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"I Lived Because I Was Blessed": Coping Strategies of American Prisoners of War

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In order to survive one of the most stressful situations humans can endure, prisoners of war must develop personal coping strategies. Through a grounded theory analysis of the memoirs of three former prisoners of war, the present study sought to discover how American former POWs articulated what coping strategies they used in their personal narratives. It found the following themes: Numbness, solidarity, faith, humor, familiarity as comfort, aggression, danger, self-discipline, and mental and physical fitness.

In the popular imagination, prisoners of war (POWs) are justifiably portrayed as heroes. However, these mediated representations are usually inaccurate in depicting the suffering the POWs truly endure (Young, 1998). POWs, instead, become a synecdoche for American freedom, as in the case of the film *Rambo* (Budra, 1990). In these portrayals, the heroic rescue of POWs functions as a cinematic trope; rather than attempting to accurately depict their survival despite living in destitute conditions, the films appropriate POWs as a means of putting matters "right" and symbolically winning conflicts like Vietnam (Sutton & Winn, 2001). However, amidst these sensationalist narratives, the true courage exhibited by these men and women through their shared coping strategies is sometimes neglected.

Coping during and after a process of being inflicted with psychological trauma is an essential aspect of survival (Gotcher & Edwards, 1990). Coping, "the processes individuals use to modify adverse aspects of their environment as well as to minimize internal threat induced by stress," may help an individual maintain a sensation of control during a crisis (Fairbank, Hansen, & Fitterling, 1991, p. 274). This feeling of control, though it may not accurately reflect the actual situation, is essentially a response to a stressful situation, in which the individual struggles to re-establish homeostasis following change (Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981). Certainly, one's self-esteem can be negatively impacted if he or she feels that the circumstances are beyond his or her control. The Americans who were taken captive as POWs were placed in severely trying situations out of their control, and, as such, were forced by circumstance to choose their own ways to cope. Even once the war completed, incidentally, it was often necessary for the individual to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder and other physiological challenges (Ferguson & Cassaday, 2002). Although some of the coping strategies were unique, others transcended the circumstances and the individual. This analysis seeks to discover strategies from the latter category, with the ultimate objective of understanding how American former POWs articulate their coping mechanisms as they endured the extreme stress of captivity.

Though the choice of strategy may vary based on one's identity and environment, the mutual ways to cope articulated below helped these POWs survive, by their own admission. Though there is much academic literature on coping strategies and some on prisoners of war, very little was discovered that pertained to how POWs or those that suffered trauma communicated about their experiences; some touched on the topic of good communication with families and social support networks being necessary to promote posttraumatic growth over time (Pearlin et al., 1981; Sterner & Jackson-Cherry, 2015). However, these articles only addressed communication in a cursory fashion. Mindful that the themes in the present analysis were given ex post facto by the POWs, the analysis will also cautiously address the nature of narratives of traumatic experiences.

Life-Strains and their Aftermath

Coping

According to a seminal study on the topic, coping refers to an individual's personal responses that work to "prevent, avoid, or control emotional distress" (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, p. 3). Coping behavior can occur in

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several ways, including the following: responding to change the situation; responding to control the meaning of the situation after it has become stressful; and responding to control the stress that results. The key to managing these consequences is through the individual's perception of available resources. When one perceives ample resources available, one is better able to cope with life strains. Indeed, the response that most directly copes with the stress of a life-strain is the one that attempts to modify the situation. In order to cope with these situations successfully, it is best if the individual has a repertoire of coping "weapons" to combat the stressors.

Individuals are able to draw from different resources in order to cope with emotional disturbances: social resources, psychological resources, and specific coping responses. The first is concerned primarily with interpersonal networks, while the second uses characteristics such as self-esteem, self-denigration, or mastery to combat threats. The latter two describe what people are and what people do to deal with life stressors. *Self-esteem* refers to the positive attitude of the sufferer, while *mastery* refers to the belief that one is largely in control of his or her situation. *Self-denigration*, on the other hand, refers to the negative attitudes of the sufferer. Ultimately, the individual's constitutive psychological resources seem to be more effective than coping mechanisms by themselves (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). However, a combination of both tends to produce the most successful results.

One of the most frequent aspects in the literature is the conceptualization of coping strategies as being either *emotion-focused* or *problem-focused*. Essentially, these terms qualify coping strategies as generally relating to psychological responses or behavioral responses. Emotion-focused coping typically occurs when the individual assesses the situation and concludes that nothing can be done to modify its challenges (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These responses are analogous to the coping that seeks to control the meaning of the experience in order to assuage the related stressful response (Pearlin & School, 1978). Emotion-focused coping includes strategies like "selective attention, positive comparisons, and wresting positive value from negative events" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150). Though these responses occur because the situation cannot be changed, they are still useful because they help the individual change the meaning of the threat, focusing instead on maintaining hope.

