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# The Righteous Among the Nations of the World: An Exploration of Free-Choice Learning

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how learners make meaning of their experiences at exhibits depicting narratives of the Polish Righteous Among the Nations of the World, free-choice learning contexts. The study focused on two exhibits at a university in the mid-Western United States. The conceptual framework of the study integrates free-choice learning, the role of narratives, reflection, and Holocaust education. Three main mechanisms emerged from the qualitative analysis and interpretation of data of how participants made meaning of their experiences: through emotions, being challenged, and broadening awareness. This study further informs our understanding of meaning making and learning in free-choice learning contexts, suggesting ways in which we might provide additional prompts to bridge historical distance and integrate connectors to learners' personal contexts in international education exhibits.

## Keywords

free-choice learning, narratives, international education, Righteous Among the Nations of the World, Holocaust education, Poland

Traveling exhibits as public pedagogy have been moving throughout communities in the United States since the 1800s (Sandlin, O'Malley, & Burdick, 2011). Today, participants in free-choice learning contexts such as museums, libraries, and other public places connect to learning through diverse entry points and have various motivations and reasons for participating (Falk & Dierking, 2002; Storksdieck, Ellenbogen, & Heimlich, 2005; Taylor, 2006). International education exhibits in public spaces are examples of such free-choice learning contexts in which the learner has control and choice over what is learned (Falk & Dierking, 2002). These exhibits may focus on human conflict and human rights in the past such as the Holocaust or the Khmer Rouge rule in Cambodia, and the present such as the wars in Syria or Ukraine. Within a Holocaust education exhibit, for example, narratives of victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers of whom a few are designated the Righteous Among the Nations for their courage may be incorporated to engage participants in reflection and learning (Albert, 2013; Glover Frykman, 2009; Parrish, 2010).

Research has documented that participation in free-choice learning is an interactive process between the learner and the program, exhibit, or space (Boyer & Roth, 2005; Falk & Dierking, 2002; Heimlich & Horr, 2010; Yelich Biniiecki, 2015). Exhibits focusing on Holocaust education provide access points of meaning making within urban and rural areas of various levels of religious, ethnic, and racial diversity.

Educators and scholars need additional information about how participants make meaning of human conflict and human rights exhibits in diverse, shared spaces to further understand how to effectively foster learning in multiple sociocultural contexts across the United States (Reece, 2005; Taylor, 2012; Yelich Biniiecki, 2015). The purpose of this study is to explore learners' perceptions of free-choice learning within Holocaust education, specifically through exhibits focusing on the Polish Righteous Among the Nations of the World. Our study focuses on answering the overarching research question:

**Research Question 1:** How did learners make meaning of their experiences at exhibits depicting narratives of the Righteous Among the Nations of the World?

An exploration of this question serves to broaden our understanding about how learners make meaning of their experiences and how educators might improve free-choice learning experiences on this topic and other world affairs.

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## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study incorporates free-choice learning, narratives, the role of reflection in learning, and Holocaust education. These bodies of literature informed the lenses through which we grounded and viewed the exploration of free-choice learning within the Righteous Among the Nations exhibits.

### Free-Choice Learning

Learning is a complex process. Merriam (2001) states,

The learning process is much more than systematic acquisition and storage of information. It is also making sense of our lives, transforming not just what we learn but the way we learn, and it is absorbing, imagining, intuiting, and learning informally with others. (p. 96)

Free-choice learning is self-directed (Ausburn, 2002), and a participant can choose how to be engaged and challenged through the “flow of experience” (Falk & Dierking, 2002, p. 17) at a particular learning event. As in participating at exhibits, Falk and Dierking (2002) identify choice and control as important elements of free-choice learning. Learner motivations in free-choice learning settings are related to learner identity and can be “emotional sites of learning” (Parrish, 2010, p. 90). Free-choice learning involves informal learning, which may be seen as a broad category including any form of learning that is neither formal nor nonformal (Schugurensky, 2006).

Although informal learning often is identified as learning for enrichment, several studies emphasize the importance of informal learning in professional development (Berg & Chyung, 2008; Grenier, 2009; Livingstone & Stowe, 2007; Van der Heijden, Boon, van der Klink, & Meijs, 2009). In the United States, Berg and Chyung (2008) found that informal learning activities were more beneficial for practitioners’ knowledge acquisition of learning and performance improvement than from formal training. Level of interest in one’s current field was the most significant indicator for engagement in informal learning (Berg & Chyung, 2008). Grenier’s (2009) study of the professional development of 12 museum docents employed at four history-themed museums found that while formal training and continuing education were initially used, informal and incidental learning were cited as important to the development of the expertise of docents. This study serves an example of informal educational opportunities intersecting with continuing professional education and demonstrating the importance of integrating informal learning into the professional development of educators (Grenier, 2009).

