

# Psychodrama of the Survivorship

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Psychodramatic meta-systemic conceptualization offers a holistic view of complex life phenomena such as trauma and survivorship, which have been otherwise traditionally compartmentalized by different disciplines. The author argues that collective survival experience is preserved, communicated, and passed down through generations in the form of familial or cultural messages containing both empirical knowledge and magical thinking components. Indiscriminative following of survival messages outside of its original historical context may, contrary to initial intent, contribute to transgenerational vulnerabilities. Cultural trauma, such as a totalitarian regime, turns the “survivorship wisdom” into a cultural artifact reflected in collective psyche as art and literature. Superstition is also a type of ancient survival messages with prevalent magical thinking. A survival genogram allows for deconstructing messages, processing the “wisdom of the elderly,” and negotiating its informed adoption by unveiling chronological layers of the message’s meaning.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Understanding Survivorship

It has long been known that survival plays an important role in trauma victims’ experiences, who often organize their lives around repetitive patterns of reliving and warding off traumatic memories, reminders, and affects (Moroz, 2005). Survivorship, as it is seen today, is the epitome of endurance, resourcefulness, motivation, and strength in overcoming adversity. The ecological perspective in community psychology, which explores diverse sources and expressions of strength among trauma survivors, introduced survivorship as the cornerstone of resilience in the aftermath of trauma (Harvey, 2007). This paradigm shift is reflected in clinical work, where the term “survivor” was broadly adopted in

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recognition of a person's strength in coping with hardship. The psychological recovery framework further embraced this notion of survivorship but also highlighted a need in conceptualization and operational definition: What does the survival actually mean in psychological terms, and how can it be used in therapeutic practice?

A closer look at survivorship suggests a complex and multidimensional reality behind this seemingly straightforward notion, as can be demonstrated in examples of common derivatives such as *survivor's guilt* and *survival mode*. Survivor's guilt was first recognized during the 1960s as part of *survivor's syndrome* (also called *concentration camp survivor's syndrome*), following the trauma of the Holocaust (Krell & Eitinger, 1985). This syndrome is characterized by a set of symptoms including anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, sleep disturbance or nightmares, physical complaints, and emotional lability with loss of drive. Later, similar symptoms were identified in survivors of extreme conditions, including combat, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, air crashes or even job layoffs, where sufferers sometimes blame themselves for the death and suffering of others, or experience existential guilt for being alive and well while others are not.

*Survival mode*, on the contrary, refers to the mode of functioning where an individual strives to accomplish immediate survivor tasks, mostly fight-or-flight or freeze response. This perfectly functional mode greatly increases chances of survival when in imminent danger. However, when the immediate survival task is no longer relevant, it may become maladaptive and interfere with long-term post-trauma adjustment. For example, war veterans who continue relying on the perceptions, communication, and behavioral patterns that kept them safe during wartime may see disastrous consequences when returned to family life. The next section offers a more in-depth look at the theories of survivorship.

### Theories of Survivorship

The complex reality of human survivorship was initially charted by the evolutionary anthropologists such as K. Hill (1993) in his *life history theory*. Hill treated life history and evolution as an optimization problem. Particular ecological factors (e.g., predators, nutrition) that affect an organism's probability of survival and reproduction can be imagined as various investments in growth, reproduction, and survivorship. The life history theory focuses on biological survival but also has important implications for psychology, as seen in the supplementing *parental investment theory* (Hamilton, 1964), which views parental investment as a crucial factor ensuring the offspring's survival. According to this theory, the survival of the genus has an evolutionary imperative that supersedes individual survival. Wildschut and Insko (2006, p. 2) discussed a *paradox of individual and group mortality* that was pointed out by theologians Barth (1960) and Niebuhr (1941), who observed during World War I the contradicting societal and religious expectations from the individual: simultaneous preaching the importance of any human life and loyal devotion to the pursuit of one group interest at the expense of other groups. This paradox

highlights the innate conflict between the interests of the individual and the interests of the group that can outweigh the value of an individual's life. Examples include heroes or martyrs, where one sacrifices one's own life for the survival of the whole group. In addition, some group members (for instance, women) appear to bear disproportionate cost for preserving their group's identity, as Shachar (1999) described in "The Paradox of Multicultural Vulnerability" (1999, pp. 87–112).

