” (Wiesel 56).) Wiesel states that the rest of the men did not attempt to steal food because “terror was stronger than hunger” (Weisel 56). Through the lens of this argument, we might assume that the crawling man’s starvation was so severe as to cause a cognitive shift that overcame his priority to avoid being shot.

This shift in priority became extremely prominent for some. Amery, a prisoner in Auschwitz observes, “I was my body and nothing else: in hunger” (Langer 89). One usually identifies oneself by one’s ideals, thoughts, or personality - all things involving the mind - Amery suggests that his identity shifted with his priorities, and that his dominant identity became his body - more specifically, the hunger that consumed his body. Elie Wiesel’s experiences further illuminate this shift when he recalls that many men in his barracks decided not to fast for Yom Kippur (Wiesel 66). Therefore, even religion came second to food in this shift of priority.

Additionally, the subjects of Doctor Keys’ experiment showed a shift away from concern of world issues such as starving war refugees to the world inside the Memorial Stadium (Tucker 161). This shrinking world was a complication for victims of the Holocaust, because in some cases their will to survive hinged upon it. For example, one report on the issues of the Holocaust states, “A number of inmates were aided in their survival through a belief in someone or something which existed outside of their immediate circumstances. Although the inmate could not be expected to focus upon his belief with any consistency, it still provided a measure of support” (Robbin 239). A shrinking world or apathy would decrease the aid that an outside ideology provided prisoners. Elie Wiesel recalls a case in which he witnessed this outside belief or focus. A relative named Stein told Wiesel that the only thing that kept him alive inside the camp was the
knowledge that his wife and children (whom he knew to be outside the camp) were alive. Stein says, “If it wasn’t for them, I couldn’t keep going” (Wiesel 42). However, the cognitive shift we have explored shows that perhaps not every prisoner was able to direct his concentration as Stein did. The focus with which a prisoner could provide an outside ideal is limited by the diminishing concentration on things other than food caused by the malnutrition intricately connected to hunger.

**Cannibalism in the Holocaust**

This shift also resulted in acts of cannibalism, as hunger and the priority of survival became more eminent than qualms about civilization. For example, during Doctor Keys’ starvation experiment, subjects had cannibalistic dreams at a point in starvation when the output of energy became greater than the input (Tucker 99-100). However, cannibalism doesn’t always stay within the realm of dreams; sometimes hunger drives it toward reality. Moses S., a prisoner of the concentration camps in Germany, recalls a particular bombing that led to acts of cannibalism, “...we found a hand from the bombing...a human hand...Five of us. Divided. And we were eating it. And somebody died, we cut out a piece – we were eating...human flesh” (Langer 117).

Outside of the camp system and starvation few people would consider acts of cannibalism. We can analyze this change through the argument that malnutrition causes cognitive deterioration, causing focus on social customs or moral codes to surrender to a more immediate and dominant focus on food. It is possible that this shift would be at least partially responsible for the victims’ resorting to cannibalism, and that the victims’ cannibalism is partly a result of a shift in concentration, focus, and priority due to malnutrition, deprivation of B-12 Vitamin and iron, and the effects of this deficiency on the cognitive mind. However, there is another shift – more psychological than cognitive – that helps to explain the adoption of cannibalism.

**General Psychological Effects of Starvation**

The path to adopting cannibalism in extreme circumstances is part of a psychological process of a shifting motive hierarchy. The motive hierarchy is a concept adopted and analyzed by Ervin Staub, Professor of Psychology Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and author of numerous works on genocidal psychology. Staub explains that motivational sources of human behavior include biological needs, social customs or standards, self-related goals (which can include biological needs), and other-related goals (Staub 36-37). All needs are originally main
motivational sources for human behavior, but when faced with deprivation of these needs, biological needs will often become a stronger drive in the motive hierarchy, causing diminution in the relative importance of other motives (Staub 37). When biological needs increase, social customs or standards will decrease accordingly. As Staub states, “When a custom or rule is strongly established, people will deviate from it only when another strong motivation requires deviation” (Staub 37). We can surmise that the increasing drive to fulfill biological needs dominates social customs or standards that would discourage victims of starvation from cannibalistic acts.

