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Attachment in detachment: The positive role of caregivers in POWs’ dissociative hallucinations

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ABSTRACT
Humans are social creatures and therefore exhibit a pervasive need for others. Hence, when benevolent human contact is scarce, this dearth may be compensated imaginatively. War captivity is an extreme example of such deprivation and one wherein dissociative hallucinations have been exhibited. Although hallucinations may serve to virtually summon benevolent others and thus provide the prisoner of war (POW) with a platform for compensation, the contents of such hallucinations have yet to be investigated. The current qualitative study is the first to examine whether the content of such hallucinations may harbor positive effects. Guided by the notion that people search for compensation in lack of companionship, we scrutinized testimonies of former POWs for accounts of hallucinatory experiences. A narrative analysis was utilized in an attempt to understand the meaning of the hallucinations for the POW. Findings reveal that benevolent figures and concomitant acts of care are exhibited in war captivity hallucinatory experiences. Thus, it is argued that the content of such hallucinations may be protective. These findings are discussed in light of the literature concerning peritraumatic dissociative experiences. In addition, attachment theory is suggested as a plausible framework for understanding these findings. Finally, limitations of the study are discussed, and future research is suggested.

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Human beings are social creatures and as such possess a pervasive need for others—the lack of which may render them lonely (e.g., Cacioppo, Grippo, London, Goossens, & Cacioppo, 2015). Thus, people are motivated to seek reconnection in the face of loneliness and isolation (Qualter et al., 2015). However, seeking human companionship may be done via imagination. For instance, research shows that when human contact is scarce, people may compensate by anthropomorphizing the real or imagined behavior of nonhuman agents (Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo, 2008). Thus, objects, imaginative entities, and pets are imbued with humanlike characteristics, bridging

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the relational gap that has transpired. Another example is the capacity to maintain an imagined relationship with a deceased loved one or imaginary friend (e.g., Boerner & Heckhausen, 2003).

War captivity is one of the most traumatic experiences one can imagine. During captivity, the prisoner of war (POW) is subjected to immense cruelty; humiliation; torture; and the deliberate deprivation of food, drink, and sleep (e.g., Herman, 1992). In addition, POWs are often subjected to periods of prolonged isolation in solitary confinement and are thus deprived of all human contact.

One form of compensation for this lack of companionship may lie with hallucinatory experiences, which have been documented in cases of solitary confinement during incarceration (e.g., Smith, 2006) and war captivity (e.g., Ataria & Neria, 2013). Theoretically speaking, hallucinations may present a platform wherein others may appear and fill in for the absence of benevolent others. Within hallucinatory experiences, for instance, one may imaginatively rejoin with close ones and draw on them for security, care, and nourishment gone largely amiss in captivity. Thus, hallucinatory content may offer moments of solace and repose within the traumatic reality. However, to the best of our knowledge, this line of thought has never been pursued. Moreover, although researchers have begun addressing the qualitative attributes of posttraumatic hallucinations (Anketell, Dorahy, & Curran, 2011), the contents of peritraumatic hallucinations in general and war captivity hallucinations in particular remain uninvestigated in this respect. The current study aims to begin filling this gap by exploring the possibility that hallucinations may pose an advantageous opportunity for POWs. In particular, this study examines whether benevolent others may appear in the hallucinatory experience and what roles do they serve. The backdrop for this inquiry is the current understanding of peritraumatic dissociation.

**Hallucinations, dissociation, and trauma**

*Hallucinations* in the current study refers to

a sensory experience which occurs in the absence of corresponding external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ, has a sufficient sense of reality to resemble a veridical perception, over which the subject does not feel s/he has direct and voluntary control, and which occurs in the awake state. (David, 2004, p. 108)

Hallucinations have been associated with, discussed with, and at times even described as dissociative phenomena (e.g., Blom, 2010; Dell & O’Neil, 2009), especially in the field of trauma (e.g., Nurcombe, Scott, & Jessop, 2009). Notably it has recently been argued that auditory hallucinations are dissociative in nature rather than psychotic (Anketell, Dorahy, Shannon,
et al., 2010; Longden, Madill, & Waterman, 2012; Moskowitz & Corstens, 2008). In the current study we then viewed hallucinations as a dissociative phenomenon, although this is largely contested in the literature. Indeed, a precise definition of dissociation is quite complex (for elaboration, see Dell, 2009; Nijenhuis & Van der Hart, 2011), and the inclusion of hallucinations within this definition remains largely contested.

