

Sense of Coherence and Sense of Community as Coping Resources of Religious Adolescents Before and After the Disengagement* from the Gaza Strip

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ABSTRACT

In August 2005, all of the Jewish communities in the Gaza Strip were permanently evacuated, implementing a political decision of the Israeli government. Employing the salutogenic approach, this study explores individual and community coping resources – sense of coherence and sense of community – among adolescents who were displaced from their homes. We examined the way these coping resources operated in three stages: before the disengagement from Gaza, a few months after the event, and five years after the disengagement.

Data were gathered among religious adolescents who had grown up in small Jewish communities in the Gaza Strip. Adolescents aged 12-18 filled out self-reported questionnaires, evaluating state anxiety and state anger as stress reactions, and sense of coherence and sense of community as coping resources.

Results suggest that both sense of coherence and sense of community were weakened immediately after the disengagement. However, sense of coherence has recovered five years after the event. Furthermore, during the two stages after the disengagement, sense of coherence and sense of community had more explanatory power of stress reactions than during the acute state. Results are discussed against the backdrop of the salutogenic model, including practical implications for different interventions which should be applied in various states of stress.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In summer 2005, 8,800 people from 21 settlements in the Gaza Strip were permanently evacuated from their homes because of a political decision to disengage from Gaza. The communities in the Gaza Strip were reported in studies as being strong and cohesive (1). The vast majority of settlements were religious in character and identity, and a majority of the settlers were nationalist orthodox in outlook with a strong ideological desire to live in “Greater Israel.” Their lives in the Gaza Strip were a core component of their ideology, and their religious faith afforded them a sense of great empowerment (2). For many of them, living in Gaza was a primary fulfillment of a religious and national mandate (3). In addition, living in the Gaza Strip had enabled them to achieve financial success (4). Settling the Gaza Strip had also been an aspect of official Israeli policy dating from the Six Day War until the decision to disengage and to remove Jewish communities from the region. The disengagement also involved the destruction of houses, synagogues and other public buildings (5). The Gaza settlers viewed the disengagement as a betrayal of the Zionist ideal (6, 7).

Prior to the actual disengagement, the settlers showed high levels of denial and they did not believe that the disengagement would actually take place. Examples of the denial are evident in interviews with two adolescent girls who participated in this study. The interviews were conducted by the fourth author immediately after the evacuation:

*Disengagement: The eviction of all residents, demolition of the residential buildings and evacuation of associated security personnel from the Gaza Strip, which occurred in 2005.

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“I was surprised; from the beginning it was like, as if it was not part of reality. And then after weeks and after months we did not hear much. We do not watch TV, we hear a little bit of news, but we are not really affected by each statement..... Again, it is not real that something like that will happen here, it is so far from us..... The more time passed the more prayers, but also in the prayers it was not that it could happen....” (Hana)

“For a year and a half they were talking about it all the time, but during this time, the settlement had only grown and blossomed. New families had arrived and there was a campaign to double the [population of] the settlement..... All the time there were events and prayers and we believed that nothing would happen, until the evacuation actually started.” (Michal)

Additionally, the settlers refused to leave their homes under any circumstances, and resisted Israeli soldiers who physically removed them from their homes (1). Furthermore, the vagueness and the uncertainty (e.g., “not knowing where we will live”; “will our parents be employed,” etc.) that accompanied this move may also have enhanced stress reactions before the evacuation itself (8). Once the disengagement had taken place, the settlers had to deal with feelings of personal loss, loss of faith in the government and in the state. Since most of the settlers had been involved in the campaign against the disengagement and since many of them had not believed that the disengagement would take place, they had not planned their short or long term future (7).

Five years after the disengagement, most of the evacuees still believed they were “right” and that their expulsion from their homes was a dramatic error. Moreover, the vagueness and uncertainty remained for those who still did not have a permanent residence. The standard of living of the evacuees had decreased and some of them were still unemployed at the time of the third stage of our study (9).

