Life in a continuous traumatic situation: perspective of the older population

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ABSTRACT
The literature is divided with regard to how older persons cope with traumatic situations of war and terror, and few studies have focused on continuous exposure to traumatic situations. To fill the gap in existing knowledge, the present study examined how older people cope with a continuous security threat which includes periods of intensive attacks. Three focus groups were conducted among older residents of rural localities situated near the Israeli border with Gaza. Content analysis of transcripts from the group sessions revealed four main aspects that concern the older participants when they cope with situations of war: (a) moral issues; (b) emotional issues; (c) intergenerational issues; and (d) resilience and future challenge. The analysis revealed that the older participants' coping patterns derive from a combination of their stage of life, the changing lifestyle in their communal rural localities, and the ways that the older residents and younger residents of the communities cope with exposure to a continuous security threat. The theoretical framework for discussion of the findings is based on social theories of trauma and resilience. In addition, recommendations are provided for interventions at the individual and community levels.

KEY WORDS – continuous traumatic stress, older people, family relations, location-based community, resilience, terror.

Introduction

Since 2001, the population living on the border between Israel and the Palestinian Authority has been exposed to a continuous traumatic situation (Nuttman-Shwartz and Shoval-Zukerman 2016), which is characterised by sporadic attacks that sometimes occur at low intensity and sometimes involve intensive fire of missiles and mortar bombs (Lahad and Leykin 2010). A continuous traumatic situation differs from a one-time occurrence in terms of its cumulative effect and in terms of the way it affects individuals' perceptions of risk or feelings of insecurity, as well as in terms of the ways

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that individuals cope with the situation (Dickstein *et al.* 2012; Terr 1991). In addition, the ongoing nature of the violent situations keeps individuals permanently on the alert and aroused. These populations 'do not have time for respite and are thus constantly governed by their physiological reactions of fright or flight, or employ avoidance in the attempt to control these sensations' (Lahad and Leykin 2010: 695).

In continuous traumatic situations, previous traumatic events play a role together with fear of potential future traumatic events and/or with the actual current traumatic events that individuals and communities are regularly exposed to (Diamond *et al.* 2010; Nuttman-Shwartz and Shoval-Zukerman 2016; Pfefferbaum *et al.* 2003). In addition, 'crossover conditions are quite common and develop when one blow creates a long-standing series of adversity' (Terr 1991: 19), which constitutes an additional trauma in later life that reactivates traumatic memories and associations with an earlier trauma (Fossion *et al.* 2015).

Studies conducted in localities along the confrontation line on the border between Israel and Gaza have revealed that over the years, an increasing number of residents have reported anxiety and post-traumatic stress reactions, but they have also reported growth and resilience (Besser *et al.* 2014; Dekel and Nuttman-Shwartz 2009). One of the peak periods of exposure was in the summer of 2014, during the Israel–Hamas war. Unlike the previous operations, this one lasted 50 days. It was a particularly complex challenge for all of the residents of the region, including the older residents, most of whom stayed in the confrontation zone and did not leave their homes for short or long periods, in contrast to most of the young families with children (Shechory-Biton and Laufer 2015). This elicits the question: What are the characteristics of the older population that chooses to stay in the confrontation area, and what are the implications of that decision?

The impact of continuous exposure to a security threat on the older population

Existing knowledge about the impact of war and terror on the older population is based on three different perspectives, which combine theories relating to old age and ageing with theories relating to trauma. The first perspective emphasises the similarity between younger and older people (Bleich *et al.* 2005), and continuity in personality traits and coping patterns (Atchley 1989). According to the second perspective, younger people are more resilient (Hantman, Solomon and Horen 2002) than older people, who experience double stress deriving from processes of development accompanying old age and ageing as well as from exposure to traumatic

events (Whitbourne 1985). In contrast, the third perspective stresses the ability of older persons to cope and shows how they learn from life experiences, cope actively and are more resilient (Kahana and Kahana 1996; Norris *et al.* 2000).