While these theories unveil only a small part of the complex interplay of multidimensional components contributing to the meaning of survival, they opened up the door to the questions about how the survival experience is acquired, preserved, shared, and passed down.

### **Survivorship in Family**

The initial focus of this paper was survivorship in the aftermath of individual trauma, but after initial research, the author began pondering whether individual survivorship exists at all. In the family, any individual exposure to violence, suicide, or sexual trauma becomes a family affair and alters the dynamics of the whole family system for generations to come. Similarly, family exposure to an external event, such as famine, war, or a refugee experience affects individual family members whether they were personally traumatized or not.

To better understand the impact of trauma on family, the author reviewed the DSM-IV PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) symptoms (American Psychological Association, pp. 424–439) through the lenses of family functioning: According to the diagnostic description, a person with PTSD may present as depressed, anxious, hypervigilant, unable to relax, perseverative about trauma, frequently dissociative, prone to uncontrollable outbursts of anger, having difficulties with concentration, memory, and sleep, potentially a problem drinker, withdrawn, avoiding important family activities, and unable to experience loving feelings. Oleszczuk (2012) described the extremely high rate of divorce in the aftermath of trauma that became a reason for prioritizing familial support in modern day trauma care models for veterans.

As traumatic exposure carries a profound effect on the whole family as much as on the individual psyche, both the individual and the family understandably desire to protect progenies from a similar pain and fate and to increase their chances to survive. This aspect shapes the transgenerational aspect of survivorship, that is, when a female victim of abuse teaches her daughter never to trust men.

### **Survivorship as Cultural Phenomenon**

There is also collective trauma, when individual trauma becomes part of large group experience after a community is exposed to extreme famine, poverty, violence, genocide, or civil war. It is important to note that the psychological impact on the community is not always proportional to the number of victims; rather, it is a function of a combination of factors, where the identification with victim plays an important role.

Well-known examples of collective traumata inflicted by single victim were the assassination of John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963, and John's Lennon death on December 8, 1980. The death of Princess Diana in August 1997 also had a remarkably profound and deeply personal impact on millions of people who experienced it as a personal loss: Many were acutely grieving and having difficulties with daily functioning, as though they lost a very close friend. The media headlines of that time were exclusively focused on Princess Diana's death. It is worth noting that during the same time, according to Black, Morris, and Bryce (2003, para. 1), more than 10 million children were dying each year—most from preventable causes and almost all in poor countries—who went invisible both for the public and in the media.

When a large group (community or society) collectively goes through a traumatic experience—a totalitarian regime, genocide, civil war, or mass famine—the survival knowledge becomes engraved in the culture through folklore, mythos, heroic epics, fairytales, or proverbs, and turns into what we call “the wisdom of elders.” In Russia under Stalin, there was a widely circulated set of survival recommendations developed by and for labor camp prisoners (Shalamov, 1955, para. 5): *Don't trust*, *Don't fear*, and *Don't ask*. Later, these were popularized and became folklore, a cultural artifact, incorporated in multiple popular songs and literature: The long list of related art pieces can be found on the Russian version of Wikipedia (n.d.).

These recommendations were initially developed with the intent to share wisdom on how to survive under the totalitarian regime. Interestingly enough, the author encountered people from very different countries who recognized these messages in their own culture. It is a possibility that these basic messages are not culturally bound but rather specific to cultures with history of social trauma, suggesting their universality and cross-cultural value. Here is the list of those messages with the explanations:

*Don't trust!* Trusting is not safe.

*Don't hope!* Hopeful consideration of the future in a situation where one has no control results in painful disappointment and traps the person in unrealistic fantasies instead of focusing on immediate survival.

*Don't show your fear!* Showing fear exposes vulnerabilities.

*Don't ask for help!* Reaching out for help and admitting need signals weakness. In addition, any help may have to be returned on the helper's terms, for an unknown, non-negotiable price.

This dilemma is archetypically reflected in multiple ancient scripts and modern fables analogous to the story of Faust: The Devil fulfills a person's immediate plea at the disproportional cost of giving up their soul or the life of a loved one.