A shift in hierarchal motives when life conditions are continuously threatening and grotesque causes self-related goals of preservation and protection (both physical and psychological) to become greater than such other-related goals as concern for moral values and other human beings, which in turn often decrease under threat (Staub 37). “Under persistently difficult life conditions, lasting changes often occur in motive hierarchies. Self-protective and self-related goals become more important, and people become less open to others’ needs” (Staub 38). Holocaust victims were likely concerned with moral or social standards against cannibalism and afraid of desecrating the memories of people by consuming their bodies. The increase in self-related goals and biological needs over social standards and the needs of others helps explain the psychological process that allowed the victims of starvation to participate in cannibalism, however unwillingly the act was performed. Once the act was completed and the victim deviated from the social standard, the victim would face the psychological effects of this deviation: guilt, anxiety, and fear (Staub 37). Due to shifts in concentration and shifts in the motive hierarchy, it is evident that hunger has extreme effects on cognitive and psychological impairment.

Apart from acts of desperation, starvation has astronomical effects on the psychological and emotional state of its victims. Malnutrition is a prominent cause in psychological issues, including depression and anxiety. B-12 Vitamin and Vitamin C deficiency are known to cause “psychological abnormalities” including depression, anxiety, mood swings, and personality disorders (C Durand; Depression Linked). In addition to B-12 Vitamin and Vitamin C, other general psychological disorders are caused by deficiencies in iron, protein, calories, and thiamine (Scrimshaw 2,15). One subject of Doctor Keys’ experiment was already prone to psychotic tendencies before being admitted, and once subjected to starvation his neurotic scores soared, signifying greater psychiatric distress (Tucker 181). Doctor Keys noted the “psychological deterioration of the men” anger
The Psychological Effects of Starvation in the Holocaust: The Dehumanization and Deterioration of its Victims

and compulsion grow as starvation continued (Tucker 124-125). Two volunteers were checked into psychiatric wards after cheating during the experiment and being expelled from the program. Once rehabilitated and nourished, their psychotic symptoms disappeared (Tucker 102 and 160). Thus, it is evident that malnutrition causes a serious decay in psychological health.

Submission of Holocaust Victims

There is also a deep connection between these psychological impairments and the discouragement to resist the Nazi oppression within the camps. Submission is an effect of uncertainty and starvation. First we will explore uncertainty’s role in this resignation. Victims were encouraged into submission as a result of the uncertainty they faced in regard to their fate in the concentration camps. As Staub observes, “The Jews’ definition of the situation was crucial in determining their response... Resistance required accurate perception of Nazi intentions...” (Staub 158). Thus, knowledge of the victims’ future inside the camps was a necessary precondition for any effective opposition to the camp system. However, prisoners were kept in ignorance about their situation. Nazis “did everything possible to camouflage the ultimate fate of Jewish victims... using all possible means to mislead” (Staub 160). In Elie Wiesel’s account, prisoners deported to Auschwitz didn’t know where they were arriving and had never heard the name of the camp before (Wiesel 24). According to Staub, this uncertainty explains why victims did not rebel while transported on cattle trains, or in other instances in which prisoners were kept in ignorance.

Submission is also caused by starvation because the psychological effects of malnutrition include apathy, the enemy of all organized resistance. For example, early in the starvation phase of the experiment, Doctor Keys noted that after physical collapse during a somatically strenuous test a subject showed no signs of anger, frustration, or relief that the test was over. Instead, his expression showed “pure resignation” which Doctor Keys referred to as “pure muscular weakness” (Tucker 105). The experiment illuminated a loss of ambition, self-discipline, motivation, and will power among the men once starvation commenced (Tucker 125). Thus, in the absence of all other emotions, Doctor Keys observed the resignation that hunger promotes.

This symptom might be explained partially by Marasmus Kwashiorkor, the disease previously mentioned which results from protein deficiency. This disease causes symptoms of apathy and the reduction of voluntary movement. Other conditions of severe malnutrition result in a
honors review

"decrease...in the level of self-initiated intellectual activities, reflecting a profound change in motivation" (Brozec 166, 170). Additional symptoms of malnutrition include numbness (A.D.A.M. Medical Encyclopedia), being less active (Scrimshaw 6), and a loss of interest (Tucker 141). All of these symptoms are in direct opposition to the motivation and passion needed to incite resistance within the camps. However, according to Doctor Keys’ experiment, as soon as the rehabilitation stage began and the subjects began to receive normal meals, energy, anger, and dissent became visible among the men, and they began petitioning to change the conditions within the stadium that they thought unfair (Tucker 174-175, 177). This account supports the idea that “hungry people mindlessly follow orders. You feed them enough and right away they demand self-government” (Tucker 178). Therefore, submission is connected to starvation due to the psychological and emotional effects of malnutrition.