Various studies have emphasised the differences between these perspectives, particularly with regard to the question of emotional trauma *versus* resilience and the ability to withstand traumatic events, in general, and events deriving from exposure, war and continuous threat, in particular (Band-Winterstein and Koren 2010). Several researchers have found that the older people do not differ from younger adults in their emotional reactions to trauma, whereas other studies have found that older people are a largely vulnerable group; they have fewer resources for coping with traumatic events than younger persons, and are at higher risk for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Solomon 1995). On the one hand, there are losses and difficult challenges that occur in conjunction with depletion of resources, especially in old age (Hayslip and Smith 2012). On the other hand, researchers have asserted that the impact of prior stressors on older adults increases their ability to be resilient (Johnston, Bailey and Wilson 2014; Lavretsky 2012).

Several studies have been conducted among older people in Israel in the region where this research was carried out. The findings of qualitative as well as quantitative studies conducted in 2009 among older residents of kibbutzim in the region on the border of Gaza following a major military operation indicate that this population is resilient, and that the confrontation did not shape their life story despite the ongoing tensions. The resilience of the older residents has been attributed to their Zionist ideology, which reinforced their sense of belonging to the land. Even though most of them had survived the Holocaust, they were motivated to establish a rural communal locality in Israel near the border, in an undeveloped and dangerous area far from the centre of the country (Chaitin *et al.* 2012). The resilience of the population of the rural periphery in the southern and northern regions of Israel has also been noted in a general survey conducted in 2014 among older persons in Israel (Dahan and Schwartz 2014), as well as in a recent study conducted among a representative sample of the Jewish-Israeli older population (Eshel *et al.* 2016).

Several quantitative comparative studies conducted among young and older adults from the same region have revealed that the rate of older adults who develop post-traumatic symptoms is higher than the rate of younger adults (Gelkopf *et al.* 2012; Nuttman-Shwartz, Dekel and Regev 2015; Palgi, Gelkopf and Berger 2015). The study findings indicate that the age factor in itself was not related to responses. Rather, coping was found to be associated with previous exposure to traumatic events, personal

resources and particularly with one's economic situation. In addition, it was found that coping is related to community resources, and particularly to one's sense of belonging to the community and appraisals of community resilience (Palgi, Gelkopf and Berger 2015). In light of the debate in the literature and the dearth of research findings, the present study aimed to examine self-perceptions of coping patterns among older residents of rural communities near the Israeli border with Gaza during the Israel–Hamas war in the summer of 2014.

Against this background, the questions arise: What are the main themes and dilemmas that characterise older people living with an ongoing threat during a period of escalation? What are the emotions evoked during the threat that accompany the decisions of older people? What are the specific characteristics of coping among older residents of rural localities in the region? Do they choose to remain in their homes, or do they choose to join the younger residents and take a break from the region?

Method

Three focus groups were conducted at three different localities in September and October 2014, one to two months after the war. During that war, three residents of the area were killed – one four-year-old child whose family lived in one of the rural communities, and two adults who were security co-ordinators in a neighbourhood municipality. The sessions were attended by 43 older persons, all of whom were over age 65: 29 of the older participants (67%) were women. The first group had 25 participants, of whom 16 (64%) were women (group A); the second group had nine participants, all of whom were women (group B); and the third group had nine participants, of whom four (44%) were women (group C).

Instrument

Data were collected through three semi-structured focus groups, which are considered to be a comprehensive, effective and economical data collection method (Kitzinger 1995). The groups were conducted in two rural communities, and at the regional centre for the older people. Sessions lasted two to three hours. Participants were asked to introduce themselves, to describe their experiences during the war and to describe how they coped with the situation. They were also asked to talk about their experiences as residents of the region, and about their decision whether to stay in the area or leave. In addition, they were asked to relate to their accusations or to mention any other issues that came to mind which seemed to be connected to this reality.

Procedure

After a personal meeting with the researchers, and with the professional approval of the regional welfare department, the head of the local municipal services for the older people, and the gerontological social worker at the municipality, the co-ordinators of services for the older people were asked to invite older residents of the region to participate in a reflective meeting about their experiences during the war. All of the potential participants were informed in advance that the meeting would be documented for the purposes of the research. Written invitations to an open meeting were distributed to older residents in the region by the welfare workers and social workers for the older people. The researchers arrived at the meeting, and the focus groups began after the participants understood the aims of the meeting and the purpose of recording the sessions. The first two sessions were facilitated by two researchers, and the third session was facilitated by only one researcher. Both researchers are known in the region where the study was conducted. One of them is an expert in the field of trauma, and the other is an expert in the field of old age. Both of them have been working in the area on the Israeli border with Gaza in recent years, and have been exposed to the security threat themselves. All of the focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

