

# Lessons from Holocaust Perpetration Learned By German Law Enforcement?

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**Abstract:** *While right-wing extremism and related hate crimes, and anti-semitism rise, holocaust education for law enforcement provides crucial historical awareness and strengthens competence in decision-making and ethical judgment. In berlin, law enforcement officers participate in holocaust education programs at the wannsee conference memorial and the topography of terror on the grounds of the former reich security main office (reichsicherheitshauptamt). While the law enforcement officers participating in the programs possess basic pre-knowledge of the holocaust and nazi-era crimes, the programs help them deepen their understanding of nazi history. However, this study shows that the law enforcement officers in berlin demonstrate limited awareness of perpetrator research and the role of the german order police (ordnungspolizei) in the nazi era, with little improvement in this area after the holocaust education programs at memorials based in berlin. This highlights the need for more comprehensive educational efforts to address these gaps and foster a more thorough understanding of their institutional history.*

**Keywords:** Impact studies, Perpetrator research, Law enforcement ethics training, Holocaust education, Antisemitism

## Introduction

The state holds a monopoly on violence, a power exercised by law enforcement, among others. As law enforcement officers regularly interact with citizens within the political and social spheres of the city, they are entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining security and order. In this capacity, the law enforcement officers are authorized to interfere with fundamental rights as enforcers of the law (Goch, 2018). Thus, the law enforcement training is extremely sensitive. Throughout the history of mankind, it has been repeatedly observed that the right to use violence, which the individual has given up according to social theories, has been abused by the police as an instrument of the state. Some of these abuses can be characterized as human rights violations in the modern world, especially in the historical development after the Nuremberg trials. The police, the Wehrmacht and the paramilitary units of National Socialism such as the SS, the Waffen-SS and the Gestapo were involved in numerous human rights violations against the civilian population during the Second World War, both within the borders of the Reich and especially in the occupied eastern territories. The murder of European Jews during the Second World War, known as the “Holocaust”, was one of the greatest human rights crimes in which the state and state authorities caused together human rights violations.(Friedrichs, 2000) The testimonies of witnesses and defendants in the

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files of the legal investigations after World War 2 not only provided a basis for legal judgments, but also a source of information for sociologists, psychologists and historians on how the monopoly on the use of force was abused in the Third Reich and how and with what motivation the perpetrators committed crimes during the Nazi era. It is hoped that the historical-political training on Holocaust education can create the importance of using this potential of the use of violence, or that it should be one of the outcomes of these trainings to see what the potential of the police, who have the monopoly of violence, the power and the means to use violence, can lead to in case of abuse. As in the past, memorials are still visited by German police today in addition to history classes as part of political education. Despite the long history of visiting Holocaust memorials from end of the World War 2 as part of law enforcement training, the educational programs offered by the Holocaust memorials for German law enforcement officers have not been examined yet. This paper centers on the research question: To what extent do law enforcement officers in Berlin have historical knowledge about the Holocaust before and after visiting Holocaust memorials? Specifically, it analyzes the impact of these visits, incorporated into Berlin police training, on officers' historical awareness and understanding of the Holocaust focusing on perpetrator studies. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research and improvements to educational programs.

## Literature Review

The goal that an open and liberal democratic society pursues in coming to terms with the Holocaust is related to the expected reflection on educational program at the memorial sites. A visit as part of an education program is not only a commemorative event and an opportunity to promote democracy and human rights education in the present, which is difficult to achieve, but can also encourage participants to reflect on the topic. Even if it does not mean that all participants will use the knowledge gained through a visit for better competence of judgment and action, it can at least raise participants' awareness (Eckmann, 2010). This literature analysis explores two primary areas related to Holocaust education: its relationship with human rights education and the distinctive approaches used to train law enforcement officers in Western democracies. The first part investigates whether Holocaust education aligns with the goals and principles of human rights education. The second part examines Holocaust education programs designed for law enforcement agencies in the United States, Belgium, France, and Germany, analyzing their content, objectives, and impact.