Dehumanization of Victims and Nazi Awareness

The connection of submission to starvation complicates the role that the Nazis played in this submission. Did the Nazis know about the submissive symptoms of the psychological trauma they inflicted by starving their victims and keeping them in ignorance? Staub states that the Nazis were aware of this effect. “The Nazis recognized the importance of making victims seem less than human. Inmates were kept hungry and helpless...One purpose was to reduce the will to resist by weakening them physically and destroying their former identity and sense of dignity” (Staub 137). However, Nazis might have had other reasons for inflicting this physical and psychological trauma.

Dehumanization of prisoners also psychologically affected the Nazi guards by enabling them to rationalize the killings of the victims. One reason the Nazis kept prisoners in a state of dehumanization was to "diminish the victims and ‘help’ the SS distance themselves from them” (Staub 137). When a commandant of Treblinka was asked why the victims were humiliated and treated cruelly when they were going to be killed anyway, he replied, “To condition those who actually had to carry out the policies – to make it possible for them to do what they did” (Staub 137). Dehumanization works through devaluing the victim so that the subject, (the one dehumanizing the victim), feels a sense of superiority. In this process the victim is often identified as a scapegoat and blamed for the hardships of the subject. This enables the brutal harming of the victim to become “retaliation” for the subject, although in reality the victim may or may not have done any harm. This process of devaluation enabled a feeling of justification in the Nazis and created a psychological
rationalization for the cruelty with which they treated the camp prisoners (Staub 48-49).

Although the Nazis might have sensed the moral ease with which they inflicted pain on the victims, universally they were not necessarily aware of their participation in this process of devaluation: “devaluation and scapegoating are often non-reflective psychological processes that arise without awareness” (Staub 148). Thus, even if the Nazis were devaluing prisoners in order to kill them with less moral conflict, they may have been individually unaware that they did so. However, it is likely that even if this was not a purposeful Nazi goal in the camps, it was a direct effect of the overall goal of the camp system – namely, extermination. I propose that the motive of dehumanization was to inflict sufficient psychological trauma on the prisoners as to insure their submission, and a psychological means to enable Nazi guards to rationalize the killings of the prisoners, whether consciously or unconsciously developed on an individual level. Thus, the dehumanization of the prisoners was inflicted as much for the psychological state of the Nazis as it was for the psychological state of the prisoners. Regardless of the consciousness of the psychological effects, starvation did cause feelings of dehumanization in its victims.

In fact, the feeling of dehumanization is perhaps the most potent psychological effect of starvation. Leon H., a former prisoner of Auschwitz, states, “Human life was like a fly” (Langer 93). But why did the victims feel this way? One answer is linked to malnutrition. The loss of self-worth and the denatured self are interconnected with malnutrition, starvation, and submission. In general, iron deficiency and B-12 Vitamins are linked to “devaluation impressions” (C Durand 1). The “poor physical conditions of the inmates” (including malnutrition) “contributed for many to a lack of self-care or self-worth” (Robbins 237). Furthermore, the acts that hunger inspires, such as cannibalism, “sometimes led to a diminished self-perception” (Langer 82). Therefore, malnutrition, poor conditions, and acts of desperation all led to feelings of dehumanization within the victims.