In this respect, it has been argued that dissociation and alterations in consciousness are distinct phenomena and that the former should be reserved for phenomena that include a division of the personality (e.g., Steele, Dorahy, Van der Hart, & Nijenhuis, 2009). Others, however, have argued that dissociative states (e.g., Butler, 2004) and hallucinatory experiences (see Blom, 2010, p. 116) may be placed along a continuum with varying degrees of detachment and pathology. Accordingly, the boundaries concerning what constitutes true and false perception are rather fuzzy. Indeed, whether hallucinations and false perceptions are even possible is philosophically contested (e.g., Crane, 2015). In traumatized persons, the conceptual confusion is in part attributed to the fact that dissociation and alterations in consciousness, such as hallucinations, typically co-occur (Steele et al., 2009).

Numerous studies and meta-analyses have shown that peritraumatic dissociation is a significant predictor of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; e.g., Birmes et al., 2003; Breh & Seidler, 2007; Murray, Ehlers, & Mayou, 2002; Van der Velden & Wittmann, 2008). It is primarily this finding that has generated the governing view that peritraumatic dissociative symptoms are detrimental in nature. Nevertheless, some doubts are being voiced vis-à-vis our understanding of the relation between peritraumatic dissociation and PTSD (Bryant, 2007; Marshall & Schell, 2002; Van der Hart, Van Ochten, Van Son, Steele, & Lensvelt-Mulders, 2008).

One domain left relatively underrepresented in the field of peritraumatic dissociation research concerns the potentially beneficial aspects of the phenomenon. As DePrince and Freyd (2007, p. 138) noted, “Dissociation may serve a protective or defensive function at the time of the trauma, or later, to keep trauma-related information out of awareness.” Conversely, the most intuitive reasoning for the protective function of peritraumatic dissociation is attributed to the fact that in detachment, one may avoid the harsh reality in which one is situated. Pioneered by Janet (1907), peritraumatic dissociation is seen as adaptive within the traumatic episode and only becomes maladaptive after the episode is long over. In this respect, Nurcombe et al. (2009, p. 547, italics in original) noted that “in its narrow definition, dissociation refers to an unconscious defense mechanism that protects the individual from unregulated affect by restricting the field of consciousness.” However, this realization, although valuable, disregards the content of the dissociative episode entirely. Hence, the current study takes a further step in the investigation of the (plausibly) protective attributes of peritraumatic dissociative symptoms
by investigating their content. Specifically, the study aims to shed light on the nature of war captivity hallucinations by qualitatively examining how ex-POWs make sense of their hallucinatory experiences.

The current study then tackles two main questions. First, may hallucinations provide POWs with virtual interactions with benevolent others that may compensate for the paucity of such interactions in captivity? Second, if benevolent others do appear in such hallucinations, what role do they play?

**Method**

**The data**

The research questions at hand mandate a qualitative research approach. Extant narratives such as memoirs may present an opportunity for such investigation (Frank, 2012), as do interviews. Because of the scarcity of such accounts, we broadened our search to include several modalities in which war captivity is narrated, thus striving to increase the validity of the findings. Therefore, the current study included accounts by former Israeli POWs retrieved from memoirs (e.g., Bachar & Aherenfeld, 2010), academic books compiling POWs’ stories (Lieblich, 1994), articles, and blogs (e.g., [https://drwerbin.wordpress.com/about/](https://drwerbin.wordpress.com/about/)). Furthermore, considering the finalized nature of written text and its lack of interactional information (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009), we also examined 11 stories recounted by former POWs in the testimonial project at The Israel Trauma Center for Victims of Terror and War (NATAL), initially retrieved for another phenomenological study (Stein & Tuval-Mashiach, 2015). The sample was then purposive in choosing POWs’ stories yet random and convenient in regard to the existence of hallucinations or lack thereof within the accounts.