The free-choice learning within exhibits allows meaning making with the aim of broadening the lens of learners. Although there is the potential for creating communities of understanding, these communities can be fragmented or

overlapped in complex ways in free-choice learning environments particularly related to international topics, which can be controversial (Reece, 2005; Yelich Biniecki, 2015). Albert (2013) challenges educators and researchers to constantly question “Whose memory of the Holocaust?” (p. 56) is being communicated within museums. Narratives about the Holocaust are constructed within specific cultural, political, and societal settings and are a mechanism to communicate stories in particular socio-historical contexts (Albert, 2013).

### Narratives

Narratives are one of the fundamental ways in which humans make meaning (Bruner, 1986, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1996). “When we think of narratives we typically think of stories, accounts of events that happened, to us or to others, real or imagined” (Clark, 2001, p. 87). Humans tell stories and use stories to make sense of the world and to make sense of their own experiences (Clark, 2001; Clark & Rossiter, 2008; Rossiter & Clark, 2007). Through narratives, humans are able to draw connections between different experiences and make a more coherent understanding of those experiences. Narratives are also deeply connected to our understanding of self and identity. As Rossiter (1999) explains, “As we understand the world and our experiences narratively, so also do we understand and construct the self as narrative” (p. 62). Narrative understanding also is connected to how we make sense of our experiences over time. People make sense of their experiences and personal development over the life course through personal narratives in which they can see and reflect on changes (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). Thus, narratives and stories are one of the main mechanisms through which humans make sense of their life experiences.

If narratives are how we make meaning of social life and experience, how do we learn from narratives? Clark and Rossiter (2008) point to three parts involved in this process. First is the *hearing* of stories. Stories not only “draw” us in but require us to call upon past experiences to make sense of the narrative we are currently hearing or reading. Second is the *telling* of stories. In particular, the “learner” becomes the actor, rather than the receiver of storytelling. In this regard, the teller must learn the story to be able to tell it appropriately. Finally, the third and probably most important element of stories is how learners take a story, make sense of it, and then use it. Clark and Rossiter (2008) refer to this as *recognizing* stories, where learners begin to understand the fundamental narrative character of experiences. They begin to see themselves as “constituted and narratively positioned” (Clark & Rossiter, 2008, p. 65) within social and cultural contexts where learners place their personal narratives in the larger sociocultural narrative in which they exist. They can then draw connections and make sense of how they as individuals fit into the bigger picture. Spaces where learners can recognize their “narrative situatedness” (Clark & Rossiter, 2008, p. 66) within larger cultural and social narratives may be

particularly fruitful places for emancipatory possibilities and learning. This positionality, or how one is individually and socially situated within social systems, places learners in a location in which they can be critical of larger narratives, and question underlying assumptions and embedded power relationships.

Meaning making with narratives in an exhibit is an interactive learning process (Polkinghorne, 1988) and can help the learner specifically make meaning of individual and social identities (Säljö, 2005). “Narratives also challenge existing ways of thinking and thereby facilitate change and development” (Glover Frykman, 2009, p. 318). Therefore, narratives can be used to help participants imagine or place themselves in a certain point in time and history and connect to their current experiences. Grever, de Bruijn, and van Boxtel (2012) propose that narratives on heritage education exhibits, such as the transatlantic slave trade, are facilitators in negotiating and mediating historical distance, “a configuration of temporality and engagement” (p. 875). One could view negotiating and mediating historical distance as a way to engage with the past to make that history closer or less “foreign,” which involves reflection in learning.

### *Role of Reflection in Learning*

Reflection is referred to as part of the process of constructing self-knowledge (Eraut, 1994; Moon, 1999). For example, memories are used to make meaning at exhibits (Afonso & Gilbert, 2006). Moon (1999) describes the conceptualization of reflection as bush-like with the first conceptualization of reflection as a mental activity and then with many branches of thinking about what reflection really is, what it encompasses, and what the theories have in common. Reflection plays a role in learning (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Le Cornu, 2009; Moon, 1999). If one considers past experiences as helping learners make sense of current experiences, then reflection on these past experiences may play an important role in learning. The ways learners construct knowledge and why and how they reflect, for example, at an exhibit, are part of the learning process and may be intricately connected to the context of the learning.