The study utilised a qualitative-constructivist approach, which is based on thematic analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Thematic analysis relates to the participants' statements and descriptions, which reflect their feelings, thoughts, beliefs and knowledge. Thematic analysis focuses primarily on *what* the participants say, as opposed to structuralised analysis which focuses on *how* they say it. At every stage, the method of analysis is based on the transparency of the process (Miles, Huberman and Saldana 1994). The transcripts of the focus groups were analysed by the researchers with the aid of an external researcher on the basis of the qualitative content analysis method, which included three main steps: (a) reading the transcripts, and reviewing the different voices that emerge from them; (b) identifying the main units of meaning in each of the focus groups (Patton 1990; Unrau and Coleman 1997); and (c) organising the units of meaning into main themes that recurred in the content of the sessions. Following careful examination and re-examination of the transcripts, the units of meaning were organised into main themes that recurred in the content of the sessions. If the researchers disagreed about any of these aspects, they worked together to reach a consensus until the content was organised into units of meaning and general categories.

Findings

The research findings included four main themes: (a) *moral issues*: questions about leaving their place of residence or staying in the area; (b) *emotional issues*: the fluctuation between fear, 'abandonment *versus* courage', and maintaining a routine; (c) *intergenerational issues*: continuity *versus* change in generations; and (d) *resilience*: maintenance, containment and responsibility, as well as consideration of the future.

The findings will be presented by themes, sub-themes, gender (M = male, F = female) and group, and will include excerpts of statements by the participants.

(a) Moral issues

The main moral discussion was about *staying home versus leaving the community and the area* was one of the major issues discussed. The sub-themes related to this moral issue were: *external responsibility versus internal responsibility*, and *justifying their leaving*.

Staying home versus leaving the community.

External responsibility	If the military had issued a directive, I would have left. It's clear to me that they're thinking of my best interests; they know more than I do. (F, group C)
	The people in the 'war room' told me to go to my daughter. I didn't want to, but my daughter said, 'You have to do what they tell you. They know'. (F, group A)
Internal and personal responsibility	I spent all of the wars here – for more than 50 years… (M, group A)
	I'm more comfortable at [my] home [than at my kids' homes] … I admit that when I was at home there were situations when I didn't go to the sheltered room. (F, group B)
	We asked ourselves: Should we go to the children? How long can we sit in the line of fire? So we decided that every weekend we'd go … During the week we'd talk on the phone every day to prove that we're still alive. I think that leaving and coming back is just fine. (M, group A)
Justified their leaving as a family obligation	They [our children] phoned all the time … 'Come over, come over' [to their home which is in a safer place] … So I went. I only stayed home for a week because the kids wanted me to go to them … They didn't leave me alone, and they came to pick me up. I didn't really insist [on staying here at the kibbutz] … It's not bad to be with the kids now that they've grown up and we can talk. (F, group A)
	I left in order to help my kids … birthdays and babysitting … But I came back afterwards… (F, group B)

In addition, the participants mentioned several *meanings and associations related to leaving their place of residence*. These included *past personal associations and reactivation of the trauma, life story and assessment* and *thoughts about the end of life*.

Meaning and associations related to leaving the place of residence.

Past personal associations and reactivation of the trauma	Leaving my place of living was like being a refugee … We were refugees … I was with my kids for two weeks, I wasn't at home. I felt what it's like not to sleep in my own bed. Two weeks away from home, in a different bed… (F, group B)
Life story and assessment	I'm going back to Argentina [my country of origin]. (M, group A)
	I thought about leaving. I established something new … Not many people have this privilege. I have coped with everything that has happened here. Economics, security … There's a concept in Arabic, *zumud*, which describes my relationship with this place. [It means] no pathos. That's the relationship to this place … to the land. (M, group A)
Thinking about the end of life	The main factor is time; it took so much time … the time was difficult. Two or three weeks would have been good. What needs to happen to take me away from this place? … I have a burial plot [in a cynical tone and grim humoir] … this place is the best sheltered housing… (M, group A)

(b) Emotional issues

Emotional issues were also a major part of the discussions in the three focus groups, particularly in the first group. This group had a large number of participants who lived very close to the border, and the four-year-old boy who was killed belonged to this small community. The emotions expressed by the participants included: a *sense of fear*, as well as related emotions such as *helplessness, pain and fear of death* and *feelings related to relocation.*

Sense of fear. This was the first emotion the participants mentioned. They talked directly or indirectly about their fears, and some of them even ignored that feeling by describing it as 'lack of fear' or attributing the feeling to their family members.

