Every year, thousands of people visit European concentration camps with the purpose of learning about, remembering, and mourning this massive tragedy. From witnessing representative evidence such as photographs, artistic images, survivor stories, and physical remnants, visitors to these sites create a semblance of the catastrophe. The effect of imaginative reconstruction appears to involve a potent experience where people believe that they understand and feel something about the event although they did not witness it firsthand. Because this type of witnessing involves imagination, visual imaging, and personally created
Because this type of witnessing involves imagination, visual imaging, and personally created narratives, it is called *vicarious witnessing* (Keats, 2005).

Through the process of vicarious witnessing people construct stories from the available evidence in order to make sense of the event itself. The purpose of this article is to show how participants experienced the vicarious witnessing process through the creation of a dramatic reading performance. Through the social performance of this reading, participants were able to tell about their personal experiences, construct meanings of what they saw in the European concentration camp sites, and intervene or resist together with audience members to act against racism and oppression witnessed in everyday life.

**Research Background**

There is recent recognition that psychological repercussions exist for individuals in the public who are not directly involved in a traumatic event (Schlenger, Caddell, Ebert, Jordan, Rourke, Wilson, Thalji, Dennis, Fairbanks, & Kulka, 2002). However, we know very little about the effect of the imaginative reconstruction of a trauma story that was not witnessed firsthand. In this project, I sought to understand how individuals made sense of vicariously witnessing trauma through evidence of traumatic events such as in the concentration camps of Germany and Poland. I focused on exploring the vicarious witnessing experience through the way people integrated the overwhelming extent of the trauma through their imagination; how they constructed meaningful narratives about the event; what types of emotional, social, spiritual, and cognitive support they sought as a result of witnessing; and the subsequent actions they performed in their home communities.

There were five participants involved in the study including myself as a participant-researcher. People volunteered on the basis of their interest in, and agreement to attend the *Bearing Witness Retreat* at the Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau camps. All participants were adults (ages 40-68), who came from a variety of professions including psychology, architecture, and nursing. People practiced a variety religious, or spiritual traditions including Judaism, Christianity, and non-denominational backgrounds. I anticipated that this array of perspectives would add depth and diversity in conceptualizing the vicarious witnessing experience.

As a group, we departed for Europe with a two-week itinerary that would take us to four concentration and extermination camps including Sachsenhausen, Treblinka, Auschwitz, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. While in Auschwitz, we joined a four-day international *Bearing Witness Retreat* that focused on engaging with the Holocaust trauma through the performance of rituals such as reading the names of people murdered in the camp (taken from Nazi camp records), honoring their memory through prayer and meditation, and participating in group conversation about the witnessing experiences.

During the course of the journey, each person processed their experience from their own unique perspective using travel journals, photography, and conversation. A consistent topic among group members was the struggle to construct meaning and understanding related to the camp prisoner’s experiences; experiential expression reflected insightful thought, strong emotions, and commitments toward social action. The use of multiple texts invited participants to explore their experiences in different ways. Some participants preferred one form of expression over another, yet all participants offered visual, verbal, and written records. From these texts, I conducted a narrative analysis that included interpretive readings of each of these unique texts and interconnections between them.
Due to the powerful experiences that we had during the visit to the camp sites, the full group mutually agreed to meet for discussion and support after returning to Canada. In the first meeting, people were unanimous in their desire to take some type of action in their communities that would resist and criticize the racial and ethnic oppression that they saw evidence of in the camps, and noticed more acutely in their daily lives. In light of this desire, we decided to work together to create something meaningful for us as a group that we could share with our home communities. In thinking about possibilities for action, I reflected on the performance of our journey of bearing witness. It seemed appropriate to enact the highlights of both the inner and outer performance of the journey in the form of a multimedia dramatic reading. I anticipated that the reading could be developed from themes that arose during my analysis of the interview texts, travel journals, images, and artifacts. When I offered this idea to the group, other members were enthusiastic about this possibility. I developed a script of our journey and presented it to the group; members were excited about the bringing this type of external performance to fruition.

In the end, the dramatic reading consisted of selected quotes from participants and other individuals, which reflected the progress of the journey from the beginning anticipations before departure, to the final commitment for future action at the end. In order to make the performance doable, I compiled the voices of myself and all participants into three distinct voices that emphasized specific themes or aspects of the experience on the levels of emotional, cognitive, and action based responses. Thus, for the three readers, no one person spoke solely as themselves but each represented both their own and other participant’s experiences.

Additionally, I interwove our voices with significant archival (see Swiebocka, 1993) and current photographs (given to me by participants) in the form of a slideshow. With these slides, I interfaced oppressive statements that people said directly to the participants during the course of the research project (e.g., “It never happened; the Jews made the whole thing up.”), as well as racist comments about the Jewish population (i.e., D. Ahenakew, public data with acknowledgement to journalist J. Parker, Saskatoon StarPhoenix). As a cultural
representation of racist discourse, we recorded these oppressive statements using voices that were different from group members’ voices. Finally, we had gathered the names of people murdered in the camps who were known by friends, family, and acquaintances in Vancouver. We read these names during the retreat, as well as during the dramatic reading performance.