### *Holocaust Education and Human Rights Education*

Eckmann argues that Holocaust education offers opportunities and is a starting point for addressing issues of human rights education such as intercultural education, anti-racist education and education for democratic citizenship (Eckmann, 2010). However, Anja Mihr criticizes this approach and claims: "While Holocaust education's main goal is to cultivate empathy towards victims, learners are often left alone with a moral imperative but without alternatives for how to prevent human rights violations in the present or the future." (Mihr, 2015, p. 526) Wogenstein counters her argument by saying that Holocaust education has the potential, that it can at least raise the awareness similar to Mihr would agree with (Wogenstein, 2015). According to Eckmann's and Wogenstein's approach, the main hypothesis for this study

is Holocaust education as part of human rights education provides an awareness that can lead to a better understanding of today's human and civil rights issues.

There is a consensus that the National Socialist crimes and the Holocaust should be the subject of formal and informal learning processes and that the teaching-learning process at the memorial sites, among others, requires a multi-perspective approach (Ballis&Gloe, 2019). The law enforcement is a suitable sample for the examination of the relationship between Holocaust education and human rights education as an impact study, since the law enforcement officers have often contact with citizens and confront fundamental right issues. Angerer argues that autonomy, which is described as the power to reflect or to refuse, and empathy as Adorno's learning goals of an education about Auschwitz, determine the methods of Holocaust education, which cannot do without didactics(Angerer, 2006). Twentieth-century European history shows that societies can break down, democracies can fall, ethics can collapse, and ordinary men can find themselves with guns in their hands over pits of death(Snyder, 2017). Engaging with history might enable a better understanding of individuals and professions such as law enforcement and criminal justice to be built. In this context, engaging with historical narratives in Western societies occurs largely within the framework of Holocaust education, as the following chapter illustrates.

### *Teaching about the Holocaust for Law Enforcement in Western Democracies*

The literature reveals that in the USA and many European countries, Holocaust education in police training is considered synonymous with a visit to the memorial and the programs that take place there. In Germany, it can be said that the Holocaust is also dealt with more comprehensively in police training. Historical and cultural differences need to be taken into account here. While Germany is a country in which the later generations of the perpetrator society also live, America is seen in history in the role of the liberator or other European countries in the role of victims or collaborators.

Recognizing the need for criminal justice students in the United States to be sensitive to the direct impact they have on issues of violence, public policy, and legal procedures, as well as the increasing concern for combating anti-Semitism, particularly in the 2000s, systematic programs were developed in collaboration with Holocaust memorials in the United States in the belief that Holocaust education could contribute to a better understanding of the civil and human rights issues facing law enforcement officers today(Sporer, 2019). In 2020, Avril Alba participated in the law enforcement and military programs at the USHMM and produced a detailed analytical study based on her own observations and interviews with museum staff. Her findings in relation to the training program suggest that engagement with the history of the Holocaust was used to reflect on the professional roles and responsibilities of soldiers and the research findings support the USHMM's claims that such approaches achieve the goals of personal reflection (Alba, 2020).

After opening its archives to historical research in 2005, the Paris Police Department began training police officers about the Holocaust (Connecting Law and Memory). In German-occupied France, the Prefecture of Police collaborated with the German authorities in the deportation of Jews from Paris and the surrounding area, where most French Jews lived at the time. According to the program coordinator, around 23,000 police officers have taken part in

this training program (Boukara, 2023). The educational program for law enforcement has not yet been evaluated.

The educational program “Holocaust, Police and Human Rights” was launched in 2014 by the Belgian national and local police and is one of the largest permanent programs in police training (Projet Holocauste, 2017). The educational program is regularly evaluated according to research aspects by the “Vrije Universiteit Brussel” and deals with the Holocaust in the context of human rights. Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt and Ivković examine the effect of memorial visiting in Kazerne Dossin on Belgian police officers' social dominance and ethnic prejudice (Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, & Ivković, 2023). Their study also indicates that 9 out of each 10 participants felt that the training had benefited them, that almost 70% found it useful for their daily work and that 55% felt they had developed a different approach to things (Kazerne Dossin, 2018). The training program 'Holocaust, Police, and Human Rights' addresses several key themes: (1) the role of the Belgian government and police in the persecution of Jews during World War II, (2) the issue of human rights, (3) the processes and mechanisms that can lead ordinary people to become perpetrators, and (4) connections to the officers' own professional and personal environments (Police Politie; Kazerne Dossin and Vrije Universiteit Brussel). This program does not compare the present with the past or judge historical events by contemporary standards. Instead, it analyzes timeless mechanisms such as bullying, violence, prejudice, propaganda, xenophobia, exclusion, bureaucracy, and dehumanization (Diependaele, 2023). The Belgian police training program exemplifies how Holocaust education can be effectively integrated with human rights education. Developed collaboratively by the memorial and a police officer assigned to Kazerne Dossin as a coordinator, the program considers situations that police encounter in their daily work and incorporates the competencies they seek to develop. The success of the program can be assessed through regular evaluations conducted by Vrije Universiteit Brussel. It can be claimed that this comprehensive approach and scientific evaluations make this program a successful example of educational programs.