Direct expression of a sense of fear	I don't want to go back [return to the kibbutz]. I'm scared. Defense, the economy … I don't know what's going to happen. It's very hard … hard to run to the sheltered room … From an economic point of view it's good to live here. But we need peace and quiet … I don't know what's going to happen next week … Every day [we worry] whether or not there will be rockets … I don't know if I can stand it. Maybe next time the crisis will be mine. (M, group A)
Inner debate related to fear responses	I've been here for 58 years. I was never afraid, and I'm not afraid now. There were wars here like the Sinai Campaign … there was less security. We're in the front line, they shot at us. (M, group A)
	I was also afraid – and not afraid. Or I kept my head in the sand – I was a fatalist. (M, group A)
	I was not afraid. There's a sheltered room … I was actually scared to go to the kids. A mortar bomb can fall. I knew that's the price. I've come to terms with it. (F, group C)

| Sense of fear attributed to family members | It bothered me to see my daughter's fear … I've been through enough in life … I worked in the garden my whole life. I'll die in the garden. It's a nice place … a nice and secure place … I'm not leaving … I have a burial plot on the hill. (M, group A) |

Related emotions.

Helplessness	During the War of Independence and during the War in 1973, the difficulty was clear. Now the routine is broken. Life is disrupted. You can't even sleep. Terrible fear. The news … The worst thing was the uncertainty. You're constantly on the alert. The red alert sirens … The hardest thing was taking a shower. Whenever I wanted to take a shower, I would wait. The next thing was going to the bathroom. At these moments mental things are difficult. You never know what's going to happen from one minute to the next. (M, group A)
Pain	The child's death caused huge damage here. This time we can't manage alone. Our resilience has been broken … maybe a lot. There is a crack … it's so painful [the participant cries]. (M, group A)
Fear of death	After three years without a husband and four years in the Holocaust, you learn a lot of things. It passes slowly … You're afraid … You hear colours … You grow up. Rockets landed right near me … Instead of crying, I opened the door. I was afraid, but I did it … I mustered strength. My experience from the war stayed with me … I didn't know I was like that … I didn't cry, didn't scream, it's inside. In this war I was at home. You hear noise all day and all night. In the ghetto it was something else … I'm calmer now. I'm not alone. It wasn't like that there. It was something else – life or death. (F, group B)

Feelings related to relocation or to leaving the community. The second track of emotions was evoked as a result of being relocated. The community was divided between those who left and those who preferred or were forced to stay. The participants who left the community expressed more negative feelings such as loneliness, feeling like a refugee, and feeling alien and abandoned. In contrast, the participants who stayed in the area expressed their anger and frustration towards the young families of the community as well as towards the policy makers, including the Israeli army commanders. Just a few participants showed empathy towards those who expressed fear and towards those who chose to leave the community.

Negative feelings about themselves	There was a feeling that you have to get to know people again. (F, group B)
	The people who weren't here became refugees for two months. They lived in difficult physical conditions. There were also those who felt isolated. (F, group A)
	They didn't help us; they didn't take care of me … no one helped. (M, group A)
Negative feelings towards others: towards young people	We're not with you guys. (M, group A)
	They expect us to do more. Good lord, they are 30 years old. Elsewhere they take care of themselves, and here they wait for us to do it… (M, group A)

Negative feelings towards others: towards the establishment	When you hear about how the army or the state acted, it doesn't do you good. (M, group A)
	How is the government going to help? … I'm not optimistic … The government won't solve the problem … The question is when the next attack from Hamas will be. The army is very organised – they put half of the country in shelters. (M, group B)
	This has been the hardest summer for me. The Southern Command Commander said everything's fine [and people can come back]. Afterwards the child was killed … I believe the Hamas more… (M, group A)
Positive feelings towards others	You can't blame young families for not being able to cope with the situation and when they have to leave the kibbutz. (F, group A)
	We need to understand the young families, I am concerned about them. (M, group A)