While exploring these psychological implications, we must also recognize that normal logic does not always apply to the internal workings of the concentration camps. It can become contradictory to calculate the will to survive within a system in which the overall purpose and eventual – even seemingly inevitable – goal was mass death. In fact, we might recognize the loss of the will to survive as a dominant Nazi goal supported by the psychological makeup of the camps and ghettos. This loss of will is apparent in the inhabitants of the Jewish ghettos during the Holocaust who suffered similar hardships and persecution as the camp victims.
honors review

Hersh Wasser, a refugee and forced resident of the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II, made a written entry on May 26th, 1942 in which he records the condition of his fellow refugees and victims: “The attitude towards death is quite casual. I venture to say that the dead are objects of envy. Nobody really has the courage to die, but the general opinion is that the dead have already passed through their vale of tears...The living envy the dead” (Wasser). As Wasser observes, the will to live began to diminish while death appeared more tempting in light of such extreme conditions. One might deduce that any will to survive came not from a desire to live as life was therein depicted, yet instead was founded at least partially by a fear of death, or as Wasser puts it, lack of the “courage to die”. In labor camps, only a victim who performed a function was kept alive. Value was determined by output and not by any intrinsic value of being human. Chaim El, a former prisoner of Sobibor, described the situation as making him feel like a robot and not a human, because his worth depended solely on his function (Langer 178). This means of measuring value might be considered the greatest cause of feelings of dehumanization in Holocaust victims.

Starvation’s Effects on Interpersonal Prisoner Relationships

Because starvation psychologically affected prisoners on an individual level, it follows that starvation would also affect prisoner relationships within the camps. To understand this, we must first explore the significance of interpersonal relationships. Henry Krystal, clinical psychoanalyst certified in adult analysis and Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry at Michigan State University (Henry Krystal, MD), survivor of the Holocaust (Henry Krystal), and student of the psychological trauma of the Holocaust (Davidson 7), offers psychological analyses that illuminate the psychological decay in prisoners. Krystal has developed the stages of the process of “catastrophic trauma” which often results when psychological defenses are overpowered. He breaks them down into four parts: I. confrontation with death, II. affective blocking and numbing, III. constriction of cognitive and executive function, and IV. defeat and surrender. This last stage, which often leads to death, references the previously explored apathy and submission that often consumed victims. This final stage was identified among prisoners within the camp system as the “Muselmann state” (Davidson 7).

Shamai Davidson, the late head of the Elie Wiesel Chair for the Study of the Psycho-Social Trauma of the Holocaust and Associate Clinical Professor at the School of Medicine of Tel-Aviv University until his death in 1986 (Minski), emphasizes the need for interpersonal relationships
The Psychological Effects of Starvation in the Holocaust: The Dehumanization and Deterioration of its Victims

among prisoners to mitigate Krystal’s fourth stage. Davidson states, “... interpersonal support, by buffering and protecting the psyche in the face of even catastrophic stress situations, can mitigate the traumatic process, and the progression to the final state of apathetic resignation and surrender may be prevented or even averted” (Davidson 9). Davidson expresses that the will to fight and survive in extreme conditions hinges on social bonding and interpersonal exchange. He believes that “interpersonal bonding, reciprocity and sharing were an essential source of strength for ‘adaption’ and survival in many of the victims” (Davidson 2). Davidson develops these thoughts into a general conclusion in which he claims human reciprocity helped avoid death. He states, “human reciprocity in the group and dyadic relations, by sustaining the morale and the motivation to struggle to live on in the Nazi concentration camps, increased the chances of eventual survival” (Davidson 4-5).

Testimonies of victims of the Holocaust support Davidson’s conclusion. For example, Helena Birenbaum, survivor of Majdanek, Auschwitz, and Ravensbrueck, expresses that if it were not for the relationship she shared with her sister-in-law, Hela, she would not have survived. Birenbaum says,

Had it not been for Hela, her boundless devotion and constant care, I would have perished after a few days...she shared every bite she acquired with me...she...did everything in her power to make easier my life in the camp...For a long time I could not rouse myself from a state of listlessness. Had it not been for Hela’s efforts I would not have roused myself from my apathy...thanks to her help, I finally joined the fight for life in the camp of death (Davidson 14).

Therefore, Helena attributes her survival to the bond she shared with her sister-in-law. An additional point is made in Elie Wiesel’s account. Wiesel recalls two brothers, Yossi and Tibi, whom Wiesel states “lived, body and soul, for each other” (Night 48). Yossi and Tibi lived for each other, or survived because of their interpersonal bond. The study of these personal bonds seems to inaccurately simplify survival within the camps: if forming personal bonds substantially increased chances of survival, why didn’t every prisoner take this approach? Starvation complicated of interpersonal relationships: starvation greatly limited the relationships that could be formed or sustained and the ability of these relationships to mitigate Krystal’s fourth stage of defeat and surrender.