Experiences of Repair

Like Malpede (1996), our group believed that the performance could be a “place of witness” (p. 231), a place where we could enact our experiences and invite audience members to participate in a representation of our vicarious witnessing in the camps. It was our hope that audience members would feel the importance of knowing more about the Holocaust and join with us in social action. To succeed at this goal, the group wanted the performance to be a place to tell about their experiences in their own voices, and a place to sit together with the audience and discuss possible joint actions against racism, abuse of privilege, doing difference, and managing power relations. In this way, we anticipated that our vicarious witnessing could be a form of political engagement (Turner-Streckline, 1997), where we could seek a particular response from the audience and create a social alliance with the community. This alliance could then serve both a political purpose and create a personal understanding of the racial atrocity in which we were engaged in as a larger world community. To achieve this type of conversation, audience members were invited to participate in a group discussion after the completion of each of the three performance venues that were created.

Performance as Healing

During the course of creating and performing the dramatic reading, people spoke about the many reparative aspects of the process. The opportunity to bear witness and tell about our
experiences gave a sense of power and purpose to the experience of visiting the camps. One person stated that the performance was “important so that the victims of the atrocity did not die for nothing. It is so important to carry on the memory so people know about the brutality and injustice of what happened.” The process of telling the Holocaust story allowed participants to honour the people that they learned about while at the camp sites. The telling was an important part of remembering and reminding people about the atrocity. The audience response to the telling was an important reflection of the worth of the reminder. For example, participants made statements about the importance of the discussion group after the performances such as, “the audience members had strong reactions; it was overwhelming,” and “It was good to see how impactful it was and how they were processing it. Many good things came out, like people’s conviction to speak out about racist comments and talk to each other about oppression.”

Participants also talked about a deep sense of responsibility in knowing about what happened during the Holocaust and informing others about it. There were ideas about the best way to teach people about aspects of the Holocaust that may not be known. For example, one participant stated, “I think people really learn through the personal not the philosophical…our social action work of bearing witness gave us the opportunity to express our opinion and at the same time, educate others. I guess that’s part of social action--becoming informed and passing it on.” Another person commented that the performance filled a gap that was left by the retreat experience by giving her the opportunity to express her views to others through an artistic medium, “it was the artistic aspect of the performance that gave it that emotional staying power with people.”

Some people thought that the performance was a way of opening a specific dialogue about cultural oppression. For example, a participant said, “It was such a rich presentation and a good strategy to eliminate racism.” For another person, being able to speak out in this way, made the performance very important, “I would say that the performance was as important as the trip itself.”

The performance also helped participants process their experiences together, as one participant said, “I think that the trip was therapeutic and that was reflected in the performance.” One person stated that she especially appreciated the collaboration because “I wasn’t left feeling isolated in carrying my experience of being in the concentration camps. Staying connected and working together has really helped me process the experience. In a sense we bear witness together and it makes it more powerful for me.” Another participant said that the performance “offset the trauma and division, isolation and helplessness because we were able to do something together.” In this way, it helped to counteract the risks of vicarious witnessing (e.g., loss of faith, sleep problems, intrusive thoughts). Participants also commented on the unity of the group in terms of presenting different perspectives, “I liked that we were all together and that the performance included others and not just the Jewish perspective. That brought truth to the experience.”

The opportunity to publicly express opinions about, and reactions to, the camp sites also had some risks. One participant stated, “…participating in the trip and the performance has threatened one of my personal relationships. It has brought out some cultural differences between us, which we aren’t talking about. This is another risk of witnessing--how personal changes we make because of witnessing, affects our relationships and future actions.” This emphasized the shadow or oppressive voice as part of the performance. One person lauded the inclusion of this voice in the performance, “I think bringing out that whole shadow piece in the performance was so congruent with what we witnessed and the consequences of the risks we took. I think it is important, too, because we need to see how it infiltrates into what
we are all experiencing now. We took personal and social risks to bear witness and seeing and facing the shadow is a part of that risk.” In a sense, there was no separation between the actual experience in the camps or with each other and the representation of it in the script. Although the script was compiled from personal interviews, participants were not consciously aware of each others feelings of separation or isolation at points during the trip; the performance allowed us to see each other’s experiences in a new way and construct a meaning of our own. One person said that the performance “was a seamless compilation of everybody’s stuff, even stuff that we all didn’t know about.”

Participants also expressed the influence of performing on confirming the reality of the witnessing experience. For example, one person less involved in working on the performance, said she “would have liked to have been more involved because the performance was a real consolidation of the experience. As I was watching the night of the performance, it really contextualized and normalized the experience of the trip. It made it a reality. I said to myself, ‘I did it, it is true.’ So it was helpful in affirming the reality of the experience.” Another personal aspect for participants involved the actual experience of being on stage, as one person describes, “I was able to break a pattern of self-criticism as I went on stage to bear witness to the concentration camps. I didn’t feel as exposed as I thought I would and think this really reflects a shift in me.” This participant was expressing the significance of the performance as a structure in which she could reconstructing her own way of being on the social and personal level. For another person, it was more risky, “being on stage evoked feelings of vulnerability in me because I realized that people could hear me and were listening to what I had to say. The fact that the voices were compiled made it a bit more risky for me, as I was saying something that wasn’t always my own.”