Problem-focused coping is behavioral in nature. Considering the environment to be potentially alterable, these strategies aim to modify the situation by solving or removing the problem therein. These strategies, however, are not exclusively external; they can be directed internally as well, as when the sufferer chooses to make a plan of action before he or she implements it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Each of these strategies can facilitate or hinder the success of the other in the coping process as they often occur concurrently. Still, the individual who successfully copes generally does so because he or she uses both functions depending on the type of stressful situation.

Each coping function is present in the suffering of POWs. For the most part, problem-focused coping tended to result in less distress and PTSD because survivors were able to be proactive about solutions such as talking to others, positively reinterpreting past events, and actively planning how they would overcome distress (see Weinburg, 2011; Simoni & Ng, 2000). Emotion-focused strategies were more avoidant and disengaging.

POWs and PTSD

Prisoners of war and PTSD are often coupled together in the literature. Fairbank, Hansen, and Fitterling (1991) examined the differences between coping strategies employed by prisoners of war with PTSD, without PTSD, and noncombat veterans. They identified one aspect of cognitive coping that manifested itself in the form of appraisal, or the process of evaluating important facets of a stressful event through its threat potential, meaningfulness, predictability, and controllability. After they collected their data, they found that although both POW groups appraised the predictability of their WWII memories equally, the group with PTSD perceived their memories as being more uncontrollable. This supports the idea that perceived controllability is a "critical cognitive factor in human adaptation to extreme events" (p. 279). Likewise, they found that the POWs with PTSD used more coping behaviors and with more frequency than their counterparts. Some coping strategies they used were wishful thinking, self-blame, self-isolation, and seeking social support. Conversely, Fairbank et al. (1991) found that the POWs who were well adjusted, or who did not have PTSD, used the strategy of emphasizing the positive to assuage negative effects from their WWII memories. Emphasizing the positive can assist in one's capability to perceive traumatic events and memories as more controllable.

Another study on coping strategies focused on the central role humor played for POWs during captivity, as well as after they returned home. Henman (2001) found that humor was tremendously important to help them through the struggle. Indeed, they reported that several of the participants in the study would risk being tortured so

they could tell a joke to uplift the spirits of fellow prisoners. Even decades later, these POWs recalled the funny stories and jokes they shared fondly, even humorously referring to themselves and their former cellmates as "ex-cons." Henman (2001) saw humor not only as a positive emotion but also as means for resilience that allowed the soldiers to be unified.

The literature on coping contained some information on the relationship between religion and trauma. One study found that people who were devout in a faith ("intrinsically religious") were more positive in response to pending trauma compared to nonreligious people (Fischer, Greitemeyer, Kastenmüller, Jonas, & Frey, 2006). In short, intrinsically religious people exhibited more positive appraisals of traumatic situations (e.g., "it was God's will that this should happen") compared to negative appraisals (e.g., "how could God allow this to happen?"). The more intrinsically religious individuals also experienced less PTSD symptoms (Berzengi, Berzenji, Kadim, Mustafa, & Jobson, 2016; Fischer et al., 2006). Also notable was that the manner an individual followed the tenets of his or her religion previously was not as effective as what they did to practice these beliefs during the time of distress (Sterner & Jackson-Cherry, 2015).

People suffering from cancer or other terminal diseases also are in special need of coping with trauma. Weisler (2006), a cancer patient herself, disclosed that her most effective coping strategies were based upon Reality Therapy, a method for coping developed by William Glasser (Weisler, 2006). The goal of these cancer patients using Reality Therapy was to transform themselves from victim to hero by changing their ways of coping. Several of the conclusions from the study were as follows: "[S]ick patients have to control their lives and take responsibility for what is going to happen, and how to face their cancer" (p. 39). Likewise, they must "adopt a positive attitude and continue to lead a normal life while dealing with and/or recovering from a disease; to change the disease from a stressful situation to the more important project of life" and ultimately "to focus on life rather than death; to choose to contend with the challenges of life and the future; to set new goals that would help motivate and prolong life" (p. 39). Much as with self-esteem (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978), the most significant strategies in Weisler (2006) focused on maintaining a positive attitude despite severely trying circumstances.

Gotcher and Edwards (1990) conducted a similar study among cancer patients. Their research was conducted to determine how each individual diagnosed with cancer would cope with the situation and the realization that the probability of surviving was not ideal. To do so, the researchers chose to analyze the coping strategies through the afflicted's communications with others, both imagined and real. From the study, they determined that "fear reduction [among the patients] is associated with [the] amount of communication about one's illness" (p. 255). Further, communication satisfaction was achieved in the patients through "communicating about one's illness, receiving information about the disease, asking questions of the health care professionals, and using communication to deal with fears" (p. 263).

Narratives and Communication

Communication can help the individual throughout the difficult experience as well as after. Gilmore (2001) argued that the act of sharing one's personal narrative allows people to not only represent themselves as unique individuals with unique experiences, but as a sort of champion, or "one [who] may stand for many" (p. 19). This two-fold mission of an autobiography is therefore suited to explicate traumatic life experiences.