As previously mentioned, “sharing” is included with interpersonal bonding and identified as an essential source of strength for adaption (Davidson 2). However, starvation greatly limits the opportunities to share
with someone else because there is already insufficient nutrition for even one person. Physically, sharing food within these relationships in order to sustain another would have caused the “sharer”, (who was already starving to death), to lose more strength. For example, in Helena Birenbaum’s testimony, she states that Hela’s support increased Helena’s chances of survival. But nothing is said about how Hela’s chances of survival are effected through this transaction in which Hela shared “every bite she acquired” with Helena (Davidson 14). It is obvious that Hela’s sacrifice in this relationship would have decreased her physical strength, increased malnutrition, and possibly encouraged even more of the psychological effects of starvation that we have herein explored. Additionally, Wiesel recalls how at times he wished that he could be free of his father so that he wouldn’t have to take care of him. In regards to his father Wiesel thought, “If only I could get rid of this dead weight, so that I could use all my strength to struggle for my own survival, and only worry about myself” (Night 101). Both examples illuminate that in relationships where one prisoner obtained the role of main caregiver, the caregiver’s chance of survival may have actually decreased or at least gained new difficulties. Consequently, there were many instances in which prisoners ended relationships in order to pursue personal nutrition and survival.

As previously observed, the motivational hierarchy causes shifts to occur in situations where certain needs take precedence over others (Staub 37). If personal “self-related goals”, (such as hunger), increase, “other-related goals” will decrease. This means that the self-related need to gain nutrition can become priority over the needs of other members of the personal bonds. This shift might cause actions that will lead to the decay of these interpersonal bonds. For example, in Wiesel’s account he recalls a son who kills his father in order to steal and eat his father’s scrap of bread (Night 96). This is a clear example of a situation in which a relationship cannot be sustained because the self-related goal of survival via nutrition takes priority over the other-related goal of supporting and sharing with a partner. Wiesel also recalls the head of the prisoner’s block in Buchenwald advising Wiesel against caring for his sick father. The head of the block says,

Don’t forget that you’re in a concentration camp. Here, every man has to fight for himself and not think of anyone else...Here there are no fathers, no brothers, no friends. Everyone lives and dies for himself alone...don’t give your ration of bread and soup to your old father...you’re killing yourself. Instead, you ought to be having two rations of bread, two rations of soup (Night 105).
The Psychological Effects of Starvation in the Holocaust: The Dehumanization and Deterioration of its Victims

This advice is reminiscent of Wiesel’s desire to break free from the bond with his father and focus on his own survival. This man’s advice also reveals something chilling about the concentration camp system: that it was structured through the implications of starvation to discourage interpersonal bonding and that in order to gain enough nutrition to survive, sharing was extremely difficult.

This complication extends beyond individual relationships and includes groups of prisoners. For example, Wiesel recalls that when being transported to Buchenwald by cattle train, some German bystanders threw bread into the wagon of starving prisoners who had not been fed for days. He says, “Dozens of starving men fought each other to the death for a few crumbs...Men threw themselves on top of each other, stamping on each other, tearing at each other, biting each other” (Night 95). The effects of starvation and the urgent need for nutrition made food a higher priority than solidarity or the needs of others. Wiesel also recalls an event in which the SS displayed the hanging of a boy. Wiesel explains that when a guard attempted to seize the boy, “two prisoners helped him [the guard] in his task – for two plates of soup” (Night 59). Therefore, some prisoners were willing to assist in the death of another prisoner so that they might obtain nutrition for survival, thus displaying starvation’s role in the decay of solidarity among prisoners.