Moon (1999) describes reflection as an input and output model viewing the inputs to reflection as theories, constructed knowledge, or feelings. The outputs of reflection may be diverse. For example, the process of learning may be an output of reflection. Emotions may be an input and an output of reflection (Dirkx, 2001, 2008; Moon, 1999). Challenging assumptions and positions of power (Brookfield, 1990) may be an output of reflection. Freire’s (2013) conscientization as part of learner empowerment and emancipation may follow reflection. Self-development, including self-awareness, which may include a perspective transformation within groups or individuals (Mezirow, 1990), may involve reflection. Mezirow’s (1990) taxonomy of reflective thought focuses on the outcome of action and

depicts non-reflective action and reflective action. Reflection in the context of deep learning suggests that a person has some awareness of something being learned or new knowledge constructed. However, Le Cornu (2005) suggests that reflection may be surface, deep, or tacit and that reflection may involve a progressive internalization or externalization in the forms of action. Reflection informs the development of the self, relating to one’s identity (Le Cornu, 2009), and this identity development and meaning making can be an emotional learning process (Dirkx, 2008). Often viewed as barriers to learning in the past, emotions may be a facilitator of learning (Dirkx, 2008).

Holocaust museums are noted as “agents of change” (Grenier, 2010, p. 573) with regard to how they challenge and prompt critical reflection and transformative learning, including within areas of human resource development such as the military, law enforcement, medical communities, and leadership training. Gauging interpretations, learning, and reflections in such museums remains a challenge because of the dynamic nature of the informal learning environment (Ciardelli & Wasserman, 2011). Connecting the past with current ethical and moral dilemmas is part of the reflection and learning process in Holocaust museums (Albert, 2013).

### *The Holocaust and the Righteous Among the Nations of the World*

Each context of free-choice learning provides a different dimension to explore; particularly, Holocaust education is an important context where we can learn about participants’ perceptions of learning and their meaning making of current, historical, ethical, and moral challenges (Grenier, 2010).

Coming to power in Germany in January 1933, the Nazis believed that Germans were racially superior and identified groups, including Jews, the disabled, sexual minorities, Roma, and others to be targeted for persecution and extermination (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.). The Nazi–German regime and collaborators systematically persecuted and murdered 6 million Jews, the Holocaust (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.). It is estimated that the Nazis and collaborators murdered at least 3 million Jewish citizens of Poland and 1.9 million non-Jewish Polish civilians during World War II (WWII) (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.). Enslaving Slavic peoples also was an aspect of the Nazi–German ideology. Within areas of resistance in occupied Poland, Nazis engaged in random killings and mass deportations (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.). It is within this life-threatening, horrific context that Jewish resisters and Gentile Righteous Among the Nations acted. Yad Vashem: The World Center for Holocaust Research (n.d.), states,

In Eastern Europe, the Germans executed not only the people who sheltered Jews, but their entire family as well . . . Only few assumed the entire responsibility for the Jews’ survival. It is

mostly the last group that qualifies for the title of the Righteous Among the Nations. (para. 6, 10)

Although Holocaust education is not a new area of inquiry, this study's exploration focuses on free-choice learning through exhibits highlighting Poles deemed the "The Righteous Among the Nations of the World" by the State of Israel. Hidden stories of Polish resistance and Righteous Among the Nations in Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries were not discussed during Communist rule (1945-1989) because resistance of any kind was not to be tolerated under the authoritarian regime and ideology (Institute of National Remembrance, n.d.). The Institute of National Remembrance, a Polish academic, archive, and education center, strives to document these stories and other crimes against Poland, but this documentation often is challenging due to the complexity of such data collection.

Holocaust education is an important context to explore as the Holocaust is an event unique to human history and after which the term *genocide* was formally used at the United Nations in addressing crimes against humanity. As there are fewer survivors, we will need to rely on exhibits, stories, films, and other ways of sharing to continue to document and tell these stories. Communities with less religious, ethnic, and national origin diversity may have less of an opportunity for face-to-face engagement with diversity and related international issues. Therefore, the context of our study provides an important area to explore learners' meaning making at programs to better inform program planning and improve strategies for learner engagement.

The focus of this study is not without controversy, and researchers often struggle to make meaning of their own experiences and ethics related to Holocaust education (Tinberg, 2005). Emphasizing rescuers may be viewed as overshadowing the evil of the perpetrators and bystanders as well as portraying Jews as passive victims. We as researchers found ourselves questioning the complexity of our positionalities, which is noted as a process for educators in Holocaust education (Lindquist, 2010). Although most participants communicated feeling horrified by learning more about the Holocaust, a local news network received one anti-Semitic and anti-Polish response about an exhibit, which was a focus of this study. To know these responses continue to exist, underscores to us that Holocaust education is an important area of remembrance and learning.