One important caveat to using autobiography as a means for telling the story of the self is its intertwining relationship with judgment. The experiential quality of trauma cannot be separated from its retelling; they are threaded together. Gilmore (2001) stated that, "In requiring testimony to take certain forms, judgment defines what cannot be said as much as what can, and, in establishing these forms as truthful, produces form as the grounds for experimentation" (p. 145). Ultimately, because judgment is required to author an autobiography (i.e., deciding on what memories and even what details from those memories to use), memoirs themselves become altered from reality. This alteration could, in turn, form coping mechanisms the POWs use to regulate both past and present trauma and frame how they reflect on their memories altogether. This is not to say that when individuals reorganize the traumatic material for the narrative that they are attempting to deceive the listener; rather, they may not yet capable of expressing "an as-yet-undefined injury" (Gilmore, 2001, p. 26).

Though inaccurate an autobiography may be, the very act of talking through traumatic experiences can be important to the survivor's healing process. In the case of trauma, there is a difference between surviving the event and being merely alive after it (Brison, 1999). Survivors of trauma may feel as if their old self is lost or even dead

after the experience, despite the fact they are still alive. Communicating the experience to others and making sense of it can help the suffering individual regain him- or herself. Thus, for a survivor to record these narratives can be tremendously therapeutic—assuming that the listener is empathetic and appreciates the story.

In light of the preceding research, the following research questions were proposed for the present study to explicate the POW memoirs:

RQ1: Which coping strategies are frequently mentioned in each of the three narratives?

RQ2: Why were the particular strategies significant or worth remembering to the former POWs?

RQ3: Did the former POWs tend to use emotion-focused coping strategies or problem-focused strategies?

Method

In order to answer these research questions, certain qualitative methods of analysis were necessary. The present study used grounded theory to interpret a thematic analysis of the memoirs of the three POWs. To effectively utilize grounded theory, Corbin and Strauss (2008) recommended that the researcher use sampling, coding, and the writing of memos in his or her analysis. The coding procedure employed in this study has resulted in an analysis of the utterances to discover common themes throughout the writings.

Regarding grounded theory as a means of research, Kulich, Berggren, and Hallberg (2003) explained that a valid theoretical model "has credibility and trustworthiness…if the identified concepts and categories emerge consistently and are illustrated and validated in the additional interviews" (p. 176). According to these criteria, the validity of each theme was indicated based upon the frequency of its occurrence. As a limitation to these particular criteria, only one "additional interview" is available: A public forum Ray Church presented in the Salt Lake City public library sixty years after returning home from captivity. The same themes he mentioned in his memoir were also reiterated in this forum (Church, 2006). Still, the writings analyzed for the present study are extremely rich with qualitative data that clearly illustrates the cognitive reasoning for the employment for each of the strategies. It was concluded that the intimate tone of these memoirs will provide ample evidence to answer the second research question.

Creswell (2007) argued that the intent of a grounded theory study is to "move beyond description and…generate or discover a theory" (p. 63). With that in mind, theories in this area should be grounded in data, or the collection of information that results from action, interactions, or the social processes of people. Grounded theory posits that situations or experiences should be its unit of analysis. There are two approaches to grounded theory: the systematic procedures of Strauss and Corbin and the constructivist approach of Charmaz (Creswell, 2007). The first approach seeks to develop a theory that explicates the process, action, or interaction of a topic. This entails that the researcher generally conduct 20-30 interviews to collect data.

With the second approach, grounded theory supports a social constructivist perspective, or a viewpoint that emphasizes the multiple realities, varying local domains, and the intricacies of thoughts, ideas, and actions. This approach accentuates the views, values, beliefs, and assumptions of individuals, rather than their exclusive actions. That being said, both approaches work to explain or create a theory based off of data collection, or an analysis of interviews, personal observations, documents, or audiovisual materials. The present study aims to use the social constructivist perspective in order to evince personal insights and beliefs from the pages of the memoirs.

The texts used for this study are the memoirs of three American former POWs. In this case, each was also a white, Christian male. Each POW autobiography is an account of his experiences from the beginning of the captivity to the end of the war when he was released from bondage. In each memoir, all of which have been published, utterances were considered significant only if they explicitly related to raising the morale of the POW or the morale of his fellow prisoners. This decision was made based upon the assumption that high morale is a manifestation of successful coping strategies (Wong & Wong, 2005). In addition to the morale qualifier, other themes emerged from the data if they were mentioned multiple times by each POW. In an effort to answer the second research question, other utterances derived from the analysis were selected to demonstrate a significant strategy to give additional insight into the cognitive processes of that particular prisoner of war.

Background of the POWs

The subjects of this study were, at the time of their respective captures, all young men at the healthiest phase of their lives thus far. Each was physically conditioned to the satisfaction of his branch of the military and each was a respected figure in his hometown. At the beginning of their captivities, each man had high expectations for his service and hoped to return home quickly (Jacobsen, 2004; Chesley, 1973; Church, 2002). For their health, possessions, and freedom to be taken away from them at this stage of their lives suggests the degree of the devastation each of them felt.