According to Shamai Davidson, interpersonal relationships increase the possibility of survival. However, an opposing argument can also be made: relationships might actually have the opposite effect in that they complicate a prisoner’s chance of survival. For example, if one prisoner is living for another (as in the case of Yossi and Tibi), and his fate becomes psychologically entwined with his partner, then there are now two people who must live – the prisoner and his partner – in order for the one prisoner to maintain the psychological will to survive. In regard to the motive hierarchy, this poses an interesting question: when do “other-related goals” become “self-related goals”? If this equation is possible, it means that at stages in a prisoner’s relationship, in order to meet his self-related needs he must additionally meet the other-related needs of his partner. Davidson illuminates this complication when he explores the relationship between Anne Frank and her sister, Margot. Davidson states, “Women who met Anne Frank in Bergen-Belsen in the month before she died believed that neither the hunger nor the typhus killed her but the death of her sister, Margot. One of these women said: ‘It was frightening to see how easy it was to die for someone who had been left all alone in a concentration camp’ ” (Davidson 5). It is possible that if Margot’s needs were a part of Anne’s self-related needs, Anne’s inability to provide
for Margot resulted in the insufficient fulfillment of Anne’s needs. This situation suggests that relationships enhance the chance of survival, but if the partner in one of these relationships succumbs to death, the other partner’s chance of death seems to be significantly increased. Overall, starvation seems to complicate relationships within the concentration camp system in that starvation is the cause for the need of relationships, but it is also one reason that forming and maintaining these relationships becomes extremely difficult.

However, starvation is not the only factor that went into the complications of relationships in the camp system. Other physical and psychological factors also affected bonds. When general survival conditions worsened, relationships seemed to diminish. For example, Davidson states, “When survival conditions became even more extreme… as on the ‘death marches’ after the evacuation of the camps, it became increasingly difficult to maintain interpersonal bonds in the desperate struggle not to fall behind and be shot” (Davidson 6). One Holocaust survivor, Solomon G, says that during the death march, “we were in such a state that all that mattered is to remain alive. Even about your own brother, one did not think… at the time I wanted to survive myself” (Hass 4). Solomon G illuminates the difficulty of maintaining other-related goals during the death march and thus suggests that Davidson is correct when he claims that the harsh conditions of the death march made the maintenance of relationships more difficult.

Holocaust survivor Eli Pfefferkorn also validates Davidson’s statement when he recalls that during the death march, “the relationships that I developed in the last camp… rapidly dissolved in the course of the ‘death march’ as the survival conditions became more extreme” (Davidson 6). However, in his testimony, Pfefferkorn also reveals that the relationships he formed at the last camp were “of an expedient nature” (Davidson 6). Although Pfefferkorn does not elaborate on this description of his relationships in the last camp, his point is a powerful one. Even in his brief statement on relationships, Pfefferkorn mentions the extreme survival conditions that affected the relationship as well as the “expedient” nature of the relationship itself. All these factors must be taken into consideration in addition to the effects of starvation on the relationship dynamic. During the death marches, there were other factors such as exhaustion and weakness that would also impact relationships. In some cases, the nature of the relationship itself may have impacted its resilience. In the camp system, the natures of relationships varied and starvation was not the only dire condition that prisoners faced; because of this, there is no way to define starvation’s exact and total role in the diminution of
The Psychological Effects of Starvation in the Holocaust: The Dehumanization and Deterioration of its Victims

Conclusion

Altogether, the physical methods of Nazi dehumanization during the Holocaust had extensive psychological effects on the victims. As a dominant Nazi tactic, starvation played a significant role in the “final solution” of mass extermination, which remained the priority of the Nazi mission within the concentration camp system. Malnutrition caused psychological impairment and deterioration to abound while inspiring acts of desperation within victims. The apathy and feelings of dehumanization or loss of self-worth that resulted from this deterioration allowed and encouraged victims to submit to their oppressors. Dehumanization of the victims also enabled psychological changes in the Nazis and conditioned them in such a way that they carried out brutalities with increasing moral ease. Victims also experienced depression and a cognitive decay most identifiable as a shift in concentration. Starvation even complicated and challenged the possibility of prisoner relationships to provide hope or motivation for survival. The psychological effects of starvation via malnutrition are numerous and provide a new understanding of the Holocaust victims’ situation and response.

Endnotes
1. There were prisoner uprisings in Treblinka and Sobibor in August and October 1943, respectively (Jewish Resistance). However, resistance was not common in the camp system and does not assist the purpose of this study, in which I will focus instead on the more common and widespread submission of the prisoners as it pertains to the psychological effects of starvation.

Works Cited


C, Durand, Mary S, Brazo P, and Dollfus S. “Psychiatric Manifestations


The Psychological Effects of Starvation in the Holocaust: The Dehumanization and Deterioration of its Victims

<http://pb.rcpsych.org/content/11/2/73.2.full.pdf>.