THE SALUTOGENIC MODEL AND SENSE OF COHERENCE

Salutogenesis views the human system as basically unsafe, and continuously attacked by disturbing processes and elements which cannot be prevented. In the basic chaotic condition of the world, people have the ability to find some order. From this point of view, salutogenesis suggests examining the entire population and not just a population “at risk.” The aim is to find those who maintain healthiness despite the stressful and chaotic conditions (10). According to this model, people who conceptualize the

world as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful have the ability to cope well when facing stressful situations. This ability has been termed “sense of coherence” (SOC) (11), with those having a strong SOC tending to perceive themselves as having internal and external resources to deal with different situations (12). Therefore, they are less likely to react with symptoms such as anxiety or anger during stressful events (13). Studies have shown that during adolescence, SOC may play a protective role similar to that of the mature adult (14-16).

Antonovsky (11) considered a number of cultural dimensions which contribute to the development of a strong sense of coherence; these include a homogeneous society with historical roots, one which is socially isolated but part of the modern world. Jewish religious society can be considered as having these characteristics. This type of society enhances feelings of consistency and meaningfulness through cooperation in decision making, and balances overloads and/or underloads, thus strengthening sense of coherence. Thus, it is expected that the religious adolescents of our three samples who grew up in such a social climate have developed a strong sense of coherence.

Employing the salutogenic approach, our longitudinal study examined psychological reactions and coping resources of adolescents who faced the stressful situation of evacuation of their settlements at three points in time: before the disengagement took place, a few months after the uprooting and five years later. Since the situation was communal in nature, we found it important to examine not only personal resources but also community assets in the three stages of the study.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY

In the past decades there has been growing research interest in the idea of communities, belonging to communities and the assets the community provides for its members (17). In an era of globalization, there is a need to belong and to have social support (18). “Sense of community” (SOCM) describes bonding, trust and group membership (19) as well as mutual concerns and shared values among group members, leading to a sense of connection (20). Sense of community is not a result of concrete experience but rather a way of thinking in which the individual is part of a community which is or will be available when s/he needs it. Therefore, a sense of community is possible even in a new place, before personal relationships have developed (21). A different dimension of sense of community is “place attachment” (22) which means an emotional connection of people to their neighborhood or city (23, 24). When

people are displaced from communities in which they have been deeply rooted, their individual and communal aspects of self-definition can be threatened (25).

Research indicates that people who have a strong sense of community will feel connected to their community. They will perceive themselves as able to influence their community and to be influenced by it and will believe that their needs are being met in the collective and they will feel obligated to the community to which they belong (26). A strong sense of community seems to be an attribute of resilient communities (27-30). As a result, sense of community has been found to be a protective factor against developing symptoms of depression (31), posttraumatic stress symptoms and other emotional problems among adolescents exposed to diverse kinds of stress (32, 33). Indeed, previous research involving evacuation for political reasons has found that the evacuation threatened the evacuees' sense of place, their sense of belonging to their own community and to the entire "Israeli community," and that it severely damaged their convictions and values (34, 35). Thus, especially when displacement is political and/or ideological in nature, it appears that coming from a strong community could have a counter effect, that is, leaving such a community could lead to more adverse effects and greater mental health problems than leaving a weaker community (36).

ACUTE VS. CHRONIC STRESS SITUATIONS

Our study examined religious adolescents before the disengagement, a few months later and five years after the disengagement. The three stages can be differentiated according to acute vs. chronic stress situations (7). We consider the first stage, before the disengagement, as an acute stress situation, while the second and third stages are characterized as more chronic stress situations (7).

The literature on psychological and behavioral effects of displacement on adolescents reveals a wide spectrum of reactions with a variety of problems such as anxiety, posttraumatic stress, depression, somatic complaints, aggressive behavior and anger (4, 8, 37). While most studies relate to displacement during wars or natural disasters, Sagy and Antonovsky (8) studied a similar disengagement in the context of a political situation. Their study related to the evacuation of Israeli communities from Sinai more than 20 years ago following the peace treaty with Egypt. In that research, the evacuated adolescents were compared with Israeli adolescents who lived in southern Israel and had not been evacuated from their homes. Anxiety and anger were higher among

the evacuated youths. However, immediately after the evacuation both anxiety and anger dropped significantly. Furthermore, in the acute state, just before the evacuation, coping resources did not explain the evacuees' anxiety at all. However, when the situation became a more "normal" chronic stress situation, resources made a significant contribution to the explained variance.