In a global study, the Anti-Defamation League (2014) documented that 46% of the respondents had never heard of the Holocaust, with the percentage of 23% in the Americas. Incorporating narratives and uncovering stories are part of Holocaust education (Parrish, 2010). Therefore, our aim within the study is not to create a "competition over suffering" (Milerski, 2010, p. 120), or to negate the suffering of any group, but to understand learning through this inquiry of an international education context in which additional

studies are needed to further the field (Taylor, 2012; Yelich Biniecki 2015).

This study aims to explore meaning making through the lenses of free-choice learning, narratives, reflection, and Holocaust education, with a specific focus on the Righteous Among the Nations of the World from Poland. Investigating learner meaning making of the Righteous Among the Nations exhibits within the public space of a library in a rural community can inform public pedagogy work within the realm of international education in settings across the United States such as the one we explore in this study.

## Method

This qualitative interpretive study focused on understanding how individuals made meaning about their experiences as participants in free-choice learning at exhibits focusing on the Righteous Among the Nations. In a basic, qualitative interpretive study, the researcher "attempts to discover and understand a phenomenon, process, the perspectives, and worldviews of people involved, or a combination of these" (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). To understand participants' meaning making, we interviewed 11 individuals who attended programs at Midwestern University that centered on the role of Polish non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. The programs consisted of the Righteous Among the Nations exhibit and the Jan Karski exhibit.

The exhibits were located in the main floor of the university's library and were set up as open panel displays in which individuals could freely walk through at their own pace. The first exhibit displayed panels with pictures and texts detailing the stories of Polish Gentiles (given the titles of Righteous Among the Nations of the World) and Polish Jews. The narratives depicted the historical context of Nazi-German occupied Poland during WWII including the stories of the rescuers and the rescued as well as their fates. For example, life stories of Polish Gentiles and Jews were described including photos of hiding spaces and narratives of courage depicting how individuals and families risked their lives to aid others, sometimes resulting in their execution.

The second exhibit depicted the life story of one man, Jan Karski, who risked his life as a member of the Polish Underground resistance to gather intelligence about Nazi-German atrocities committed against Jews, write reports, and impel Western leaders to intervene, which they did not (Jan Karski Educational Foundation, n.d.). Part of the narrative of the exhibit described how Karski was smuggled into the Warsaw Ghetto and a concentration camp near Lublin. His photographic memory and firsthand account of the crimes against humanity he witnessed were central to the narrative depicted in the exhibits as well as his journey through life after WWII.

The researchers' subjectivities are important to describe as it is through our lenses the data were analyzed (Sultana, 2007). The first researcher is from outside the state in which

**Table 1.** Participant Characteristics.

Name	Age	Sex	Race and ethnicity	Occupation	National origin
Gail	26	F	White	PhD Student	United States
Jenny	63	F	White	Instructor	United States
Lilly	53	F	White	Instructor	United States
Madeline	21	F	White/Hispanic	Student	United States
Nancy	55	F	White	Assistant Professor	United States
Ola	38	F	White/Polish	Instructor	Poland
Piotr	49	M	White/Polish	Instructor	Poland
Rhonda	22	F	White	Student	United States
Thalia	65	F	White/Jewish	Retired	United States
Valerie	20	F	White	Student	United States
Wanda	59	F	White	Program Coordinator	United States

the exhibit was held and identifies as a member of the Polish American heritage community. She has worked and lived in Poland and visits Poland annually. The second researcher is from the area and identifies as American.

At the end of each exhibit, participants were given an opportunity to provide feedback on comment cards. Sorting comment cards and identifying themes related to our main research question provided the first stage of data analysis, which we organized through concept mapping, a visual organization process to organize data and view interrelationships between themes (Novak, 2010; Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009). The comment cards also provided an opportunity for exhibit attendees to indicate if they were interested in participating in a study associated with the exhibit and provide a space to give their contact information. The second author sent emails to those individuals detailing the study and asking for volunteers. We used convenience sampling to access participants and, therefore, are unable to generalize our findings beyond our own study. Similarly, there are limitations to the representativeness of our sample. Our sample is drawn from persons who attended the exhibit and left their contact information on the comment cards. Thus, we did not have access and did not interview individuals who attended the exhibit but did not comment on comment cards or leave contact information. Eleven respondents composed the final sample recruited for this study. Table 1 depicts participant characteristics as they identified and described themselves.

Participants included 11 women and one male; all were associated with the town's university in some capacity as either student or employee. The demographics of participants are unsurprising given the social context in which this study is situated: a mainly White, small, college town in the Midwest.

Participants were interviewed by the second author. Interviews took place at the location of the participant's choosing (student union, coffee shops, the second author's office) and were audio-recorded with the permission of the participant. Through a semi-structured interview guide (Creswell, 2014), participants were asked about their experiences in the

exhibits, what they remembered most, about their learning styles, how they used what they learned at the exhibit, and how they made sense of their experience at the exhibit. Following data collection, the interviews were transcribed verbatim by an outside transcriber and analyzed by both the first and the second authors.