In connection with the crimes committed by the state apparatus during the Second World War, there are places in Germany where these crimes were planned and carried out. Many of them are now memorial sites that offer various programs for interested parties, educators and professional groups. As the police force in Germany is organized at state level, the federal states have a certain degree of autonomy in the organization of their police forces. Therefore, police forces in different federal states may differ in terms of training, equipment and practices. In Berlin, the sample for this study, there are memorials for law enforcement officers with focus of perpetrators of Holocaust: The Wannsee Conference House, where the plan for the final solution of the so-called Jewish question was decided, and the Topography of Terror on the grounds of Reich Security Main Office (Reichssicherheitshauptamt) as important memorials to the history of the Holocaust (Jasch, 2017). Educational programs in both memorials for law enforcement have not yet been investigated.

## Research Methodology

### *Participants*

After consulting with the Political and Ethics Department at the Berlin Police Academy, which oversees the coordination of educational programs, arrangements were made to examine Holocaust education programs for law enforcement officers offered at two different memorial sites. All participants in this study were Berlin law enforcement officers who attended these programs voluntarily. They were invited to participate in the survey on a voluntary basis after the goals of the study were clearly explained. Fourteen police officers registered for the seminar at the House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial. Eleven participants from this group took part in the preliminary survey. The number of participants in the follow-up survey was twelve. All those who took part in the preliminary survey were also interviewed after attending the seminar. Due to time and organizational restrictions, a survey at the Topography of Terror was only conducted after the seminar. Nine of the ten participants who registered for the educational program took part in the survey. Overall, twenty law enforcement officers attended this survey. In terms of gender distribution, twelve participants (60%) were male police officers, while eight participants (40%) were female police officers. According to the Federal Statistical Office of Germany, the proportion of women in the Berlin police force was 27.8 percent in 2019(2020) and 31 percent in 2021, as stated in a press release from the Berlin Senate (B.Z., 2022). It can therefore be said that the gender distribution in this study is representative of the Berlin police force. Most respondents belonged to the group of over 50 years old with twelve participants.

### *Data Collection*

The educational program in a museum can be analyzed either by reading the guide manual or by observing it yourself. The primary groups of methods that are applicable in a research study and can basically be used for both qualitative and quantitative studies are interviews, observations and surveys. As part of this study, the educational program entitled “Just ordinary policemen? On police work during National Socialism” in the Topography of Terror and the educational program entitled” Police in a constitutional state - What happens when constitutional principles play no role? The significance of the police in the Nazi state” at the House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial through participative observation and surveys were conducted before and after the programs.

### *Observation*

Observation is not a passive act of perception, but an active process shaped by two key factors: the involvement of both action and reflection. The first factor pertains to the positioning within the system, the conditions under which data are collected, and the research materials utilize, essentially, the perspective adopted in analyzing the system and the second one involves the application of selective exclusion when interpreting the phenomenon (Froschauer& Lueger, 2020). In this context, the question of how mediation should be

structured in an exhibition focused on the theme of perpetrators relates to understanding their motivations and addressing the research question of why the Nazi perpetrators acted as they did. This paper approaches the phenomenon with the expectation that memorials will engage participants in a reflective process, encouraging a deeper examination of perpetrator research. By doing so, they have the potential to foster a better understanding of human rights issues and contribute to the promotion of democratic values and human rights. During a conceptual meeting with the Berlin Police Academy, it was planned to attend Holocaust educational programs offered to Berlin police officers in frame of this study. The analysis was conducted by actively participating in sessions designed specifically for Berlin law enforcement at the Topography of Terror and the Wannsee Conference Villa.