Larry Chesley was a young man from Idaho who was stationed in Thailand after he volunteered for service in the Air Force. When he was sent to Vietnam in early 1966, he anticipated returning to his wife and children in time for Christmas. However, while he was flying a mission over North Vietnam, his plane was shot down and he was transported to the notorious *Hoa Lo* or "Hanoi Hilton" for imprisonment. Ultimately, he was a prisoner of war from April of 1966 to February of 1973 (Chesley, 1973).

Ray H. Church was raised in Delta, Utah and volunteered to be a Marine shortly before World War II began. The day after the attacks on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Japanese invaded the island of Guam, where he was stationed. Church was taken as a prisoner of war and remained in captivity in Japan from December of 1941 to August of 1945 (Church, 2002).

Gene S. Jacobsen was a 19 year-old man from Idaho stationed in the Philippines as a member of the Army Air Corps. Within five months of beginning his service, World War II began in that theater with the attacks on Pearl Harbor. He was sent to endure the brutal Bataan death march, then was imprisoned first in the Philippines and then finally in Japan. He was ultimately a prisoner of war from April of 1942 to August of 1945. Incidentally, of the 207 prisoners who accompanied him through the death march, only 65 survived to return to the United States (Jacobsen, 2004).

Findings

The thematic analysis of the memoirs yielded nine noteworthy findings: Numbness, solidarity, faith, humor, familiarity as comfort, aggression, danger as entertainment, self-discipline, and mental and physical fitness. The following examples shed light upon each of the themes.

Numbness

Through Chesley's (1973) seven years of captivity, he felt he became numb to his environment:

> The year 1969 was sort of a nondescript year. Somehow, time just passed…the best part of all was that by the end of 1969 we began to feel a little more secure. We were apparently not going to be tortured any more. Now we just had to hang on. With God's help I'd done that in the tougher conditions of the nearly four previous years. With the same help I could hang on in the less difficult times ahead. (p. 33)

This same numbness Chesley exhibited became a defense mechanism for him against his environment. He chose to downplay some of his trials: for example, when one of his cellmates had severe diarrhea for "almost the entire time [they] were there," it became an extremely unpleasant experience for Chesley. However, he chose not to dwell on the circumstance more than he needed to. It was "just another one of those more minor problems we got used to" (p. 42).

Church also vaguely noticed the passage of time, but chose not to feel despair by it: "Time went on somehow, but each day there were fewer of us to greet it. We felt out of touch with the world as a whole; one day passed much as the next" (Church, 2002, p. 50). After some time had passed, the feeling of numbness escalated into a form of bravado, because Church had already experienced his worst expectations: "We who had survived Tanagawa hadn't much fear left. What was left to fear?" (p. 52).

In his respective camp, Jacobsen offered a similar assessment of his situation: "By this time hundreds of Americans had died and had been buried at O'Donnell. Prospects of our surviving as prisoners weren't too good, so there wasn't much to be happy about except the fact that we were still alive" (Jacobsen, 2004, p. 106).

Solidarity

Solidarity emerged repeatedly from the analysis of the data. The "brotherhood" among the captured men seemed to transcend many of the horrors they had experienced. Chesley (1973) stated that many of the prisoners were able to cope because:

> We tried to be considerate of one another, not to be down on each other, or criticize each other, or say cutting things. Naturally we slipped sometimes, but I believe this negative kind of reaction was kept to an absolute minimum. On the positive side, acts of service and kindness, even at risk of punishment, were commonplace. When men were sick, roommates would give them their clothing to help them get warmer and stronger. (p. 103)

Likewise, he shared an intense degree of unity with the others held captive:

> Morale is a matter of mind and heart more than of circumstances. As prisoners we were members of a unique brotherhood; we were united against our captors; and we were loyal to the best that was in us. This unity engaged the mind and the heart on a high plane and helped us to overcome the unpleasant surroundings and overlook each other's human failings. (p. 108)

Church (2002) also correlated unity with serving each other. He said that the service conducted by some of his fellow prisoners "earned the respect of hundreds of POWs who owed their lives" to these men (p. 51).

Singing together also brought a sense of unity. Church (2002) wrote that some of his most treasured memories of his imprisonment related to singing:

> We sang and talked to ease our loneliness. Major Spicer had a good voice and loved to sing. Of course, it was like a tonic to me and, I suppose the others, too…who never missed a session. We all needed the comfort and the true pleasure that comes from singing. Our quartets began to attract large groups. What a lift that singing was to our morale, whether we were listening or singing. (p. 33)

When all of the prisoners at Church's camp discovered that the U.S. had won the war, they immediately started singing until they were exhausted.

In the Philippines, Jacobsen (2004) treasured the feeling of unity so much that he dreaded the time that he would be separated from his friends:

> I did hate to see us separated even for the day because we had become so dependent upon each other for moral support. We talked with each other a great deal and made every effort to be optimistic, even in spite of our predicament. (p. 129)

Similarly, assemblies among the POWs "caused our morale to soar…During the middle of the afternoon word was passed quietly that there would be an assembly of POWs in the northern compound…Quickly but quietly the men assembled, then just as quickly two fellows spread out before us a large American flag. Underneath was a large printed sign: 'We'll be free in '43!'" (pp. 146-147).