In the first round of coding, both authors thoroughly read through the interview data and openly coded (Miles & Huberman, 1994) the data for relevant themes and commonalities pertinent to the research question: How did learners make meaning of their experiences as participants at exhibits focusing on the Righteous Among the Nations of the World? Matrices were then developed to put order on the initial themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the second round of coding, the authors further refined their initial codes through the use of the matrices with categories such as: "things most remembered from exhibits", "how used knowledge", "us versus them", and "hidden stories". Trustworthiness of the study was maintained through such strategies as maintaining notes and comments about the interaction with the data, meeting throughout the analysis process in face-to-face meetings or via video conference to co-check meaning making, and providing participants with opportunities for feedback on transcripts (Creswell, 2014).

### Findings: The "Web" of Learning About Righteous Among the Nations

Our findings identified three main mechanisms in which participants "made sense" of their experiences at the Righteous Among the Nations and Jan Karski exhibits: through emotions, being challenged, and broadening awareness. The following four participant stories were chosen to depict the interrelationship between the ways in which participants made sense of learning about this topic.

Nancy, a dance professor, teaches at the same Midwestern University where the exhibits were held and attended both of the programs. She attended the programs because of her life-long interest in Holocaust history. During her attendance,

Nancy was struck by the personal stories of the Polish Gentile families who helped Polish Jewish families escape. She comments on how she felt uncomfortable around the Poles during the event. Nancy draws connections between the program and contemporary global conflicts happening in the Middle East and Ukraine. Particularly, she wonders why it is that these conflicts between ethnic or religious groups continue to happen over the course of history. Following the program, she speaks with her husband about how the program reinforced the importance of being aware of global issues and conflicts.

Gail, a doctoral student at the same Midwestern University, attended the first program. Her main reason for attending the program was because of her interest in “hidden stories” throughout history, particularly those about WWII. Gail also has a grandfather who was a soldier in WWII. She was most struck by the unfolding narratives and the pictures of the families of the rescuers and the rescued when participating in the program; particularly she wondered what other hidden stories were out there that we do not know about. Gail connected her experience at the program to her own work as an educator. She sees hidden stories as a potentially useful learning tool in the classroom.

Ola also attended both of the programs. She was interested in attending the program because she is Polish and lived most of her life in Poland. Both of the stories presented at each program are not unfamiliar topics for Ola. As a young child, she learned about these events while attending school in Poland. Revisiting these stories through her participation in each program made Ola proud of her Polish heritage. She felt especially proud when recounting her experience at the programs with Polish friends after she attended the exhibits.

Thalia is 65-year-old, retired woman, and she attended the first program and a corresponding play associated with Righteous Among the Nations of the World. She had two main reasons for attending the programs. First, she said she was immediately interested in it because she is Jewish and she recalled how there are not a lot of programs about the Holocaust offered in her city of residence. Second, she attended the programs because she was interested to see how Poland and Polish people’s roles in WWII were going to be portrayed in the exhibit. Thalia concluded that her experience with the program added to her knowledge about Poland’s role in the world, particularly that there were “good” Poles who aided Jewish families escaping the Holocaust, which was inconsistent with her previous perspective that Poland did not help much during WWII.

These four examples demonstrate the often complicated and interrelated ways in which participants communicated they make sense of learning in Holocaust education contexts. Specifically, one respondent, Nancy, described learning and the interconnections between these meaning making mechanisms like a “spider web.” She said, “There’s an intersection here, and an intersection there, and they might not seem like they directly relate, but if you follow the web around, they

are connected.” This web becomes evident when analyzing participants’ stories about how they made meaning of their attendance of the Righteous Among the Nations programs. The topic intersected, for example, with a participant’s identity, international issues, and emotions.

In the remainder of this section, we focus on answering our overarching research question: How did learners make meaning of their experiences at exhibits depicting narratives of the Righteous Among the Nations of the World? We explore these mechanisms—emotions, being challenged, and broadening awareness—in greater detail and how they are related to meaning making of the Righteous Among the Nations exhibits.

### *Through Emotions*

One of the main mechanisms through which people made sense of their participation in the exhibits was emotions. They described “being moved” or being “emotional” during their learning. Participants communicated emotions from sad, to angry, to hopeful in the same learning process.