### *Survey*

A qualitative survey method was chosen to measure participants' perceptions of education programs for the law enforcement profession at memorial sites. While quantitative research aims to test preconceived assumptions and theories, qualitative research aims to build a new theoretical understanding in a previously unexplored area of investigation (Froschauer&Lueger, 2020). Since law enforcement visits to memorial sites in Berlin—and across Germany—have not been scientifically studied before, this study used a survey with open-ended questions (see Appendix 1). This approach enables qualitative analysis in this previously unexplored field and aims to shed light on the achievement of educational programs at these memorials. The surveys were conducted at the memorial sites on the same day as the educational programs for Berlin law enforcement. Participants were asked to take a survey with the same questions before and after the education program. Since the survey was conducted with a specific cohort, such as the law enforcement officers who participated in the holocaust training in Berlin, it was necessary to have a small scale. The number of active police who participate in these programs annually is already small. Moreover, even if it is small scale, it can be considered as an explorative study as it is the first study in this field.

### **Results**

The survey data is coded according to victim groups in accordance with the categorization of the German Federal Centre for Political Education. The institutions of the Nazi regime are considered for the categorization of the perpetrator groups. For the questions about the motivation of the perpetrators and the decision-making space of the perpetrators, the answers are not categorized and coded but evaluated individually. The preliminary survey is intended to reveal the participants' prior knowledge, while the follow-up survey does not directly reflect what is conveyed in the seminar, but rather what the participants perceived of the communication in the memorial. The difference between the pre-survey and the post-survey reflects the perception of the educational work at memorial sites. A comprehensive statistical analysis was constrained by the limited size of the sample.

The survey (see Table 1) showed about the perception of perpetrator groups that fifteen of twenty participating police officers recognized the population as one of the perpetrator groups of the Holocaust, while only seven of the respondents described the police as perpetrators of the Holocaust. A comparison of the pre-survey and post-survey at the House of

the Wannsee Conference Memorial regarding the question of perpetrator groups shows that one participant only named the population and not the police before the seminar, but also the police after the seminar.

A comparison of the pre-survey and the post-survey at the House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial with regard to the question about victim groups shows the positive impact of the mediation in education programs on the perception of victim groups. In the follow-up survey, one participating police officer wrote “Polish elite” differently than in the preliminary survey, while a policewoman wrote “people who are engaged to Jews”. In addition, two police officers wrote so-called “Asocial” differently than in the preliminary survey, while one police officer wrote disabled people. Based on the answers to the questions about victim groups and perpetrator groups, it can be said that the participants know the victim groups better than the perpetrator groups. Even after the mediation, the increase in awareness for victim groups was higher than the increase in awareness for perpetrator groups.

**Table 1:** Summary of Key Post-Survey Findings about Perpetrator and Victim Groups

<b>Variable</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Holocaust Perpetrator Groups</b>		
Population	15	75
SS	7	35
SA	4	20
Gestapo	6	30
Police (Ordnungspolizei)	7	35
Military (Wehrmacht)	5	25
NS-Administration	5	25
Concentration Camp Guards	3	15
Doctors	4	20
<b>Holocaust Victim Groups</b>		
Jews	17	85
Sinti and Roma	14	70
Political Opponents	14	70
Homosexuals	12	60
Mentally Ill People	11	55
“Asocials”	3	15
Civilians	3	15
Others	3	15

In the preliminary with the participating police officers at the Wannsee Conference Memorial, six of the eleven police officers stated that they had no knowledge of the former lives of the ordinary Nazi perpetrators, and one police officer said he had sufficient to good knowledge of the museum, without specifying what knowledge he had. One police officer involved only named Himmler and Heydrich. In this case, the perpetrators were reduced to high-ranking Nazi perpetrators. Three participating police officers mentioned striving for power and racial ideology in the sub-category. In the post-seminar survey, there was no change in the answers. Three of the police officers who took part in the program of Topography of Terror wrote in the post-seminar survey that they had no knowledge of the answer. Three of the participating police officers described the “normality” of the perpetrators, while one police officer described the political and social situation after the Treaty of Versailles.