Similar to the above mentioned research, this study too examined acute vs. chronic states of stress: the acute state, during the disengagement, and two chronic situations: a few months later, and then, a few years after the disengagement. We expected that during the acute state, the resources would have less explanatory power compared to the two chronic states.

In accordance with the literature review, the following were our research hypotheses:

1. We expected the stress reactions, state anxiety and state anger to be higher before and immediately after the disengagement compared to the third stage. At this stage, five years later, the evacuees had been settled, even if not permanently, and had returned to some routine which could help decrease the state anxiety and anger (8, 38).
2. We expected sense of coherence (SOC) to fluctuate during the different stages of the research (39) because of the major rupture and ensuing crisis. As for the environmental coping resource, we expected sense of community (SOCM) to be strongest during the first stage and to deteriorate as result of the crisis (40).
3. We anticipated that, while the personal resource of SOC would have a protective effect, with stronger SOC linked to fewer symptoms of anxiety and anger (41), the community resource of SOCM would have a counter effect with strongest SOCM linked to more anxiety and anger (36). We further expected that time would have a moderating effect. Thus, during the first stage, when the situation was acute, the personal and environmental coping resources would explain stress reactions to a lesser extent compared to the more chronic states of stress, a few months after the disengagement and five years later (8, 41).

METHOD

SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE

One hundred and four Jewish-Israeli teenagers who lived in the Gaza Strip settlements participated in the first phase; 77 adolescents participated in the second phase and 115 adolescents participated in the third phase. Participating

adolescents were aged 12-18. Means and SDs of the age of participants were: Stage 1: $M=15.75$, $SD=1.86$; Stage 2: $M=16.46$, $SD=1.32$; Stage 3: $M=17.07$, $SD=1.37$. Females accounted for 81% of the first stage sample; 84% of the second sample and 48% of the third stage sample. Regarding parents' education, in the first stage, 79% of the fathers and 86% of the mothers had post-high school education. This was the case for 75% of the fathers and 70% of the mothers in the second stage and for 73% of the fathers and 68% of the mothers in the third stage.

Data were collected by self reported questionnaires before the disengagement (in May-August, 2005); two to four months after the disengagement (Oct.-Dec. 2005) and five years after the disengagement (May-July, 2010). Community leaders were greatly suspicious of the research since they thought it had a political agenda. Thus, we did not get permission from school principals to enter schools. In the first two stages, adolescent research assistants administered the self reported questionnaires to their peers, and in the last stage, the last author administered the questionnaires to adolescents. All questionnaires were administered to the adolescents in their homes, and permission was received from their parents. It seems that since our research assistants in the first two stages were girls, we had a majority of girls in these stages. In the last stage, the author tried to balance the sample. When approaching the adolescents informally and personally, they were very cooperative.

Similar administrative procedures were applied for the three stages of the research. The involvement of the administrators of the questionnaire was minimal and included only explanations of words which participants did not understand. Since questionnaires are frequently used for adolescents, almost no such involvement was needed. All participants were informed that the researchers were interested in their experiences, and anonymity was emphasized. Participation was voluntary.

MEASURES

- **State Anxiety** (42) was assessed using the Hebrew version of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). It has proved to be reliable, valid and equivalent to the English inventory (43). State anxiety includes 11 items from the 20 item inventory of the STAI (on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 to 4). Examples of questions are: I feel peaceful, I am afraid of disasters, I am worried, and others. Cronbach's alpha ranged from .85 to .89.
- **State Anger** (42). The Hebrew translation (43) was used

in order to assess adolescents' anger. This translation has proved to be reliable, valid and equivalent to the English State Anger Inventory (43). The scale consists of six items on a 4-point Likert scale. Examples of questions are: I am angry, I want to scream at someone, I feel frustrated. Cronbach's alpha reliability ranged from .85 to .88.