**Analysis**

In an attempt to overcome definitional issues concerning dissociation (i.e., what is to be considered dissociation), the study primarily targeted accounts of hallucinations that adhered to the more restricted stance in the literature (e.g., Steele et al., 2009) and largely disregarded related phenomena, such as dreams or fantasies. These were discerned according to participants’ evaluations (e.g., “I would get to a state of delusions” compared to “I remember this dream I had”). These were cases wherein POWs reported entering an alternative consciousness, typically, “automatic, near-instantaneous, and implemented without conscious awareness or decision” (Dell, 2009, p. 760). However, inevitably, these discernments remain an interpretive decision. Moreover, only hallucinations that possessed narrative form were analyzed. The term *narrative* is used here to
indicate a discursive mode consisting of a temporal aspect, some character(s), action(s), and hence also a plot (e.g., Bamberg, 2012). Thus, analysis disregarded accounts of phantom phenomena (e.g., imagined pain, imagined body deformations) or environmental deformations (e.g., moving walls).

Relevant narrative segments were scrutinized in an attempt to identify the figures in the story, their role in the plot, and their relation to the narrator. This was aided by a search for the valuation (Labov & Waletzky, 1997) of the story (i.e., the segment of the story that answers the question “So what?”). Concomitantly, examining what elements were selected or omitted by the narrator served to establish the end-point the narrator wished to convey (Spector-Mersel, 2011).

**Ethical considerations**

The current study adhered to ethical guidelines of narrative research (Josselson, 2007). Participants in the testimonial project whose narratives were analyzed had all given their consent to use their stories in research. All names and identifying information appearing in unpublished materials have been altered, and those drawn from published works have been properly cited and referenced. The current study relied on institutional review board approval for participants’ initial participation in research (Stein & Tuval-Mashiach, 2015).

**Findings**

Although many accounts disclosed the existence of hallucinatory experiences, only a few elaborated as to their content. Among these, we found several accounts describing malevolent characters, all of which were one’s captors, and only five describing benevolent characters, in particular spouses, siblings, parents, and caring strangers. It is interesting that those who disclosed hallucinations portraying positive figures did not report hallucinations involving perpetrators. Although this is a noteworthy finding, it does not affirm that such hallucinations did not take place, only that they were not reported. Concomitant to the research question, we present only analyses of accounts including benevolent figures. All excerpts below have been translated from the original Hebrew by the first author, facile in both languages.

**Caregivers in a care-forsaken environment**

Yair, a former paratrooper taken captive on the Egyptian front in 1973, shared a narrative that explicitly demonstrates the summoning of benevolent others. Following his harsh interrogations, the vilest of human conduct, Yair
told of turning to his dear ones for comfort and reassurance. However, at some point that capacity failed him:

In contrast to the former five weeks [of harsh interrogations] I remained this time [after the interrogation] completely alone: usually, right after the interrogators would leave my room, I would call upon the images of my dear ones, and they obliged and appeared. My late father, my mother and brother, and my adopting parents on the kibbutz. I would direct the conversation to me and to my condition, and they would commend me on my courage and ignite hope in my heart. This time no one appeared. I am incapable of recreating that moment of utter despair. All I can remember is that for the first time I was left lonely, and I remember what a sense of darkness—as if the lights have been extinguished inside. (Dolev & Dori, 1973, p. 52)