In the preliminary survey at the House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial, seven participating police officers most frequently mentioned ideology or racial biology when asked about the motivation of the Nazi perpetrators. Three participants mentioned “peer pressure” In addition to these mentions, the following individual mentions were made: “unemployment”, “longing for a stronger Germany”, “defeat in the First World War”, “need for power”, “sadism”, “change of world domination”, “personal fear”. In the follow-up survey at the House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial, there were some changes in the answers compared to the preliminary survey. Two participants who had not answered this question in the preliminary survey mentioned “peer pressure” and “ideology” in the follow-up survey. One participating police officer also stated “fear” and “ignorance” differently before and after the seminar. One participant gave the answers “racism” and “anti-Semitism” differently in the follow-up survey. Another police participant answered “ideology” and “racial prejudice” in the pre-survey and “hatred of Jews” and “prejudice” in the post-survey. The adaptation in the group in Browning's “Ordinary Men” is said to have been mentioned by the three participating police officers as a Nazi perpetrator motivation. However, these mentions were observed in the pre-survey and no further mentions of adaptation in the group were observed in the post-seminar survey. In the post seminar survey in the topography of terror, three of the participating police officers named "peer pressure and belonging" as the perpetrators' motivations. While three participants mentioned the concept of power as a motivation, two participants mentioned “obedience” as a Nazi perpetrator motivation. Racial ideology was also mentioned by two participants. In addition to these mentions, the following individual mentions were made: “fear”, “anti-Semitism”, “hatred of those who think differently”, “division of labor that distributes responsibility and thus individual guilt”, “jealousy”, “greed”, “lack of empathy with the victims”.

In the preliminary survey at the Wannsee Conference Memorial, two of the participants gave no answer and one participant stated that he knew nothing about it for the question about scope for action and decision-making of Nazi perpetrators. Two participants stated that the Nazi perpetrators at the time had little or no room for maneuver, while one participant stated that it was very difficult to refuse the order to kill because he would put himself in danger by refusing the orders. The other participant stated that there was room for maneuvering, but did not explain how this was possible. Two participants mentioned the personalities “Stauffenberg” and “Oskar Schindler” in a way that was irrelevant to the question. In the post-seminar survey, one participant who had previously said that he knew nothing about the topic stated, unlike in the pre-survey, that he was unable to assess this topic in the post-survey, but otherwise there was no difference in the answers. In the Topography of Terror survey, four



respondents stated that the Nazi perpetrators had no room for maneuver. Four respondents stated that the perpetrators had room for maneuver, but only one of these four mentioned “illness” or “weakness” as a possibility to refuse the order to kill, while the other respondents either did not answer the second part of the question or were not familiar with it.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In the opinion of this thesis, the research developments and research results of perpetrator research should be communicated in the context of an education program in a memorial site that was characterized by perpetrators. Therefore, the mediation in the memorials studied was analyzed based on research findings and interpretations of perpetrator research. Regarding the topics “the former lives of Nazi perpetrators” and “the motivation of Nazi perpetrators for murderous acts” as well as “the scope of action of ordinary Nazi perpetrators”, which are the basic findings of perpetrator research, it can be seen that the police have a basic level of knowledge, while some of the participating police officers have hardly any knowledge.

A comparison of the follow-up survey and the preliminary survey at the Wannsee Conference Memorial reveals no significant change in the perceptions of the participating police officers in the follow-up survey.

Although perpetration is dealt with education programs at both the Topography of Terror and the House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial, the findings and interpretations in perpetrator research are crude. On the other hand, one should consider that given the time frame of an education program, it is obvious that education about the Holocaust cannot cover all aspects. If the mediations in these two memorials are intensive and well structured, it is to be expected that the main approaches of perpetrator research, such as “Ordinary Men” by Christopher Browning (Browning, 2000), “Ordinary Germans” by Daniel Goldhagen (Goldhagen, 2007), “Ordinary Organization” by Stephan Kühl (Kühl, 2017), should be covered in a program for the police. Given the time constraints of the seminar day, preparatory materials on these topics could also be produced and distributed to the police prior to the educational seminars. These preparatory materials should include the findings of perpetrator studies, particularly those examining the role of the German police in World War II and how normal policemen could execute civilians without trial on execution fields. They should also include a literature list for those who want to learn more about this subject. Extracurricular programs offered to police, like the successful example at Kazerne Dossin in Belgium, should be scientifically evaluated. They should continue to develop these programs in consultation with law enforcement based on study findings.