Faith and Worship

Chesley (1973) effectively summarized one of the dominant themes when he quoted the adage "There are no atheists in foxholes" (p. 81). Before meals and on Sundays, the prisoners would send a secret signal around the prison and then commence to recite the 23rd Psalm, offer a prayer, and then pledge allegiance to the flag. Speaking of these weekly Sunday services from which each man participated in his respective cell, Chesley explained:

> To others, each of us might have seemed alone, but to us the separating walls were insignificant for those few minutes on Sunday. We were together in spirit…There's nothing like prisoner-of-war life in a

> communist country to emphasize the importance of religion and patriotism in one's life, and we made love of God and our country the paramount theme and an anchor to our souls throughout those years. (p. 21)

Likewise, "our daily prayers and our scanty religious and patriotic services, conducted privately but simultaneously each Sunday, were strong sustainers of morale" (pp. 98-99).

Even as Chesley was falling to the earth from his burning plane, he felt of the presence of divinity in his life:

> I sincerely believed I would return home in safety if I did my best to live right. There was comfort in this thought as I floated to earth…I had tried to keep close to the Lord when I *wasn't* in trouble. I felt that he would help me now that I *was*." (Chesley, 1973, p. 6, original emphasis)

This same belief helped sustain Chesley throughout the rest of his internment.

Church (2002) claimed that his survival was due to more than simply luck:

> I lived because I was blessed. First of all, I was the right age. Had I been thirty years older, I wouldn't have made it, and I was in fairly good shape when the war started. Second, I think I had a desire to make it. (p. 45)

Church's favorable physical condition and age were due, in part, to the belief that a higher power had provided him with it.

As Jacobsen continued to survive all of the appalling circumstances, he began to wonder how he was doing it: "I consoled myself with the feeling that the Mormons must be praying for their members because, in my case at least, someone was looking after me reasonably well under the circumstances" (Jacobsen, 2004, p. 165).

It is noteworthy that the prisoners of war mentioned their faith so frequently to comfort them; prayer and devotion seemed to dominate their thoughts.

Humor

Each POW claimed that humor was vital to his survival. One time, Chesley's (1973) cellmates went out to a pit to empty their waste buckets. They were so excited to find some hidden notes from the other prisoners that they started to return with the buckets full until they realized they had forgotten to empty them. When the others saw this through the peepholes they had made, his fellow prisoners "were convulsed in uncontrollable laughter" (p. 43). Chesley admitted that "one of the most significant things that helped us hang on over there was a sense of humor, being able to laugh at each other and ourselves…We had some riotous times laughing at some of the silly little things that happened. I think I may have laughed harder in prison than I have ever laughed at anything in my life" (p. 78).

In Japan, Church (2002) recalled that one of the prisoners was always so smug and upset that they ironically nicknamed him "Happy" (p. 48). He summed up this strategy as such: "To be able to joke, bet, and laugh is very special when one is surrounded by the enemy" (p. 62). Continuing, Church said: "We men would tease and kid each other, to take our minds off our dreary life" (p. 61). As an example, one time he and another cellmate nailed a fellow cellmate's shoes to the floor of the room. When the cellmate tried to pick them up, "he thought his strength had at last failed him. [As they watched, they] nearly choked holding back the laughs" (p. 61). Stunts like these were vitally important for the prisoners.

The humor helped the prisoners overcome the fear of their surroundings. In the Philippines, Jacobsen (2004) and his cellmates learned of their captors' humorous nicknames: "Donald Duck," "Big Speedo," "Little Speedo," "Mortimer Snerd," and "Smiley" (p. 157). As his camp was debating about which slogan to use for 1944, they decided to use "Mother's Door in '44" since their previous slogan "Free in '43" had not come to fruition. Jokingly, they decided the other option "Frisco whore in '44" did not stimulate quite as much enthusiasm as the latter (p. 163). Finding the humor in the situation was essential to providing morale to the men.

Familiarity as Comfort

When Chesley arrived in Vietnam for his internment, he discovered that the American prisoners had nicknamed the main prison compound the Hanoi Hilton. There were camps called "Heartbreak Hotel" and "Little Vegas," with the latter's rooms dubbed Las Vegas casino names like Desert Inn, Stardust, Golden Nugget, The Mint, and The Thunderbird (Chesley, 1973, p. 16). The prisoners would frequently talk about what they loved and missed about home: "We would describe in mouthwatering detail different types of dishes our wives made that we liked so much" (p. 43). He told the others that if he could have any food in the world to eat right then, it would be a hamburger and a milkshake, the most American food he could think of.

Jacobsen also spoke longingly with his fellow POWs in the Philippines: "The talk at the spare-time bull sessions always focused on either food or home, but mostly on food. The guys would tell of meals they had had at home, or were going to have, until all mouths watered" (Jacobsen, 2004, p. 159).

In the barracks in Japan on one of his first nights there, Church (2002) found a small degree of comfort in familiarity: "the nauseating smell of old horse manure reminded me of the barn and corral at home. It didn't take much to make me think of home. It's funny how dear things become when you're faced with the prospect of never seeing them again!" (p. 32). Something as mundane as the smell of manure provided Church with the comfort he needed.