(c) Intergenerational issues: continuity versus generational change

The older participants in the study were first-generation residents of the kibbutzim who were enacting a vision of community and social values, in contrast to members of the next generation who felt less allegiance to the community, as reflected in the orientation towards individualism and privatisation which characterises the Western world. As such, the discussion moved beyond the issue of war to the issue of relationships between parents and children, as can be expected at the stage of ageing. The participants mentioned differences in the perspectives of parents and children, as well as differences in the spirit of the times from one generation to the next. It is important to note that this theme was mainly mentioned by participants in the first group, who were from the kibbutz where a child was killed. The war situation 'helps' the older people continue in the parenting role and see the differences between the older and younger generations.

The war situation stressed differences between the two generations.

Differences in level of functioning	I have a feeling that some people panic; they [the young families] 'lose it' [get hysterical]. You have to guide them [the young families] and lead them back on the right path. (M, group A)
	Maybe we told them [the young people] to come back in the hope that things would return to normal. Maybe we felt that was possible. We didn't push them to stay away [leave the community, the kibbutz]. (M, group A)
	We made superhuman efforts. We visited, we showed concern, we called every day … we went there… (F, group A)

Differences in emotions	After what happened, the young families lost faith … You can't raise children here … The kibbutz is split between the young members and the older members … The young members feel bad, and the older members feel guilty. The young members didn't function … We were the ones to maintain the grounds… (M, group A)
	The young families speak a different language … They want to keep their children, but we want to maintain the home … We are 'addicted' to this place. (M, group A)
	I don't feel what they feel … We feel that the real crisis lies in the young people leaving. (F, group A)

Other participants were able to accept and understand age differences as well as differences in family conditions, and expressed empathy in an attempt to bridge the gap between the generations.

The middle generation sees their children – every knock on the door … that makes the fear. I wasn't afraid – the young parents are responsible for their children. (M, group A)

You can't blame a family with babies for not being able to endure [the situation and reaching the] point when they have to travel to the North. We need to understand the young families, I am concerned about them. (M, group A)

Beyond the war, and maybe as a result of waking up to reality, some of the participants expressed a feeling of failure in their life's work and education. Others talked directly about their life stage. They mentioned that they had lots of experiences and were ready to end their life.

Feeling of failure	There's a lot of weakness because the kibbutz has been privatised, despite some remnants of the traditional communal values and ideology. You find out that most of the children are not here, and that's what hurts most. (M, group A)
	I feel like my life's work has been destroyed. We haven't made any achievements. This was a leading community, we've had our setbacks, and we've grown – but now? (F, group A)
	There is Zionism here. It's our life's work. We have not succeeded in transmitting it to the next generation, and that's very painful. (M, group A)
	If we don't have kids it will be silent here, like a cemetery … no children playing. Any community will die if there is no renewal. (M, group A)
End of life	The older people … however you look at it, we've lived most of our lives – even if something happens to us. (M, group A)
	By nature, we are older and more established; we don't have young children. (F, group A)

(d) Resilience versus weakness

The term 'resilience' was also raised in the group discourse ('living here [on the kibbutz] is resilience'). Beyond their declarations, the participants

considered whether they should stay on or leave, at least temporarily. This was framed by the participants in all three groups as a question of resilience *versus* weakness.

The participants raised this question, and offered a variety of possibilities ranging from the individual level to the level of the state. They mentioned the older members, the younger members, the security teams, welfare workers, sub-groups in the community, and even the army and the state. Most of them expressed their vulnerability and coined it as 'broken resilience', whereas others talked about the future. There were also positive expressions that shed light on the participants' lived experiences and their optimistic views.