Other common messages are:

*Be nice to everybody!* There is no way to predict when one will have to rely or depend on others in times of hardship.

*Don't throw away food!* You may need this food in the future to survive. This message is very common in cultures with comparatively recent histories of food shortages, such as the Irish Potato Famine (a period of mass starvation, disease, and emigration between 1845 and 1852), Golodomor (mass starvation) in Ukraine in 1930s, Leningrad blockade during World War II, and others.

Morphologically, the survival messages vary; some seem more practical and have transparent rationale (i.e., *drink only boiled water!*), while the reasons for other messages appear vague, such as the taboo against disrespecting bread depicted in Andersen's 1859 fairytale, *The Girl Who Trod on the Loaf*. The author further suggests that it is possible that in the context of the time, these messages made perfect sense. As time passed and the context changed, they detached from their original source, lost their initial meaning, and instead acquired features of magical thinking—canonized as superstitions or “wisdom of elders,” implying that our ancestors possessed some kind of sacral knowledge or wisdom that they shared with us through messages. The next section will offer more in-depth analysis of the historically distant messages.

### **SURVIVAL MESSAGE: ARIADNE'S THREAD OF TRAUMA**

The author argues that where a family or community survived a trauma, this experience is organized in the form of messages (compact prescriptions for survival) and passed down as family or cultural wisdom, cultural artifacts, or superstitions where the main function of these survival messages is to provide progeny with instructions on how to avoid similar traumata and hardships of the predecessors. In this way, survival wisdom is transmitted through multiple generations and becomes part of cultural psychological heritage. Sometimes, the survival message remains the only indicator of long-forgotten trauma, and exploration of these messages opens the door for the protagonist for discovering, connecting with, and integrating the ancestral psychological and cultural legacy. Pinpointing the essential factors that assured survival in the past has subjective importance because it cognitively organizes the experience creating a sense of predictability. As helpful as that can be, this process is confounded by attribution and survivorship biases described by Elton, Gruber, and Blake (1996) when the causes of success and failures are misidentified or misattributed. Additionally, this “carved in stone” wisdom often becomes useless or even maladaptive in different context. The author observed that the indiscriminate adoption of survival messages, contrary to what it was initially intended, heighten vulnerabilities: A woman who grew up following her mother's warning not to trust men may have difficulties establishing trustworthy relationships within the family, as this message becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy only validating the accuracy of initial prescription in a similar way to how any superstition carries fundamentally unverifiable ad hoc potential.

As shown earlier, the main function of the survival message is to provide progeny with instructions on how to avoid and survive traumata but also to guide and support them through challenging times, as they often offer strategies for strengths, resiliencies, supports, as well as suggestions for coping and overcoming

that can be helpful in determining the course of psychological recovery. In addition, survival messages sometimes contain cognitive templates for assessing danger, meaning attribution, moral reference points, and encouragements. These inspirational messages are frequently attributed to famous people. There are multiple collections of such “inspirational” quotes in books or on the Internet; for example, “The darkest hour is just before the dawn.” According to The Phrase Finder (n.d., para. 1–2), the initial source of this proverb is not known. However, there is a saying among Irish peasantry to inspire hope under adverse circumstances: “Remember,” they say, “that the darkest hour of all is the hour before day.”

### Five Components of Survival Messages

The author identifies five main components of a deconstructed survival message:

1. *Intent*. “This message is to keep you safe and out of trouble.”
2. *Prescription*. “To stay safe, you must do/avoid doing . . . .”
3. *Magical thinking*. The belief that this message is true by virtue of ancestral pedigree. It also presumes the existence of hidden knowledge and wisdom to which we no longer have access. When a message’s meaning appears vague (which may be an indication of a more ancient origin), it functions as what we know as *superstition*. The author believes that the magical thinking component of said messages serves as contributor, making them ritualistically powerful and not readily accessible for cognitive processing or relevant adjustments. An example of one widespread cross-cultural superstition and, possibly, an ancient message is *don’t break a mirror or you will have seven years of bad luck!* In the author’s personal experience, even the slightest probability of seven years’ worth of adverse occurrences deters even nonbelievers from testing the practical predicting validity of this superstition.
4. *“All-or-nothing.”* The magical thinking component makes the message inflexible. The message has to be adopted “as a whole” and followed literally; it doesn’t allow any exceptions or partial adoption.
5. *The consequences for disobedience* (“do this, or else . . . !”). This is implicitly or explicitly included in some messages, especially in superstitions, as is shown in the “broken mirrors” superstition.