- **Sense of Coherence** (SOC) was measured using a series of semantic differential items on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with anchoring phrases at each end. High scores indicate a strong SOC. An account of the development of the SOC scale and its psychometric properties, showing it to be reliable and reasonably valid, appears in Antonovsky (10, 44). In this study, the SOC was measured by the short form scale consisting of 13 items and was found to be highly correlated to the original long version (44). The SOC scale has been found to be valid in many languages including Hebrew (45). The scale includes items such as: "Doing the things you do every day is" – answers ranging from (1) "a source of pain and boredom" to (7) "a source of deep pleasure and satisfaction." In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha ranged from .74 to .81.
- **Sense of Community** (SOCM) was measured by a scale developed by Davidson and Cotter and has been found to be reliable and valid (26). It consists of 17 questions, scored on a 4-point Likert scale. The scale was translated into Hebrew and was validated by Sagy et al. (46). It includes items such as: "I feel like I belong here" (membership); "It is hard to make friends and meet people in this place" (influence); "It would take a lot for me to move away from this community" (shared emotional connection). In the present study we used 15 of the 17 questions. The two questions which were omitted relate to politics in the community and religious observance. Since these questions could have evoked antagonism and unwillingness to answer the entire questionnaire, it was decided to omit them. Cronbach's alpha ranged from .75 to .84.

DATA ANALYSES

First, frequencies and percentages of the samples' demographics were explored. Second, a one-way ANOVA was run to explore differences between the groups on the study's variables. To understand the unique impact of each of the variables and interaction effects as well as the cumulative contribution to the investigated outcomes, a hierarchical regression analysis was carried out for each dependent variable.

Statistical analyses were conducted with SPSS Version 18 and the accepted p levels were set at $\alpha < .05$.

RESULTS

Examination of the second hypothesis show significant differences among the three stages in state anxiety but not in state anger. Overall, results show that, five years after the disengagement, levels of anxiety were lower than the first stage prior to the disengagement. However, there was no significant change in levels of anger. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is supported for state anxiety but not for state anger.

Changes in personal and environmental coping resources were also found. The level of SOC was the lowest immediately after the disengagement and was significantly different from the pre-disengagement stage

and five years after the disengagement. Sense of community, in turn, dropped significantly immediately after the disengagement and has not recovered since then. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is supported.

An examination of the third hypothesis shows that while SOC was found to be significant in explaining both anxiety and anger, SOCM did not explain any reaction. Thus, the first part of our third hypothesis is accepted for SOC which was significant for both reactions.

In order to examine our moderation hypothesis we tested interactions of the stage of the research and each of the coping resources. When entered in step 2 the interaction of stage X SOC was marginally significant ($p = .053$) and stage X SOCM was significant for anxiety. Both interactions were not significant for anger. Thus, we decided to run a separate regression for each stage with both SOC

Table 1. Mean, SD and F values of the different variables in the different stages of research

	May-Aug. 2005 (a)		Oct.-Dec. 2005 (b)		May-July 2010 (c)		df	F	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
State Anxiety (Range 1-4)	2.93	.66	2.95	.66	2.33	.63	2	26.18 ^{ac, bc}	.00
State Anger (Range 1-4)	2.21	.85	2.31	.82	2.12	.81	2	1.10	.33
Sense of Coherence (Range 1-7)	4.64	.83	3.98	.87	4.53	.74	2	16.32 ^{ab, bc}	.00
Sense of Community (Range 1-4)	3.45	.43	2.21	.57	2.90	.45	2	154.51 ^{ab, ac, bc}	.00

Table 2. Sense of coherence and sense of community as explanatory factors of stress reactions in three different stages of the disengagement from Gaza

	State Anxiety					State Anger				
	R ²	B	β	SE	t	R ²	B	β	SE	t
Step 1										
Sense of Coherence		-.42	-.49	.05	-8.45 ^{***}		-.40	-.40	.06	-6.66 ^{***}
Sense of Community	.22	.07	.07	.06	1.15	.16	-.01	-.01	.07	-.20
Step 2										
Sense of Coherence		-.13	-.15	.14	-.91		-.19	-.19	.18	-1.08
Sense of Community		.84	.81	.20	4.28 ^{***}	.01	.19	.16	.25	.76
Stage X sense of coherence		-.06	.33	.03	-1.95		-.05	-.21	.04	-1.17
Stage X sense of community	.08	-.16	.78	.04	-4.06 ^{***}		-.04	-.18	.05	-.84