Clearly, the capacity to summon such close connections was of great import in Yair’s coping process, for only when these conjurations failed him did the devastating impact of despair and loneliness transpire. Yair went on to tell of his subsequent attempts to end his life: He stopped eating and tried to choke himself with his sheets. According to Yair, it was only after one of the guards pleaded that he eat, and had “spoken to me, in his way, like a man speaks to a man,” and thus “ignited in me once again a spark of life” that “the images of my dear ones also have returned to visit me” (p. 53). However, Yair disclosed,

this time the talks revolved around my depression … they all argued with me and tried to minimize the value of my despair. All have increasingly spoken of home and their love to me. And then they vanished. And once again I was left alone. (p. 53)

Although the importance of the figures is clear, Yair’s account may be considered on the border between dissociative hallucination and imagination, or otherwise less pathological on the dissociative continuum (Butler, 2004). Although Yair initially speaks as if the imaginary figures were controllably summoned, his language subsequently becomes passive, indicating that he perceived the hallucinations as exhibiting their own agency, and thus implying that control over their appearing and vanishing was absent. The following stories, however, depict less control and are thus more clearly dissociative hallucinations.

Another account was told by Asaf. Now in his early 60s, Asaf was an Israeli pilot in his 20s when captured in Syria in the 1973 Yom-Kippur War.

I remember in one of the interrogations … where I was being interrogated 3, 4 days in a row, without food, without water, and a very harsh interrogation physically, and also with no medical care. I am already over a month captive with no medical care … And at the end of this terrible interrogation, after 2 [or] 3 days, I remember that I have gotten to a state where I was a rabbit, and I am in a small cage, and there came a fat and very kind woman and has given me rabbit food.
The hallucination is embedded within the reality of the harsh conditions of captivity. Indeed, from a Labovian approach to narrative (Labov & Waletzky, 1997), the harsh reality serves to orient the listener to the context in which the hallucination has taken place. As evident in Asaf’s account, the hallucination included not only himself but an additional figure. This figure is nameless but nevertheless has a role in the plot—that of a food provider. What is of most interest is that food does not simply appear but is supplied by another. It then may be that the act of care is in itself a meaningful component and an integral part of the narrative’s message.

A similar conclusion may be derived from Michael’s (altered name) story. For 3 1/2 years Michael was captive in Egypt:

You get to these situations over there that I would get to a state of delusions. I would suddenly see in front of me this aunt [in Hebrew, Doda—a nickname for a volunteer who gives food to soldiers in designated posts across Israel—J.Y.S.], back then there were aunts . . . that used to come with us to Sinai. They used to give you food. I would see such a woman giving me cola [extends his hand in a motion of giving the cola and then abruptly slams his hand on his knee, tears welling in his eyes. Wipes his eyes and takes 8 s of silence to regain his words]. She would serve me the cola to my hand and I would extend my hand [extends his hand] . . . My hands were tied [moves hands behind his head to illustrate] but I would extend my head and nothing [slaps his hands on his knees]. Nothing.

The desperation and devastation in this excerpt are easily felt in the vividness of the depiction, as is the anticipated enjoyment within the imagined scene. The experience is clearly one of false hope and shattered anticipation. Again, the depicted illusory reality poses a mirror to the deprived reality of imprisonment, a moment of nurturing within a context of deprivation. The emphasis however, in narrated consent as well as in prosody and body language, is not on the beverage per se but on the act of supplying it. Details that may be considered superfluous find their way into this narration to embellish the act of provision, an act of care: the extension of the hand, the culturally embedded identity of the cola provider as an “aunt” (a double meaning in its own right), and the establishment of the figure’s cultural role “to give you food.” This may be better realized in contrast to the lack of similar additional detail provided vis-à-vis the nurturing substance (e.g., its temperature, quenching capacities, or taste). It is likely that this is because this information is irrelevant to the endpoint (Spector-Mersel, 2011). It is noteworthy that in both Asaf’s and Michael’s stories, the caregiver is a woman who supplies some kind of nurturance and nourishment, and in both cases she remains anonymous. The only thing the narrators disclose vis-à-vis these persona are their roles as caregivers. An examination of Aron’s (altered name) account may serve to substantiate this notion further.
Aron was an accomplished physician and medical researcher at the time of recounting and an Israeli military doctor held captive in Egypt in 1973. He disclosed the following:

My first real awareness of hallucinations happened after the fall of my post . . . as I stayed in the dungeon in the Egyptian captivity. As I was wounded and unattended, after a time of isolation, ignorance of what is taking place, brutal investigations, deprivation of sleep, food, drink, harsh physical conditions and such, appeared beside me figures that were close to me. My wife, a friend from school, a commander, who spoke to me, encouraged me, and disappeared. It was a very short event, vivid and meaningful. This event was positive in my eyes then and also today. I was as I said thrown in the dungeon, feeling that my health condition is deteriorating from day to day, unattended, undiagnosed, untreated, thrown from one investigation facility to another, very weak, vehemently coughing, spitting blood along with the cough or vomit and even defecating blood . . . sitting [or] lying blindfolded and hands tied behind my back. First my wife appeared and I am shouting to her, “What are you doing in this terrible place?” and she replies, “For I am in Switzerland and in close contact with the Red Cross . . .” It is a fact that she had actually gone to her parents when I went to the [Suez] canal . . . and indeed in those days she visited the headquarters of the Red Cross in Geneva many times . . . I screamed [quietly because I had no voice due to inhalation of flame-thrower’s phosphorous substance] “So get me out of here!” and she disappeared.

This excerpt serves to demonstrate how hallucinations may bring about encounters with loved ones for whom the POW yearns. Once again, the underlying needs inveterate within the narrative are evident: the need for human contact, companionship, but also a rescuer. Once again, the harsh conditions are elaborated with great detail, thus exemplifying how the hallucination must be apprehended in light of that context.

Aron’s excerpt is the only narrative in the study in which the narrator provided an explicit valuation (Labov & Waletzky, 1997) of the hallucination itself. According to his testimony, he considered the appearance of his wife to be a positive experience both at the time it occurred and at the time of recounting. Aron cherished these brief moments of contact, which seemed to momentarily provide him with a feeling of being taken care of. Indeed, disclosing two additional hallucinatory encounters, one with a classmate from medical school and one with an acquainted doctor, Aron attested that these “encounters” were significant for him in that “a ‘contact’ with close people has been formed . . . a fact that strengthened me temporarily.” For Aron, these reinstated human connections, albeit lacking “real” substantial existence, were a source of solace in a reality of desolation.

It is noteworthy that although detachment certainly played a role in these accounts, it was not addressed in the narratives as the most important constituent of the experience. Rather, the emphasis was on the roles the figures assumed within the hallucinations. This is of particular import when compared to the governing view of dissociative states as being protective, primarily in their
capacity to deflect emotion (Nurcombe et al., 2009) or otherwise detach oneself from the traumatic reality (Janet, 1907). These accounts suggest that detachment is only part of the picture, while hallucinatory content is an invaluable, complementary aspect of such dissociative states. Positive content may not only facilitate escaping the harsh reality but also compensate for those needs compromised within the traumatic episode.

Discussion: Attachment in detachment

The current study presents an effort to investigate the contents of POWs’ hallucinations during war captivity. Specifically, the study sought evidence concerning positive figures and their roles within the hallucinatory experience. The findings suggest that peritraumatic hallucinations in captivity may indeed involve benevolent others and acts of care and may therefore present a platform for compensation in the benevolence-deprived environment wherein they manifest. Moreover, the findings suggest that the role of dissociative hallucinations in such traumatic contexts may be more than mere detachment or avoidance as maintained by contemporary scholars. These findings suggest that the content of dissociative symptoms may be as important as their aftermaths for understanding their underlying mechanisms, and thus warrant further research.

Given the embeddedness of hallucinations, it is important to keep in mind that hallucination contents are likely to change according to the context wherein they manifest, and their role may change accordingly. Hallucinations then may serve to avoid a sense of betrayal (e.g., DePrince & Freyd, 2007; Gómez, Kaehler, & Freyd, 2014) or otherwise divert one’s attention from the traumatic occurrence to more positive or pleasant experiences, as exemplified in some of the accounts above.