As established earlier, some survival messages outlive their timeframe of reference and remain unchanged in changing situation. Then, the situation incongruent inflexible following of their recommendations in a different context may increase vulnerabilities instead. An example could be a person who was taught not to disclose their problems to the outsider will understandably choose not to reach out to available supports even when this help is desperately needed. The survival messages have one additional quality: The messages from different survival scripts can merge together, and this may even further increase the risk for victimization by creating double bind, a psychological predicament in which a person receives conflicting instructions. For instance, two common but contradicting messages for children say that *They must obey adults* and *They shall*

*not trust strangers*. A child who adopts both these messages listens to grown-up abusers from within their social atom while not trusting strangers who may be able to help them.

### **Psychodramatic Work with Survival Messages: Survival Genogram**

Cherepanov (2013) described that during Chernobyl radionuclear disaster, the cultural heritage shaped individual's identity and became a resource for survivorship by creating a sense of predictability and control over one's own life and future. In clinical work, the author encountered various reasons a person feels compelled to explore transgenerational and cultural contributors to the present situation: observing maladaptive behavioral patterns that seem irrational, dealing with life challenges and hardship, negotiating the future, or desire to understand the driving forces behind decision making processes.

According to Blatner (2000), the method of genogram has been widely used in psychodrama as an opportunity to analyze the transgenerational experience (p. 197). It allows one to identify the problematic messages, place them in a broad historical and cultural family context and, using surplus (simulated) reality, safely challenge them by exploring their origin, impact, and consequences.

The author demonstrates that the genogram can also be effective in working with survival experience: Tracing the survival message back to its traumatic origin brings the original meaning to a conscious level, which clears the way for its cognitive unfolding, restructuring, assessing its relevance to present day issues, and introducing the choice whether to keep, modify, or reject it. The cognitive and emotional processing of the survival message removes its ritualistic power and breaks the perpetuation of vulnerabilities when seeking safety, in fact, increases potential for victimization. Cueing the survival message to the original situation allows the separation of its intent, meaning, and cognitive-behavioral component from magical thinking and allows for the protagonist to negotiate this message instead of indiscriminately adopting it at face value.

Psychodramatic genograms of traumata also address their transgenerational relevance to the person's present day life. In addition to exploration of past collective and cultural traumatic experiences, the survival genogram helps to focus on the transgenerational aspects of strength and survival strategies, the important resource in overcoming present day and future challenges. In seemingly hopeless situations, such as the Chernobyl disaster, the historically significant collective experience of survival during World War II served a crucial source of empowerment and resilience (Cherepanov, 2011, pp. 3–4; Pearson & Cherepanov, 2012, pp. 413–424). The genogram of survivorship adds a unique perspective in reconstructing the trauma history from the opposite direction—by following the experience of overcoming: The Ariadne thread of survival messages leads the protagonist back in time to explore the historical trauma and the survival lesson that is consistent with origin of the message.

To work with survival messages, the author proposed and had opportunity to test the model of the *survival genogram*, a modification of genogram allowing work on the survivorship and historic experience of coping and overcoming instead of focusing solely on trauma and its negative impact. Like any other historic psychodrama, the psychodrama of survivorship begins and ends in the present. In between, there is a mental journey into the protagonist's personal, familial, and cultural past, and the imaginary future, where the most important part in historic revelations is the relevance of the messages to the present time. Just like in nesting dolls, the meaning of newer messages is more apparent and is easier to access, while the true meaning of older messages may be hidden. The step-by-step outside-in unsealing of historical layers of meanings, beginning with recent ones—prior to approaching deeply seeded cross-generational and culturally embedded messages—is similar to opening the nesting dolls (*matreshkas*). The suggested protocol offers flexibility in terms of how far in the past the protagonist is willing or ready to go at one time. The nesting doll approach allows for complete sessions at any level of disclosure, as the *matreshka* remains a complete and fully functional doll, despite how many layers are opened.