Aggression

Many of the prisoners not only suffered from the adverse conditions of prison life, they suffered from hatred for the enemy. This hatred was largely motivating; on some occasions, however, it escalated into violence. One day when he was feeling "more dead than alive," Chesley could not move because of the intensity of his physical agony. His cellmate, Jim Ray, started yelling for the guard. When the guard arrived, he commenced to beat Chesley with his shoe until Ray "picked the guard up, and threw him out of the room." The guard threatened Ray, and Ray shouted back "If you hit me with that I'm going to take it away from you and beat the hell out of you" (Chesley, 1973, p. 27).

Violent responses spread across boundaries and wars as well. In particular, their anger was aimed more at corrupt or traitorous American officers than the Japanese captors. Church had a superior officer, a man named McLain who was American, and yet worked only to please the Japanese captors. At one point, Church was so infuriated by McLain's traitorous position that he went into McLain's office, jumped over his desk and beat him about the head in a severe manner. Once Church took his punishment for the carnage and returned to the camp, "[e]very man in camp welcomed me with a clap on the back and glowing admiration. I was the camp hero" (Church, 2002, pp. 38-39).

In Jacobsen's camp, there was also an American officer who catered to the Japanese by guarding his own men. This action evoked much anger among his fellow POWs. Jacobsen's wrath was also kindled by fellow prisoners who did not respect each other. When one of the prisoners stole Jacobsen's leather shoes, he felt an intense feeling of disdain for him. When Jacobsen (2004) at last encountered this same man months later at another barracks, he "almost beat him to death" and then forced the man to wear a sign around his neck for ten days afterward admitting to his thefts and admonishing all around him that he was not to be trusted (p. 169). Though their aggression and sometime violence were never specifically correlated with raising morale, they did offer a clear example of a problem-focused coping strategy for each of the POWs.

Danger

POWs were made stronger, physically and mentally, by attempting to entertain themselves through the element of danger. For example, the prisoners attempted to accomplish goals, like communication, without the guards discovering them. At Chesley's camp, the guards did not want the POWs to be able to see each other, but the men would poke holes in the tar-paper the guards would hang up to block off seeing the others. Chesley (1973) explained the entertainment of the thrilling task:

> Stimulated by the enemy's elaborate plans to the contrary, we made it a habit of watching each other going to and from the bath area, getting food, or pulling weeds in the sun on the rare occasion when we had the

> privilege. *We had a lot of fun doing this* and got a lot of information which we duly passed around from room to room. (p. 37, emphasis added)

Secret communication also provided this element of danger in the lives of the POWs. In his first cell, Chesley heard a prisoner singing the tune of "Besame Mucho" from the next cell, asking questions and giving instructions while singing the melody. Each time, Chesley would cough as a coded answer to the other prisoner's questions. Prisoners would also sing in order to communicate: "Some prisoners had a personal song—'The Yellow Rose of Texas' for example. When you heard this being whistled or hummed or sung, you knew that So-and-So was out washing his clothes, or whatever else he was doing. This told you, for instance, that he was still around, still in his particular camp" (p. 35). Chesley also offered perhaps the most important reason for this communication: "[The system of secret communication] occupied our time, kept us informed, stimulated a proper resistance to our captors, and encouraged us with the implicit reminder that each of us was part of a larger, concerned unit" (p. 98).

In order to survive, Church (2002) and many of the other prisoners in his camp used a tactic called "strafing." Strafing was actually a term the POWs used originally to describe a low-flying airplane that destroyed the cities in its path. Likewise, the POWs in Church's camp adopted the practice, but used the term instead to describe the practice of stealing incoming food supplies off the dock. The rations were scarce in Church's camp and were not enough to sustain life for more than several months. Yet the men in the camp were healthier and better nourished than at any other camp Church had seen. Church (2002) justified the practice as more than a simple thrill:

> This was war, and it was our duty to escape and foil the plans of the enemy in any way we could. Maybe this was a way to justify our conscience, but "strafing" was perfect in describing the way boxes looked after hungry POWs got through hitting them…we quickly found that the reason for the better condition of the Umeda veterans was their chance to supplement their diet by strafing from the cars along the tracks and at the docks. The men who couldn't strafe starved to death on the rations. At first there were bunglings in learning to strafe, and then beatings for getting caught, but amazingly soon the new men became excellent strafers. When their lives literally depended on their success at strafing, their cleverness became a wonder even to themselves sometimes. The strafing served as a form of entertainment to relate the various narrow escapes to the others, helping to boost the prisoner's morale in their cleverness over the captors. (p. 54)

Jacobsen (2004) had a similar experience as his group languished in the Bataan death march: "The only times we had anything to eat or drink were when we would steal a stalk of sugarcane from an adjacent field or a cup of water from one of the many flowing wells along the road we were traveling" (p. 86). As his captivity continued, he learned the utility of stealing not only to nourish themselves, but to learn the skill as a challenge: "We learned to become skilled thieves and stole from the Japanese every time the opportunity presented itself. Many times we risked getting a severe beating by smuggling items into camp to other men" (p. 148). In many cases, this acquired skill of thievery was the very thing that kept the prisoner alive.