As noted, hallucinations that failed to include benevolent others were also evident in the accounts in the current study. These were not presented because they veered away from the study objectives. However, their existence calls attention to the assumption that not all POWs possess the capacity to imaginatively summon caregivers for companionship in their dissociative states. But then, what determines who can and who cannot?

Attachment theory: A plausible framework for understanding the findings

One plausible response may lie with attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Attachment theory posits that early relationships with primary caregivers shape one’s perceptions of subsequent human relationships. Accordingly, people develop either a secure attachment style in response to consistent, available, and nurturing attachment figures or insecure (avoidant, anxious/ambivalent, or disorganized) attachment styles in response to caregivers who are negligent, unavailable, and ill attuned to their needs (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Main & Solomon, 1990).
One prominent aspect of attachment theory is the capacity to draw on mental representations of caregivers in times of need. As people traverse into adulthood, and consequently their primary caregivers become more distant, this proximity seeking may be accomplished by identifying alternative figures to turn to, such as spouses or friends (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). From an attachment perspective, one may speak of an imagined presence of attachment figures and an engagement in virtual interactions with them (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This is considered an activation of the attachment system. Once established, the attachment system may serve as a mental resource that enables such summoning when activated. Indeed, studies using social cognition research paradigms with secure and insecure individuals have shown that threat activates the attachment system and fosters increased accessibility of representations of attachment figures (e.g., Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002). However, attachment styles seemed to affect this capacity. Whereas attachment-anxious and secure persons exhibited an activation of the attachment system (i.e., had access to representations of attachment figures), attachment-avoidant persons exhibited an inhibition in this respect.

Adopting this line of thought, we may then suggest that those who possess secure or anxious/ambivalent attachment styles, and thus are prone to proximity seeking, may prove more capable in summoning hallucinatory caregivers in captivity. However, those who exhibit disorganized or avoidant attachment styles, and are concomitantly less driven to seek proximity, may lack this capacity and hence be more susceptible to hallucinations wherein needs may remain unfulfilled or altogether lack a caregiver to satisfy them. Notably such attachment patterns may be fashioned in early childhood or otherwise fashioned, and indeed worsened, by the trauma (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

**Study limitations and future directions**

The current study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, all accounts analyzed in the current study were disclosed by Israeli POWs. Future research should be more culturally diverse to increase generalization.

Furthermore, the study objectives (i.e., to identify whether benevolent others appear in the hallucinations and have a positive role) and design (i.e., lack of control over data production) did not enable comparisons regarding the prevalence of appearances versus nonappearances and contra-appearances of benevolent/malevolent others. Moreover, given that the sampling was purposive we deliberately refrained from any presentation of prevalence, which would have been inherently biased. Furthermore, although the exemplars may seem few in number, it is important to keep in mind that in order to establish the existence of a phenomenon, rather than argue for its prevalence, even one exemplar may suffice. Future quantitative efforts should explore the prevalence of positive hallucinatory content both in its independent
appearances and in comparison to negative content. Moreover, qualitative endeavors may benefit from interviews designed to uncover the broader meaning of hallucinations and the role of various others within them.

An additional limitation concerns the contested definition of dissociative states. Conversely, whether the accounts above depict dissociative states or not largely depends on one’s conceptual framework. Future research should attend to other more as well as less definitive dissociative states and explore their contents.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the innovative findings of the current study raise some questions concerning the role of dissociative hallucinations in severe traumatizing environments such as war captivity. Being the first effort to examine the content of such hallucinations, the preliminary investigation undertaken in the current study may serve as a springboard for future research aimed at understanding peritraumatic dissociation, hallucinations, and the role attachment may play in such instances. Future research may begin examining the predictive value (e.g., as risk or protective factors concerning subsequent PTSD) of specific dissociative symptoms such as hallucinations according to their qualitative attributes.

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