In this regard, people were able to change lines that did not fit for them. For example, one participant wanted one of her initial lines changed from, “It will be an interesting challenge for me to see how I respond to group pressure or momentum, and whether I can stay with it or not” to “Because I usually travel alone, it will be a challenge for me to be in this group. Will I fit in or will I remain an outsider?” These two lines have significantly different meanings; the first assumes inclusion and curiosity about her personal coping within the group, and the second assumes the position of outsider with concern about continued exclusion from the group. This possibility of performing differently added to the corrective and reparative nature of the performance.

Reaching Audiences

From an academic perspective, the performance was also a means of conveying the research findings to the community in an accessible form. This was especially important for this topic because people experience the act of vicariously witnessing trauma on a daily basis through news reports and other media forms of reporting about significant tragedies in world affairs. It is now common to see or hear warnings on television or radio newscasts when traumatic images or stories are forthcoming. Both the importance, and consequent effects of vicarious witnessing are aspects that are essential to convey to the public at large. Hence, our performance accomplished important goals on many levels both for us as participants and for those in our audiences.
Personal Notes

During the eight-month period of the performance process, I explored the many ways I positioned myself as a participant-researcher within the group, script writing, and performance. The performance was a structure to recreate myself within the margins of the group, understand my choices and actions, and speaking about my experiences along with others. While going to witness the camps, I thought my role was straightforward; instead, I found myself radically changed by the witnessing experience and caught in a complex web of relations, rules, and questions. The performance helped me realize that I interwove this experience into every aspect of the research process and was, in essence, performing my own experiences as I encouraged others to perform theirs.

During the creation of the performance, I represented myself as an objective researcher in the role of narrator. Although my voice formed the movement of the text, the character of each speaker, and the framework of the setting, I hesitated to be centre stage during the actual performance. I was not sure how visible I should be on stage, what I owned in the narrative process, and where I should draw the line between myself and others in the performance context. Additionally, the group had many expectations around my leadership, so I wore many hats—that of author, director, producer, researcher, participant, and performer. Hence, to distance myself from the chaos of all these roles and my hesitation to be acutely visible, I was willing to settle for an objective neutral position in the script, entering briefly into the reading to transition the audience from one scene to the next. Indeed, I was content to have my art work (sculptures and posters of sculptures) at centre stage, rather than myself. I felt content that the art represented my voice in the most direct and clear manner.
The meaning of my objective positioning, and the words that I chose to speak, were in sharp contrast to the more subjective language of the other readers. I wrote all of my lines in the third person. For example, “…she recalls feeling compelled to take up an invitation to bear witness at the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.” It was not until we were practicing the reading on stage at the theatre that I realized how I had represented myself as detached from the inner heart of the reading as if I was not an experiencing participant. I realized the meaning of the position I took in the script and its effect on my stage performance and relationship to the text. The text reflected my hesitation to hold the performance as part of my own experience. Because the script’s message was about the shadow of racism, I tried to maintain a neutral perspective in order to avoiding fully owning the message about racism because of my non-Jewish background because I had received subtle and not so subtle messages that I did not have a right to be a spokesperson for the Holocaust story. With this understanding and insight, I worked on new lines for myself from the first person perspective. My first line now read, “I was the first witness. The journey started for me when I decided to take up an invitation to bear witness in the Auschwitz concentration camp.” With this change, I moved into the performance, joining the others in a very different way than I had initially.

For me, the final change in the script came out of a struggle with cultural difference. I realized that I needed to situate myself among others in a way that made me visible. After contemplating the situation and discussing it with other participants, I changed my lines so that I could be more definitive, responsible, and performative in the script’s anti-racist message. From this position, I felt like I owned and expressed my own voice among the others. My voice and performance in the script evolved from being distance and detached, to being clearly located in the intention and purpose of the performance. Finally, the performance itself was a type of ritual that we were able to repeat several times; each time I experienced it as healing the wounds of witnessing by reigniting our alliance as a group and working though the journey’s impact as a process of repair.

Women and Children – image from Auschwitz (Swiebocka, 1993)

Final Words
The creating and performing of the dramatic reading performance presented served many reparative purposes for people in the study. As demonstrated above, the performance consolidated and completed the experiences that participants had in the context of the study; there was a sense of closure. It created a structure that allowed us to have a public voice that opened the way to performing our passion, beliefs, and values. The performance also included audience members in discussions about performing power, racism, and equality. It gave them a chance to learn about the camps and the experiences of vicarious witnessing. All in all, it opened up dialogue within a community of people who can confront traumatic and oppressive stories that are heard on a continuous basis in every day life.

I leave the final word for two of the participants; the first states that, “the performance really gave me a sense of purpose, something to work towards, something to live for,” and the second said, “the performance of our experiences was one of the highlights of my life.”

References


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