Self-Discipline

Though the captors tried to break the men's spirits, they could not because of "the strong U.S. military discipline [the POWs] managed to maintain and the self-discipline which this encouraged" (Chesley, 1973, p. 51). Chesley gave several examples of the discipline he had learned and how it impacted his stay in Vietnam: "One thing that improved morale in the long-term when we went into the large room was the implementation of U.S. military discipline in ways previously impossible" (p. 100). His military experience also provided a much needed relief to the chaos of war: "When we moved into the large room in November 1970, we organized immediately in the military sense" (p. 101).

Church (2002) felt his personal level of self-discipline awarded him many opportunities he would have otherwise missed. At one point, the captors told the camp that "ten lucky men would have their names drawn to broadcast over short wave to their families in America" (p. 34). When Church learned that his name was not drawn, he offered a pack of cigarettes he had saved for such a situation to one of the fellow prisoners who had been chosen. The other prisoner could not pass up the opportunity for the cigarettes, offered Church his spot in return. Because

"cigarettes didn't control [him]," concluded Church, he was able to let his family know that he was still alive (p. 34). He was also able to trade cigarettes again afterwards to be able to send a letter home to the States.

Likewise, Jacobsen (2004) used cigarettes for bartering, and was able to do so because he had controlled himself to not be dependent on the tobacco. Jacobsen described one of his coping strategies in a remarkably similar fashion: "It was during this period, more than ever before in my life, that personal discipline was required" (p. 87).

Mental and Physical Fitness

Chesley was fortunate enough to have "classes" with his cellmates in which they would memorize poems, work on their singing, and would have foreign language lessons from those in the camp who spoke another language. As a result, Chesley said he learned twenty poems as a prisoner of war. For Jacobsen (2004), relief came in the form of speaking about poems with his lieutenant: "I spent hours talking with him and learning many poems that he would write down for me. I must have learned dozens, some of which I still remember" (p. 164). The prisoners all chose to participate in these classes because they recognized the importance of maintaining sharp minds. As Chesley described: "We loved each other in the Christian sense, we helped each other, we taught each other, and we tried to keep ourselves busy, especially our minds" (Chesley, 1973, p. 29).

Church (2002) said many times he was grateful he was not an officer, because they were not permitted to work in the camps. He believed that the officers were the ones who suffered the most: "Work was my salvation; it kept me too busy to think. Had I been an officer, I would not have been permitted to work. We were luckier to have something to do to relieve the monotony with physical activity and mental alertness in working" (p. 54).

Jacobsen (2004), in his respective environment, confirmed the same feeling:

> After about six weeks I was sent back to the work side of camp and was happy to go. First, I was happy that I was well enough to go, and second, on that side of the camp we were forced to work, and keeping busy helped to make the time pass much faster. There the morale of the men was much better, also. (p. 165)

Likewise, personal hygiene was just as important to the prisoners as keeping mentally and physically fit. For example, when Chesley (1973) mentioned the times he was "allowed" to bathe or to shave, he spoke of it like a privilege. One time as a reward, the Vietnamese allowed the men lye soap more frequently and to shave twice a week. Even when the POWs had to use "surface sewage water" to bathe, it was "only just better than not bathing at all" (p. 41).

Once, Church's (2002) cellmate said: "Church, this filth kills more of us than any other thing!" (p. 47). Hygiene was so important to the prisoners, that one of them had smuggled in an old razor blade, and more than forty POWs used it for more than a year—literally wearing it out. By staying busy, working hard, and maintaining their hygiene the best they could, they attempted to control their circumstances by making them appear more like the normalcy of home.

Discussion

The themes that most frequently emerged in the narratives of the POWs were numbness, solidarity, faith, humor, familiarity as comfort, aggression, danger, self-discipline, and mental and physical fitness. Each of these common themes were clustered around utterances related to raising morale for the prisoners and the camp. Though each theme can be generally categorized under the emotion-focused or problem-focused function, some of the strategies—familiarity as comfort, aggression, danger, self-discipline, and mental/physical fitness—are unique to the literature.

The strategies that received the most mention by each POW were solidarity, faith, and humor. Returning to Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) description of the structure of coping, the analysis revealed the POW narratives exhibited a combination of each of the three resources, social and psychological resources, as well as specific coping responses. The interpersonal communication exhibited between the POWs and their cellmates drew upon social resources that ultimately built their solidarity.