Broken resilience	The child's death caused huge damage here. This time we can't manage alone. Our resilience has been broken … maybe a lot. There is a crack … it's so painful [the participant cries]. (M, group A)
	It was the breaking point. Everyone was on the lawn. I wasn't there on Friday. I was at my son's. It sounds so horrible. They [the young people] are frustrated. They don't know how to get out of it. They're in mortal fear. The child was killed – that's the end. This has been the hardest summer for me. The Southern Command Commander said everything's fine [and people can come back]. Afterwards the child was killed … I believe the Hamas more … What's the future for this place, for my home? (M, group A)
	The child was killed. It's painful. He left this world. You have to cope. For the young people it's a major blow. (M, group B)
	Now things have gone wrong. Our community has gone through a serious upheaval, and we're afraid people will leave. (M, group A)
Thoughts about the future, positive expressions of optimistic views	I'm optimistic about the future. We'll overcome this crisis … I'm not worried. We have enough resilience to withstand the changes. This place will stay alive … three new families are coming. (M, group A)
	Despite the difficulties and crises, there is enough energy to start getting back up. (M, group A)
	Optimism and the future go either up or down. Just as we can reach the bottom, we will also rise up. (M, group B)
	Some of the families will think twice about coming back or leaving … A lot of them will leave … but there's no choice … You have to swallow it and go on. I think it's not a question of resilience or strength, the mission is to rebuild… (M, group A)
	We are here now, and we will be here tomorrow – I and my children. I remember last time it was very difficult, and we continue … Last month it was hard … and we are still here … [we are] together and even learn more … we will continue, you'll see… (F, group C)

Discussion

The findings presented here reflect the main dilemmas of the older residents during the latest war between Israel and the Hamas. The themes raised by the participants can be categorised as: (a) issues relating to the normative developmental stage of the older participants (*e.g.* the issue of intergenerational conflict, including questions about the future and the legacy that the participants leave behind, as well as questions about the ability to face reality and engage in self-examination (Gould 1978; Whitbourne 1985); (b) the moral question relating to the image and identity of their community in the contemporary era and processes of expansion from a collective society to a society that emphasises individualism (Itzhaky 2003); and (c) issues relating to the security situation and exposure to threat, which include questions relating to traumatic experiences and questions relating to emotional and behavioural coping patterns, as well as questions relating to resilience (Bonanno, Romero and Klein 2015; Fossion *et al.* 2015). Beyond that, the findings revealed that the issues are intertwined, and that they need to be considered together.

The most significant emotional aspect was the fear reaction that accompanied continuous exposure, which other studies have found to play a dominant role in understanding the implications of the phenomenon. Fear of the next missile attack shapes coping patterns more than fear of a missile that has already fallen (Diamond *et al.* 2010). However, the participants were clearly apprehensive about emphasising this reaction, possibly due to their historical ethos as well as to behaviour norms relating to their ideology and their past, as well as to their preferred perspectives of resilience. The findings shed light on the emergence of a breach in beliefs about staying on the border, belief in the mission and faith in the establishment. Similar motifs have been found in previous studies conducted among residents of the city closest to the border (Dekel and Nuttman-Shwartz 2009; Diamond *et al.* 2010).

The discussion of fear and fearlessness was characterised by a dichotomous perspective which attests to the emotional aspect of responses to traumatic events, as well as to the behavioural aspect of those responses and to the role of interpersonal relations (Price 2007). The participants noted that when the feeling of helplessness was accompanied by a division in the community, it reduced the participants' personal ability to function, posed a burden for their families and left them in a position where they were waiting for someone from outside to make a decision about the best situation for them. Some of the participants could not reconcile the division. It aroused anger and hostility, which was mainly directed towards

the younger members who responded and behaved differently (Finklestein 2016). The division also aroused hostility towards others who accepted the decisions, acted differently than they did in the past and deviated from the accepted norm. This situation has been found to characterise conflicts related to terror, war and continuous traumatic exposure (Raufman and Weinberg 2015).

With regard to the issue of living in the shadow of war, the findings indicate that the participants talked about personal, family and community patterns of coping with the threat. These coping patterns, which were translated into proactive behaviour at the time of the military operation, have been found in previous research and are consistent with the age of the participants in this study (Kahana and Kahana 1996). A comprehensive examination of the findings reveals that the participants focused not only on fear responses (and fearlessness), but also on issues of location-based identity and community, *i.e.* the questions of leaving their place of residence and responsibility. The concern with these aspects increased after people were hurt and one child was killed – events that made the existential struggle real.