## EXAMPLE OF A PSYCHODRAMA SESSION

### Warm-Up

During the warm-up, the survival experience is brought to a group's focus. This theme can come up spontaneously, brought up by a group member, or be introduced by the director who makes this decision based on group dynamic. The director then is warming the group to the issue by asking a question such as, "Can you recall a time when you experienced a difficult situation that made you feeling hopeless, helpless, or like giving up?"

### Action Part: "The Nesting Dolls" Approach

**Mapping.** The protagonist maps the current problematic area where the survival task is a prominent issue. Mr. M, a 50-year-old male of Irish descent, feels that his life is spinning out of control, and he is like a "train without breaks heading toward disaster." His boss hinted that his contract may be ending soon, along with his health insurance, and his wife is awaiting biopsy results. He is fearful, anxious, and has difficulty sleeping because of his worries—he tries not to show to anybody his fears, and his performance suffers. While he realizes that nothing bad has happened yet, he "jokingly" mentions that if he were dead, at least his family would get the insurance (denies suicidal intent or plan). The protagonist has difficulty identifying what he wants help with: "There is nothing anyone can help me with . . . ."

**Survival genogram.** Once the protagonist identifies the problematic area—which in our example was a state of despair and helplessness—the survival genogram is introduced by asking the protagonist whether he or his family have ever experienced a situation in the past that similarly felt as though there was no way out. This question helps the protagonist gain psychological distance and

perspective by removing him from the overwhelming demands of his immediate situation, prompting him to concentrate on his family's remote history of survivorship instead.

Mr. M identified family survival challenge, such as the Potato Famine and the Great Depression, when his family endured and survived tremendous hardship, and he built the historic genogram of his family cued to mentioned historical context.

**Role reversal.** To identify the survival messages and connect them with the protagonist's present life, the protagonist is invited to role reverse with his family members who lived during the Great Depression. The director interviews the protagonist from the role of various family members focusing on three clusters of questions:

1. *Resources/Strength/Empowerment:* What helped you and your family to survive against all odds? What kept you going? What were the sources of your strength, supports, and resources that allowed you to withstand the adversity?
2. *Implementation:* What advice you would give the protagonist, given what you know about his current situation?
3. *Changes to make:* What does the protagonist need to do to improve the outcome?

Mr. M's response examples:

- A. Resources/Strength/Empowerment: "Staying together and supporting each other through tough times; our love, devotion, and prayer helped us through," and "We did whatever we could and trusted God to do the rest."
- B. Implementation: "One day at a time!"
- C. Changes: "There are more people who can help than you know of, but first you must ask for help and allow them to help you."

After the Auxiliary takes the role of the parent/grandparent, the protagonist, who gets grounded in present time, becomes a recipient of these messages and is encouraged to negotiate them: ask additional questions, seek further advice, and choose whether to adopt or reject the message fully or partially.

**Additional options.** After receiving the inspirational, empowering, and instrumental survival messages, the protagonist can be offered to work on their future vision to put the current situation in perspective or to rehearse the current interactions with their social atom from a different position.

### Suggested Sequence of Steps for the "Nesting Dolls" Approach

Starting Point	Historical Reference Point	Ending Point
1. Present Time	Individual History	Present Time
2. Present Time	Family History	Present Time
3. Present Time	Cultural History	Present Time
4. Present Time	Future	Present Time

**Group sharing.** The protagonist and the group share related personal experiences.

Using this “nesting dolls” approach, the protagonist revisits the family heritage of survivorship through lenses of individual, family, community, or cultural experiences at different points in history, using the present as a reference point to check the messages against their relevance to the current situation. During the final phase, the person has an opportunity to integrate the lessons from the survivorship of their ancestors to enhance resilience in facing the future (“Assembling nesting dolls back together”).