The faith exhibited by the POWs had a multifaceted coping function, using both the emotion-focused and problem-focused functions. The faith strategy was emotion-focused when it was psychological, in the cases when the individual determined he could not modify his situation, like when Chesley fell to the earth after being shot down from his airplane. In each of these cases, the POWs silently resigned their fate to a higher power, deriving a measure of peace of mind from the realization. However, each also participated in faith as a problem-focused coping strategy. This was apparent when they would actively worship with other prisoners of faith. When they would minister to each other through service, reciting scripture, or singing sacred hymns, they enacted behavioral responses to their situation by actively striving to change morale. Each approach to the situation appears to have been dictated depending on which individual was involved; emotion-focused coping seemed to follow an internal, psychological process of self-assessment, usually in the form of intrapersonal communication. Faith as a strategy of problem-focused coping usually appeared when it involved associating with their fellow prisoners. In these cases, this variety of coping strategy was largely related to interpersonal communication. These findings are noteworthy regarding the scholarly conversation on the topic because they suggest that faith can function as an emotion-focused strategy or a problem-focused strategy, at least in this particular case study. By envisioning the role of communication as a way to bridge both types of coping strategies, the present study reconciles conflicting literature, which argues that religion is either problem-focused (Simoni & Ng, 2000) or emotion-focused (Weinberg, 2011).

Humor also played a major role in the survival of Jacobsen, Church, and Chesley. In this case, humor was mostly behavioral and problem-focused. In each of their utterances regarding humor, the men were interacting with at least one of their peers, whether it was telling jokes or playing pranks. By so doing, they were able to directly impact the morale of the camps by lifting their spirits and exerting some level of control over their devastating circumstances. Their use of humor supports Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) assertion that the meaning of a threatening situation can be changed:

> The same experience may be highly threatening to some people and innocuous to others, depending on how they perceptually and cognitively appraise the experience…One's ability to ignore selectively is helped to trivializing the importance of that which is noxious and magnifying the importance of that which is gratifying. (pp. 6-7)

These coping strategies were not conditional upon the physical environment. Other strategies such as exercising the body, cleanliness, or danger as entertainment, for example, could be taken away by the captors, thus eliminating those strategies for the POW. Faith, solidarity, and humor, being dependent upon the sufferer's attitude, however, can exist in the most destitute of circumstances because each can "perceptually and cognitively [re]appraise the experience" (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, p. 6). According to the qualitative comments of the POWs, these particular strategies resonated with them because the strategies counterbalanced the negative effects of the horrors and death that had become commonplace in their everyday lives.

There were more themes from the analysis that demonstrated Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) varieties of coping. The emotion-focused coping strategies included numbness, faith, solidarity, and familiarity. These strategies were attempts not at modifying the situation, but at changing the meaning of the experience. These also exhibited the same traits as one of the most common coping strategies, the positive comparisons, which focused on the positive elements of the situation.

The problem-focused coping strategies included humor, aggression, danger, self-discipline, and mental/physical fitness. These attempted to improve the situation by modifying it (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Examining the list of strategies situated in each category reveals more information about POW coping. The men used both emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies and, in some cases, both categories, depending upon the circumstance.

The structure of the memoirs also offers additional insights into the POWs' cognitive processes. In their research on the coping of child abuse survivors, Klein and Janoff-Bulman (1996) found that evidence of maladaptive coping was often demonstrated through the narrative focus of their trauma histories: other people tended to be the focus of these abuse narratives, especially the abusers. In the POW histories, on the other hand, each respective author is clearly the protagonist of the narrative with all other individuals being peripheral. The fellow prisoners

were mentioned much more frequently than the captors, and usually in the context of how they served or helped each other. Further, one of Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) coping resources, self-denigration, appeared to be missing. When describing himself, the tenor of the utterance was mostly positive, relating much more closely to the psychological resources of self-esteem and mastery. This is not to say that self-denigration did not exist in the psyches of the POWs, but, if it did, they chose to minimize or not disclose it in their narratives. Understood in the context of literature on coping and trauma narratives, then, it can reasonably be stated here that the narratives of Jacobsen, Church, and Chesley do not clearly demonstrate maladaptive responses to the stress of captivity.

Conclusion

After returning home, each POW was lauded as a hero for his determination and courage. Church, for example, received letters of commendation from two U.S. Presidents, as well as military and ecclesiastical leaders (Church, 2002). Each POW's successful efforts at coping with a difficult situation certainly played a part in his ultimate survival.

Part of the reason that these men were publicly lauded as heroes was because of their courage in handling their situations and surviving them. From examining their memoirs, it became apparent that each prisoner intuitively used coping strategies in effective ways. They used emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies with the intent to control their situation when possible or to endure it with patience when it could not be controlled. They each demonstrated a keen use of the psychological resources at their disposal, in particular *self-esteem* in an attempt to maintain a positive attitude and *mastery* to cognitively reframe each situation as being under control as opposed to being "fatalistically ruled" by circumstance (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

The present study focused only on the coping strategies that directly and positively impacted the morale of the prisoner and his camp. As such, it did not examine other psychological dimensions of coping such as self-denigration or the acquisition of a negative attitude. It also did not explore other less-affirming coping mechanisms such as those that *increase* the emotional distress of the sufferer, believing that one deserves to feel worse before one can feel better (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, despite the relatively narrow purview of the present study, the analysis reveals that it is not unprecedented that traumatic narratives can be rewritten by using all of the coping tools at one's disposal, and, in particular, gravitating toward self-esteem and mastery.

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