The references to history and feelings such as attachment to the land highlighted the participants' past experiences and their associations with the question of staying in the area or leaving in an emergency. As shown in the literature, at the stage of late adulthood events in the past, including traumatic history, often shape the present and the future. Therefore, it is not surprising that the participants talked about the experience of being refugees, the need to settle the land and the importance that they attribute to the land. Whereas recollections and reconstruction of these traumatic experiences can be viewed as part of the developmental stage of age and ageing (Fossion *et al.* 2015), they can also be viewed as part of coping processes in late adulthood (Sneed and Whitbourne 2005). The references to feelings of attachment and belonging to the place and to the land have also been revealed in other studies on evacuation following natural disasters and political evacuations (Billig 2013). On the whole, there were no substantial gender differences in the participants' responses. However, among the participants from the community where the child was killed the men played a more dominant role in the group discussion than the women.

The dilemma of staying in their community or leaving focused not only on the security situation and the participants' sense of security. Beyond that, the participants mentioned age-related issues such as the aspect of continuity, particularly in the context of family ties and intergenerational relationships. The issue of following in the parents' footsteps and perpetuating their life's work, on the one hand, and the desire to create a better future for their children, on the other, was not necessarily an outcome of the security situation. It is possible that the security situation limited the boundaries of

the discourse and the choice about continuity or independence for the older participants as well as for their adult offspring. The fact that most of the participants' children had chosen to leave created an emotional and instrumental void for the parents. According to Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources theory, this situation can also impair the parents' ability to cope with security problems. In addition, it is possible that those parent–child dynamics are projected to all of the community residents, regardless of concrete family relationships. As expected of other people who are ageing, the participants complained about their children, questioned their behaviour patterns and even made an effort to continue performing the parental role. However, consistent with the findings of other studies, the participants felt that because they were old and often had functional disabilities, they had become dependent on their children (Palgi, Gelkopf and Berger 2015). In addition, as found in previous research, exposure to tension might harm and change interpersonal and family relations and functioning (Pagorek-Eshel and Dekel 2015). As mentioned, this issue was raised mainly during the period after the war, when the participants talked about the conflict between the younger and older members, as well as about conflicts among the older members themselves.

It is important to realise that participants of the community in which the child was killed mentioned that event and talked about the impact that the death of a four-year-old child who was hit by a mortar bomb had on general plans to raise children in the region and on the possibility for young families to live in the community. Some of the participants used the security situation as an opportunity to maintain their parental role, even though their children were mature enough to manage by themselves and even had families of their own.

A good and supportive subjective view of intergenerational family relations provided the basis for the narrative and for the way that the participants described leaving the area during the war. It may also have provided them with legitimation for leaving the place, which they described as a response to their children's needs (babysitting, taking a break for short intervals). In extreme cases, they described it as evacuation and being refugees. Thus, besides enabling the participants to provide instrumental help, this pattern also served as a defensive solution for their mental state, which derived from the moral and ideological changes they were witnessing in their community as well as from the need to cope with the security situation.

Another perspective elicited from the participants' statements relates to the situation in which the offspring of the older members left and young families joined the community. In this connection, the participants expressed a sense of sadness and disappointment with their offspring who did not follow in their footsteps, as well as disappointment with the new

families, many of whom lack the roots and ideology of the founding generation. Besides the intergenerational conflict, which takes place beyond the immediate crisis generated by the military operation, only a few of the participants talked about the future. This situation might derive from the changes that are taking place in the communities, which make it difficult to create a future. It may also be reflected in the existential fear expressed by all of the participants. Thus, the developmental and generational conflicts are combined with the ideological conflict about the future of the community and the future of the collective orientation. As mentioned, the participants also expressed the clear dilemma with regard to staying or leaving, even temporarily, while coping with life in the shadow of war.

In addition, the findings shed light on the internal and public negotiations that are taking place with regard to resilience. It is interesting to note that most of the statements related to personal responsibility for managing the situation. This might be indicative of the participants' generational role (Spector-Mersel 2008), as reflected in high resilience (Bonanno 2004). The generational role is also reflected in statements that are consistent with the participants' age and derive from their life experience as well as from past events in their lives, which they used in an attempt to attribute meaning to the current problem (Carstensen 1995; Fossion *et al.* 2015).