Here is another example when the survival genogram can be the method of choice in working with survival messages: A female protagonist of West African descent, Ms. A, describes her problem as difficulty finding the relationship. She is an attractive professional woman who meets men all the time, but the relationship never develops into anything serious; men find her overbearing and imposing. During the mapping, Ms. A shares that she feels that she has no choice but to always appear strong and in control. She was able to track this message back to her father: “I still hear his voice saying this to me.” Using the survival genogram, Ms. A went back to the time when her father was growing up in Africa. She explored the extreme hardship, violence, starvation, and mass killings that her father lived through. It was powerful experience for Ms. A, which allowed her to further clarify this father-to-daughter message. The initial message was formulated as, “You must always show everybody that you are strong!” The role reversal with the father revealed the survival imperative of this message and offered access to its initial meaning. As a result, Ms. A uncovered the slightly different emphasis in this message: “To survive, you must always present strong. This is to repel all the bad people wanting to take advantage of you, or they might think that you are weak and an easy prey.”

Finding an additional hidden meaning of the message allowed the protagonist to see the essential contradiction in her life script: She was seeking a mutually trustful and respectful relationship while approaching it as a survival task. As a result of the session, Ms. A came to realize the inapplicability of the father’s survival tactic to her current life situation and its incongruence to her own personal goals. She was able to negotiate the areas of her life when she can put her guard down and allow herself to take risks, be vulnerable, open, and spontaneous. The session ended with the protagonist sharing that she gained “a lot of insight” in many areas of her life, far beyond the relationship issue, and that she cannot wait to try out the newly discovered different way of life.

## SUMMARY

Most of the individual, familial, and cultural survival messages initially originate in response to past traumatic exposure in an effort to protect progeny from traumatic fate, and increase chances of survival. Nevertheless, with time passing, these messages tend to generalize, lose their functionality and applicability to the changing reality, while continuing to govern the recipients’ daily choices and life scripts—not always on a conscious level. It was suggested that messages

morphologically differ, depending on the time of their origination: The meaning of recent messages is more recognizable, transparent, and practical, while others (such as superstitions) contain stronger magical thinking components with symbolic or metaphoric features. As shown earlier, the superstition can be an example of ancient survival message that lost connection with its origin and acquired life of its own; the original meaning of superstition is not always obvious. The “magical thinking” component of survival messages (belief that ancestors cannot be wrong because they had hidden knowledge that we no longer can access) protects them from any empirical verification and results in their indiscriminative adoption.

Earlier in this paper, it was demonstrated that survival messages from different traumata may compound and acquire the “double bind” features. To the contrary to their initial intent, the literal following of most survival messages increases vulnerability and potential for victimization due to their inflexibility and situational incongruence. For example, following both the messages “do not trust” and “do not ask for help” may deter a traumatized individual from reaching out and accepting much needed help.

The author proposes the survival genogram method, which is shown to be particularly beneficial in working with survival messages. While a trauma-focused genogram predominately is used to assist with identifying and cathartic reliving the historic traumatic experiences, the survival genogram opens up the opportunity for the protagonist to emphasize the strength, survivorship, and overcoming. This method is based on the assumption that the informed adoption of survival messages allows the individual to take true advantage of lessons learned by previous generations through hardship and passed down as values, inner resources, and coping strategies that can enhance the person’s ability to effectively manage traumatic experiences and adverse life challenges in the present or future.

The “nesting dolls” approach allows historically gradual and situation-specific, uncovering the core meaning and true intent of message beginning from the newer ones to those that became cultural artefacts. The use of survival genogram in working with survival messages, both familial and cultural, focuses on identifying and challenging inflexible, often irrational and dysfunctional prescribed beliefs, behavioral patterns, and life scripts governed by messages, negotiating them to meet demands of the present situation.

The family- and culture-bound survival messages can serve as source of strength, meaning finding, empowerment, coping, and resilience that serve a foundation of our knowledge about the world and ourselves. The described method of survival genogram allows exploring the survival messages within a transgenerational context, tracing them back to their initial cause or traumata and, in this way, clarifying their original meaning that opens up the opportunity for cognitive processing and negotiation. The survival genogram “demystifies” a message by revealing its original intent and introducing choices, thus breaking the cycle of trauma-related transgenerational vulnerabilities and inviting us to truly access, learn of, and benefit from our ancestry cultural and psychological heritage—both the accumulated wisdom and the lessons learned.

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