Participants described trying to imagine the horror, sadness, and pain around for one to take such action to save others when one could have opted only to save oneself. Questions included “Could I be brave?” and “Could I have the courage to save others under such circumstances?” Lilly examined her beliefs as a Christian and asked, “Would I rise to the occasion?” This was a rather common response to the program during interviews with participants and many asked, “Could I do this?” Some also provided answers to these questions; they did not know if they would be able to perform some of these heroic acts they read about, but hoped they would be able. By asking these hard questions of themselves and in some cases providing answers, participants make sense of narratives by imagining themselves in the shoes of the Polish Gentile families to reflect on whether they would be capable of doing similar things under similar circumstances. Participants not only asked questions about themselves in relation to the narratives but also more generally about human nature.

Gail, who attended the Righteous Among the Nations program, reflected more generally on the role of the Polish Gentile families:

It’s amazing how much people were willing to risk for total strangers. Some of them had a connection, but most of them had no connection to these people and yet they died for them. I think it teaches something really fundamental about the potential for goodness in people; it also teaches [us about] the potential for evil.

Like Lilly and Valerie, Gail was amazed at what others could do for complete strangers. Empathy was one of the biggest emotions identified in participants’ reflections on their experience in the programs. Gail also empathized with the Polish

Gentile families who helped the Polish Jewish families for being willing to risk it all to save them. She concludes, again, by asking hard questions about human nature and good and evil. She identified that human goodness and evilness could exist, which she saw as a useful lesson.

Participants also described feeling empathy for the survivors they read about. Valerie said, “It (the exhibit) definitely makes me empathize with the survivors . . . How they wanna forget and I don’t wanna acknowledge it. I feel that’s kind of repetitive.” She explained that she did not want to even think about the fact that “the Holocaust could have happened.” It was difficult to “be in tune with the emotions behind it.” Valerie described feeling empathy with Holocaust survivors in how she understood how it might be easier to forget because of the emotional pain remembering can cause. Valerie’s reflection was somewhat different from the majority of other participants, because she identified how difficult telling and remembering these stories can be for survivors and how that might lead to wanting to forget rather than remember these events. Valerie’s account suggests how challenging participating in this program was for participants in a multitude of other ways.

### *Being Challenged*

Participants expressed empathy, but for some, empathetic feelings also brought a sense of challenge because it took them “outside of our cultural bubble.” Participants described feeling challenged because they had previously not known of the stories of the Polish Gentile families saving the Polish Jewish families. Some felt guilty they had not learned about the Righteous Among the Nations earlier and that through narratives, this was the first time they had really started learning about these individuals. Rhonda was “surprised” that she had not heard of Jan Karski in high school history. This “surprise” was common among other participants as well. For example, some participants described these stories as hidden to them. This feeling of surprise served as an important starting point for meaning making. Madeline, a college student in elementary education, attended because it was required for class, but she stayed much longer than required because she found the narratives of the exhibit interesting. Her younger sister’s friend attended with her. Madeline said that she learned, “There are a lot of invisible stories.” Valerie, a sophomore in college, heard about the exhibit from her history professor and she remembered that it had been in New York City prior to coming to the library on campus. She described the stories at the exhibit taking her “outside of our cultural bubble” and she felt that the exhibit was important to push people outside of that bubble. Ola and Piotr described feeling appreciative of the exhibit educating others about their cultural history; however, all other participants described being “pushed out of the cultural bubble” as a part of their participation, which made them feel uncomfortable and challenged them in a multitude of ways.

In addition to the content of the program challenging participants’ “cultural bubbles,” sharing space during the program with individuals of various cultural backgrounds also was challenging for some participants. Within the same program, Nancy said,

There were a lot of Polish people there which was fun, since I’ve never been to Poland it was fun to speak to them, but they are a little clannish . . . I haven’t been to Europe in about 10—12 years so I forgot this, this “you’re not us” thing. But it’s okay, people are who they are.

In this community, Nancy wanted to learn about “the others” and came to learn about diversity and tolerance, but felt challenged to socially be around “the others” in a real, physical space. She expressed curiosity and discomfort by the diversity of people in attendance of the program, which she attributed to not regularly being around other languages or those unlike her.

Other participants experienced similar reactions, and their social identities came to the forefront during their participation in the program. Thalia felt she was challenged by two points: as a member of the Jewish community, “There are good people wherever you go, so I was pleased that the good Polish people were getting some recognition and I was also pleased that Poland was recognizing the significance of its role . . .” However, she also said, “I’m a little concerned that they are suddenly going to try to say that Poland did a good job, because they didn’t in general do a good job. But significantly wonderful people did a wonderful job.” Throughout her interview, Thalia seemed challenged by her reflection on rescuers, bystanders, victims, and the context of oppression in which they co-existed. She said that she did see Poles at the event, but she hesitated to go and introduce herself. Therefore, moments encountering the other at the event were part of the challenge that intersected with the content of the exhibit. Thalia’s description of her experience also explores how her social location as a Jewish person and her perception of Poland’s role in WWII shaped her meaning making of the program.