***p < .001

Table 3. Sense of coherence and sense of community as explanatory factors of anxiety in three different stages of the disengagement from Gaza

	May-Aug. 2005					Oct.-Dec. 2005					May-July 2010				
	R ²	B	β	SE	t	R ²	B	β	SE	t	R ²	B	β	SE	t
Sense of Coherence	.09	-.27	-.32	.08	-3.28 ^{***}	.38	-.41	-.55	.07	-5.68 ^{***}	.27	-.45	-.52	.08	-5.72 ^{***}
Sense of Community	.02	.23	.15	.15	1.50	.06	-.28	-.24	.11	-2.53 [*]	.00	.00	.00	.12	-.04

p < .01 *p < .001

and SOCM as independent variables and state anxiety as dependent variable. Results are presented in Tables 1-3.

As hypothesized, the coping resources better explained anxiety a few months after and five years after the disengagement (chronic states) compared to the pre-disengagement stage (acute state). It appears that sense of community was significant in explaining anxiety only a few months after the disengagement but not in the other stages. Further, contrary to our expectations, it had a protective effect. SOC had the strongest explanation of anxiety immediately after the disengagement. We can conclude that our moderation hypothesis was supported for anxiety.

DISCUSSION

This study explored stress reactions (state anxiety and state anger) as well as individual and environmental coping resources (sense of coherence and sense of community) among religious adolescents: before and after the disengagement from the Gaza Strip. The first stage took place during the acute stress situation of the threat of the Jewish communities in Gaza to be displaced, while the two other phases were carried on in the chronic state, when the acuteness was over, a few months later and five years after the uprooting.

Our first hypothesis was comparative and related to the three stages. We found a different pattern in each of the stress reactions. While state anxiety followed our expectation and was higher before and a few months after the disengagement, state anger did not follow the same pattern. It seems that levels of anxiety of the adolescents were connected to the vagueness of the situation as well as to the threat of the destruction of their home and community (4, 47). Anxiety was reduced only after five years, as most families have established some routine and have a place to live even if it has not been a permanent place and of lower quality than their previous homes in the Gaza Strip.

Anger, however, has not decreased significantly over time. It appears that more than anxiety, anger expresses the feelings of the evacuees. Adolescents, as well as adults of this population (48) have felt that the leaders of the state betrayed them and their mission. It seems that the incongruence between the political reality and the particular ideology of the settlers (49), as well as the loss of existential meaning in their lives, have become the main feelings among this population (50, 51). This discrepancy could lead to feelings of anger rather than to anxiety (8).

We also examined the individual and environmental coping resources over time. Our hypothesis that SOC would

fluctuate during the three stages (39) was accepted. Our study indicates that being exposed to a break in a value system and living in unstable and chaotic life conditions can weaken the individual's resources, the ability to make sense of the world and to perceive it as manageable. As a result of these experiences, SOC could be meaningfully weakened. Our results indeed show a major drop in sense of coherence immediately after the disengagement. Five years after the disengagement, however, the SOC of the adolescents had been rehabilitated. These results show a different pattern from a recent study which examined stress over long periods of missile attacks in southern Israel (39). In the present case, when there was just one acute stressful situation, we found potential for recovery of this important personal resource was clear. A long lasting stressful situation led to continuously deteriorating SOC (39). It appears that the strong beliefs of this ideological group have enabled them to maintain a high sense of coherence in the long run, in spite of some decline in the acute period.