Although the participants reported high levels of functioning and a sense of personal resilience, they had difficulty communicating with their children who chose to leave. In addition, they had difficulty negotiating with other entities within and outside the community as well as with the service providers who were responsible for the regional community system, with the army and with the government authorities. The experience of detachment, incomprehension and even betrayal by the authorities described by the participants in this study is consistent with the results of previous research which revealed that these feelings accompanied continuous exposure to missile attacks and even reduced the sense of resilience among residents in the area (Diamond *et al.* 2010).

The high intensity and long duration of the most recent threat may have changed the participants' balance of personal resilience and reduced their ability to seek help. This explanation is supported by other results, which have shown that ageing people have difficulty dealing with continuous exposure to threat (Palgi, Gelkopf and Berger 2015). Moreover, it is possible that the participants' insistence on performing essential functions and on emphasising their role as parents and grandparents served to reinforce their sense of personal resistance. Furthermore, contrary to prevailing opinion and to the findings of previous studies on the sense of belonging to the community (Nuttman-Shwartz, Dekel and Regev 2015),

very few participants mentioned the community and social systems that provide services. Evidently they relied mainly on themselves and on their family members. In fact, the older population of kibbutzim is considered to be a strong population that maintains supportive relationships with their families (Dahan and Schwartz 2014).

The findings indicate that there is a range of resilience levels, with 'I fend for myself' at one extreme, and 'lack of control' and 'dependence on others' at the other extreme. In this case, 'others' ranged from family members at one end to external factors at the other (particularly the army which gives instructions about what to do). This extreme end of the continuum caused major disappointment following the resumption of fire after the army gave an order to return, and particularly in light of the tragic events that occurred when the families returned – the ultimate tragedy being the death of a four-year-old boy from a mortar bomb. Without a doubt, this tragic outcome reduced the confidence of individuals in the state and government institutions, which in turn reduced their sense of resilience. The fact that the decision to stay or leave was not accompanied by clear instructions forced people to listen to themselves. In keeping with other research findings, the results of this study emphasised that efforts to organise at the individual, interpersonal and family levels provided reinforcement to the participants and their families, and enabled them to cope successfully with the threat and the war. However, at the community and system-wide levels, the participants' sense of resilience was undermined. Their inability to benefit from the resources that were provided, and the community's inability to engage in a dialogue with its members about their needs and responses, constituted a shortcoming in terms of ecological resilience (Ungar 2013). Studies have shown that the government should provide services and assume responsibility in order to increase the resilience of the residents of these areas (Bonanno *et al.* 2015).

Before concluding, some limitations of the study should be mentioned. The communities that were examined do not reflect the situation in all of the localities in the region. Nor did the study examine the participants' perspectives before the military tensions (14 years ago) and before the present confrontation. In addition, although the sample was homogeneous in terms of the identity and location of the community, it was not homogeneous in terms of age, as it included a wide range of older participants between the ages of 65 and 90. Nonetheless, the themes raised by the participants were consistent. Furthermore, the younger residents in those communities were not asked about their coping strategies during the operation or about their perspective of the coping strategies adopted by the older residents. This information would enhance the validity of the older participants' subjective experience regarding the functioning of the community as a whole and their own functioning during the army operation.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings of this study make an important contribution to understanding the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes that characterise war and continuous threat situations, as well as to understanding the issue of coping with those situations. Moreover, the findings indicate that the continuous threat posed a challenge for the older residents and for the community as a whole in terms of security as well as in terms of social, generational and developmental aspects.

The findings highlight that coping patterns derive from the participants' life stage, from the changing kibbutz structures and the intergenerational differences in those patterns. Hence, before the next confrontation there is a need to continue examining issues such as: intergenerational relations; the social, ideological and identity changes in the community; and how to enhance resilience among individuals and communities in order to improve their natural attributes and enhance their ability for containment. In addition, a contingency plan should be devised to evacuate and protect residents so that no one is neglected. Finally, we recommend that future research should deal with the relevance of ecological, trauma and resilience models to personal, community and public coping in normal routine situations and in emergencies. It would also be worthwhile examining these issues from a comparative perspective among other groups of participants and under other conditions.

Acknowledgement

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