### *Broadening Awareness*

The final way in which participants described making sense of the programs was through feeling an increased awareness and feeling as if their “eyes were opened” or opened a little wider. This increasing awareness also was connected to the idea of the “hidden” stories displayed in narratives. Many respondents identified that they had not previously known about the stories, and through their participation in the exhibits, they increased their knowledge or gained greater insight about the Holocaust. Madeline shared she thought that continually acknowledging these stories and keeping informed does not let us forget. She said,

I think recognizing that those things are so real and that they happened. Just getting to see the pictures and actually the list of names (those who saved people, who were killed because of it,

and people who were saved), which you could look at the names and just walk over them, and ignore them, not even thinking about them, but if you actually think of all the lives, all those people touched, just being able to think back and realize that's not just a story you read in a history book.

By participating in the exhibit, Madeline talked about how these stories that she learned about in history books throughout her lifetime became more humanized. Through the photos and narratives provided in the programs, some participants described feeling much more connected to the stories. The stories became more "real" to them.

Others identified developing an awareness about their own privileges as Americans. Participants drew comparisons between the privileges afforded to people in the United States that others in different locations may not have. For instance, Wanda spoke about how many of the people in the world do not have the freedoms available to those in the United States. Similarly, Nancy, a university professor, spoke on the same issue but in more detail:

We are in such a fortunate climate of freedom. I don't think we are teaching people what the cost of freedom is; what the value of freedom is and what you have to do to maintain it. When you are upset about something—do you write your representative? Do you protest? Do you understand that you are not shot when you protest? [I am] Concerned we are becoming a country of mushballs and self-centered whiners. People do not have the easy life we do.

Nancy was very critical of what she saw in current U.S. culture as political complacency, apathy, and being uninformed about the surrounding world. For some of the participants in this research, attending such a harrowing exhibit on the atrocities of the Holocaust served as a reminder to be aware of what is going on around you, to not be complacent, and be a concerned, informed citizen.

Others acknowledged that attending this program reinforced the idea that as individuals, it is our responsibility to be aware of what happened in the past as well as what is going on today. Valerie said that she felt "more attuned to the suffering happening now . . . We can't forget about history; we can't forget about the things that are going on internationally." Thalia said, "It's terribly important that we not stop talking about it." Piotr said he thought that there was a "break" in Holocaust education in the United States and that "We still have to work on those issues; basically it's important for the human rights and humanity." Thalia said the participation further ignited feelings for her to continue to share information about the Holocaust so that it cannot be repeated. She said,

You know, it becomes more important for exhibits like this to happen, for people to understand that this was a reality and it wasn't just 6 million Jews, it was 3 million other people that they killed, so if you were gay, or handicapped, or gypsy, I mean

they murdered a lot of people. It's so important that these things be brought to our university for the next generation because I'm afraid that they are going to try and say that it didn't happen.

Thalia's response communicated a sense of urgency to continue to tell these stories presently and capture them for future generations. Participants' interviews emphasized their ideas of the importance of being aware of what was going on in the world: past, present, and future. Through this program, participants learned things they did not know, criticized unawareness about historical and present international conditions, and recognized the importance of continuing to spread awareness about the Holocaust and other similar issues by sharing stories like *Righteous Among the Nations of the World* and Jan Karski.

## Discussion and Implications

This study further informs our understanding of meaning making in free-choice learning contexts. In particular, the study suggests ways in which we might further bridge distance in international education exhibits focusing on human rights and human conflict. Hidden stories within exhibits and fostering learning around those stories are complex processes. In this study, the exhibits were held in the middle of a nationally identified conservative state in a rural area with a majority White population, a very small Polish population, and a very small Jewish population, of which some participants belonged to both social groups. The diversity represented in the exhibit on multiple levels is also hidden or non-existent within daily life for the majority of the population. Falk and Dierking (2002) identify participants' choice and control as important elements of free-choice learning, such as learning at exhibits. This study's findings suggest that we may wish to identify additional prompts and support for meaning making within that physical space of the exhibits to help learners identify these choices.