Regarding the second coping resource, sense of community, it was strongest in the first stage of the research, significantly dropped after the uprooting and it never recovered. The religious communities in the Gaza Strip were known to be unified and powerful. They were imbued with a strong ideology characterized by support for "Greater Israel." Before the disengagement these communities protested against it and did not cooperate with the establishment in planning the future after the uprooting (1). Thus, it is not surprising that before the disengagement the adolescents felt a strong sense of community as they were still part of the community in which they had grown up, and they believed that their ideology would sustain them. However, the disengagement led to the disappearance of strong cohesive communities as residents of each community had been separated and settled in numerous places. Our results show that feelings of belonging to the community have not recovered among the adolescents. Five years after the disengagement it was possible to rehabilitate the personal resource of SOC but not to return to the sense of strong community. The damage had been mostly to the community level and to the feelings of belonging to the wider collective.

The second hypothesis related to the contribution for explanation of anxiety and anger by the different coping resources. Our most meaningful results relate to SOC which was found to have the strongest protective role for both stress reactions. It appears to be as important a personal asset for adolescents as it has been usually found for adults. Moreover, it appears to have a special significance even in a communal situation. Perhaps this explanatory

power of the personal SOC can be understood on the backdrop of the distinctions of the communal life.

The last question related to the moderation effect in the three stages of the research. As was expected we found a different effect of the coping resources on anxiety in each of the three stages. Our results followed previous findings in which, in the acute situation (before the disengagement), the coping resources had less explanatory power compared to chronic states (a few months after and five years after the disengagement) (8, 52). These results support the suggested model (52) of distinguishing between acute and chronic stress in the way coping resources operate in each state.

To conclude, it seems important to prepare communities and individuals for a variety of stressful situations. The model is built on the assumption that during the acute stage the situation is overwhelming and the actual exposure to the stressful situation contributes significantly to the explanation of stress reactions. During chronic stress situations, however, personal and environmental coping resources become significant in explaining coping and stress responses (52). Thus, when the situation is acute it is most important to address situational characteristics to deal with the event/s, while, for chronic state situations which resemble more “normal” life, it is most important to enhance personal coping resources in particular.

Relating to the specific situation of uprooting, it seems most important to plan this kind of move on the community level and to include the entire community. When communities can move as a whole to a different place, it might conserve their strengths and assets. In addition, it is important to work on connectedness to the new place and new people. There should also be close relations to significant adults, so that adolescents would feel that they can be supported by them. Having said that, it is important as well to provide help to significant adults, especially teachers and educators, whose role is to reorganize and to help the youngsters develop new meaningful relations with their surroundings. Such reorganization could positively impact the meaningfulness and manageability aspects of the personal SOC of adolescents which appears to be an important asset in the long run.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The uniqueness of this research involves the special population with their strong belief system that included a high ideological commitment to build their homes in the Gaza Strip (53). However, beyond the suggestions enumerated above, we must consider the limitations of the study. The samples are neither representative nor random but rather

consist of youngsters whom we were able to reach during the different stages. Thus, some degree of potential sample bias should be taken into account. Apparently, the distribution according to socio-demographic criteria was not sufficient.

Additionally, since all the data are retrospective self-reports, the extent to which adolescents’ experiences of stress converge with external observations, such as parental, teacher and clinical reports, remains to be investigated. Although young people’s self-reports are generally a reliable source about internalizing and stress experiences, an assessment of outcomes may benefit from multiple informant evaluations. As a rule, the multi-informant paradigm facilitates evaluating youngsters’ psychological difficulties in different environments (54).

In spite of these limitations, the importance of this study is in its being a field research carried out in the midst of the stressful situation among adolescents who had to be evacuated from their homes and communities.

In conclusion, individual and environmental coping resources were found to be significant protective factors when adolescents face stressful situations such as displacement from home as a result of a political agenda. The results of this study show that most adolescents who faced this very stressful situation of being permanently evacuated from their homes and experiencing a major break in their value system can be rehabilitated and stay healthy in the long run. Our results support the grounded theory of salutogenesis upon which this research is based. Furthermore, these results, once again, support the notion that different interventions should be applied in different states of stress (41). When the stress is acute, it seems important to target the situation itself, in attempting to help people cope better. However, when the situation becomes chronic it is important to strengthen personal and community coping resources. Additionally, it seems that coping resources can be recovered even after severe crisis. These results should alert policy makers, educators and health practitioners to the possibilities of strengthening the personal and environmental resources.

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