In Germany, the police are a matter for the federal states, which is why political education varies from state to state. Academic conferences could be organized with the participation of the respective state police forces and memorial sites, at which the aspects of the police forces and memorial sites are exchanged. Such conferences, which deal with the approach to communicating the history of National Socialism in police training and further education, enable a learning effect between the federal states. As the police forces of many western countries are dealing with the history of the Second World War, international conferences can also be organized in this sense.

Although there are many perpetrator-centered memorials in Berlin, they do not offer programs for the police that deal directly with human rights, as is the case in other Western countries. If a Holocaust education program addressing current discrimination and anti-Semitism is offered at any memorial in Berlin, scientific studies comparing these programs with programs that do not deal directly with the present day would be useful to determine their necessity and effectiveness. It would otherwise be useful to regularly evaluate the impact of the existing occupational group-oriented programs on the memorials.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, Holocaust education plays an important role in the training of the Berlin police, both in terms of time and content, both in training and advanced training, and since the police are in constant contact with society and hold the monopoly on the use of force in their hands, it can be said that they have a delicate task. As history is the teacher of life (“*Historia magistra vitae*”), it can be argued that police training should include an understanding of how and why police officers have carried out unlawful orders in the past. Teaching the aspects of perpetrator research dealing with the involvement of the Order Police (*Ordnungspolizei*) in the murder of Jews by the Task Forces (*Einsatzgruppen*) during the Holocaust, which can be seen as the extreme example of following unlawful orders, during a seminar at a police memorial site could provide a better understanding when it comes to assessing cases in the present day.

The ordinariness of the perpetrators in Browning's *Ordinary Men* and Kühl's *Ordinary Organization* highlights how the abuse of a monopoly on violence—though rooted in historical context of the Holocaust—has the potential to occur anywhere. Human history is marked by numerous genocides and large-scale state crimes, even if they don't match the scale of the Holocaust. The Belgian police identify bullying, violence, prejudice, propaganda, xenophobia, exclusion, bureaucracy, and dehumanization as timeless mechanisms, which can be considered as ongoing threats to a pluralistic society. In this context, it becomes essential to connect historical reflection to contemporary realities due to the timeless and placeless character of abuse of state violence. This approach is also applicable to education programs in countries with different historical backgrounds. Furthermore, the scarcity of sociologists and educational scientists working within memorials, along with the lack of scientific evaluation of the educational programs they offer, poses a significant challenge to the continued development and effectiveness of these programs in this line.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Survey Questionnaire

Good day,

My name is Furkan Aydemir. I am conducting a scientific survey. The aim of the study is to analyze the impact of visiting memorial sites during police training on Holocaust education. The survey will be conducted twice, before and after the visit. This is not an exam or a test. Naturally, all responses will remain anonymous. Thank you for your participation.

1. **Which groups of victims during the Nazi reign of terror are you aware of?**
2. **In your opinion, who were the perpetrators of the Holocaust? The term “Nazi perpetrators” here does not refer only to high-ranking Nazis (Hitler, Himmler, Heydrich, Göring).**
3. **What knowledge do you have about the early lives of Nazi perpetrators during the Weimar Republic?**
4. **What do you think motivated the Nazi perpetrators? Why did they act in such a murderous manner?**
5. **To your knowledge, did ordinary Nazi perpetrators have sufficient freedom of action to refuse orders for acts of violence? Are you aware of such options?**
6. **How do you feel about the way Nazi history is addressed in your police training?**
7. **Gender**
  - a) Female
  - b) Male
  - c) Non-binary
  - d) Prefer not to say
8. **Age**

I am ... years old.
9. **Nationality**
  - a) German
  - b) Other nationality
10. **Were you or your parents born with a nationality other than German?**
  - a) Yes, I was
  - b) Yes, one or both of my parents
  - c) No