For example, participants at the *Righteous Among the Nations* exhibits reflected upon "what would I do" as it related to current ethical and moral dilemmas (Albert, 2013). This reflection also accompanied emotions such as sorrow, anger, and hope, which may be facilitators of learning and an input into the meaning making process (Dirkx, 2001, 2008) and a space connecting learning and emotion (Parrish, 2010). Participants described the exhibits providing a connector in fostering empathy and challenges within the learning process. Therefore, participants' interviews suggest that in their cases, historical distance was bridged as Grever et al. (2012) and Ciardelli and Wasserman (2011) discuss in their work, which is an important aim in such exhibits. Participants discussed the exhibit prompting a reflection on the need to work on current humanitarian issues in the present. However, interviews suggest that this historical distance perhaps was not bridged within the space of the exhibit itself. When pressed to be in a shared, benign space like a library with

“the other,” some participants expressed feeling challenged to do so and even seemed unaware in interviews that they spoke intolerantly of “the other.” For example, Nancy, an assistant professor, was in a shared space to learn about diversity and tolerance, yet seemed uncomfortable and even made othering comments about Poles in her interview. If such exhibits aim at prompting deeper critical reflection, educators may ask what other kind of prompts could be provided to foster this reflection. Such prompts might include questions at the end of the exhibit focusing on social identities in communities and social justice, resources or links if participants would like to learn more, and ways of continuing to stay involved in the issues of focus.

Participants described being challenged through the narratives of rescuers and victims they read at the exhibit (Clark & Rossiter, 2008; Glover Frykman, 2009). Their reflection was situated within multiple cultural identities, such as national, ethnic, religious, and professional within different socially prescribed values of power. For example, Ola and Piotr described appreciating that the topic focused on the history of their ethnic group was receiving attention. Thalia was challenged by feeling othered at the event and in the process of reflecting on her tension of discovering the “good” Poles, did not know what to do when she saw Poles talking at the event. And, U.S. citizens seemed to feel shocked that they did not know about aspects of the topic. For U.S.-born participants, this appreciation of the space of the United States often was “safe” and “better” as participants struggled with trying to come to terms with other ways of thinking about national origin and identity. Therefore, educators may find challenges and tension between this appreciative reflection (Le Cornu, 2009) and critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990) within these shared spaces on multiple levels. Although none of the individuals discussed talking to each other, each had an interest in “the other” which they indicated in through descriptions of empathy and challenging. The learning described involved a tension or symbiotic relationships between the appreciative and the critical reflection. The prompts which could be provided to bridge historical distance might also provide further ways of developing critical media literacy about current events and engagement. For example, using prompts to examine community relations in the communities in which one resides could provide additional connectors for participants. Virtual privilege walks could be added to supplement exhibits and ask participants to examine their positionalities. Questions as simple as “Who do you eat with at work or school?” and “Who would you ask to drive you to the airport?” can provide points of reflection about how we decide who matters.

Free-choice learning has been noted as a powerful professional development connector for leaders, teachers, and students (Grenier, 2009) as the narratives here suggest. The study also suggests that providing avenues to further interrogate our positionalities (Lindquist, 2010) and the positionalities of such exhibits within our environments may deepen

professional development. Free-choice learning programs can be an input into professional development, and international education exhibits may provide very important spaces to do so. Although professionals such as educators participated in the exhibit, additional organization around fostering specific professional and continuing education could be incorporated for concrete learning objectives within multiple disciplines thereby increasing awareness of the topic as well as connecting to formal educational goals. In addition, all participants interviewed were members of the university community, which also may indicate the need to examine outreach initiatives to engage communities beyond the “cultural bubble” of the campus. Additional questions connected to intergroup, on-site observations, and daily life might be helpful.

Free-choice learning in international education, particularly of human conflict, provides opportunities for reflection to negotiate and mediate historical distance to engage with the past to make that history closer or less “foreign.” This learning and reflection may also be a connector to foster interest in learning more about communities in which we live. Whether the exhibit is focusing on Sudan, Syria, or Ukraine, diverse heritage and diaspora communities of multiple and intersecting identities may be learners and participants within a shared space. Learning and reflection for diverse communities is multifaceted. Through understanding the complexity of meaning making, we can better plan and facilitate programs within Righteous Among the Nations and Holocaust exhibits as well as other international free-choice learning contexts.

Our research demonstrates the complexity of meaning making that takes place when engaging in international education, free-choice learning settings. Future research should continue to investigate meaning making processes across diverse learning contexts. Similarly, our sample is mostly White of U.S. nation origin and undisclosed ethnicities and religions. Future research should attempt to address the limitations of this research by incorporating more racially and ethnically diverse participants. Despite the respective limitation, it is also important to acknowledge that there are many communities across the United States that share similar characteristics with our study context: a nationally identified conservative state in a rural area with a majority White, U.S.-born population; therefore, exploring meaning making with the public pedagogy of exhibits such as the Righteous Among the Nations may inform how these exhibits are part of facilitating learning in areas with little cultural diversity and where face-to-face interaction with “the other” may happen in those public spaces.

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