



Determinants of individual resilience following missile attacks: A new perspective



Yohanan Eshel ^{*}, Shaul Kimhi

Departments of Psychology, Tel Hai College, Israel

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ABSTRACT

The current study promotes a relatively new index of individual resilience, based on one's post adversity strength to vulnerability ratio. It examines the contribution of four variables to individual resilience: community and national resilience, well-being and exposure to war and terror adversities; as well as the mediating/moderating effects of sense of coherence and sense of danger. The data was collected four months after Israel's war with the Gaza Strip in 2014. The sample included 510 adult civilians, 251 who live in southern Israel and were threatened directly by massive missile fire, and 259 who live in northern Israel, which has not been under missile fire recently. Results supported the significant role of these four determinants and the two mediators as predictors and validators of individual resilience. No significant differences were found between the two samples. Results were discussed in terms of the nature of resilience as a personality attribute.

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1. A new perspective on individual resilience

People are exposed to adversities throughout their lives. More resilient people respond to traumatic events by transient disruptions in their ability to function, whereas less resilient individuals are more substantially affected by them. Resilience is “the personal quality that enables one to thrive in the face of adversity” (Connor & Davidson, 2003, p. 76). Resilience has been defined in terms of a recovery from traumatic events, that is, as “an individual's stability or quick recovery (or even growth) under significant adverse conditions” (Leipold & Greve, 2009, p. 41), or as “the capacity of a dynamic system to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten stability, viability, and development” (Masten, 2011, p. 494).

Several authors have argued that defining resilience merely by its recovery components may obscure its dual nature as a dynamic integration of positive adaptation and pathological processes (Kimhi & Eshel, 2015; Masten, 2011). According to this perspective, higher resilience reflects the degree to which the impact of post adversity risk factors is countered by post adversity recovery strength, whereas lower resilience reflects a level of risk factors which is higher than this stress-resistant strength. Lavee, McCubbin, and Olson (1987) have similarly observed that family resilience reflects simultaneously the effects of protective factors, and the impact of family risk factors.

These theoretical perspective of the dual nature of resilience did not result in either an agreed upon definition or an agreed upon measure, and only a few studies have investigated resilience simultaneously in

terms of beneficial as well as detrimental responses to adversity (e.g., Eshel & Kimhi, 2015b). The contribution of the present research is the empirical affirmation of the contention that resilience should be determined concurrently by individual strength and vulnerability. We define resilience therefore, as the balance of individual strength (protective factors) and vulnerability (risk factors) following an adversity or a traumatic event. Individual strength to vulnerability ratio (SVR) will thus be determined by level of perceived recovery from adversity, divided by level of reported post adversity distress symptoms.

1.1. Recovery

Recovery from war adversity was examined in two large scale Israeli studies of the aftermath of the 2006 war with Lebanon. These studies indicated that posttraumatic recovery constitutes a beneficial psychological resource which supports coping with traumatic events, even though pre-trauma status has not been restored. Posttraumatic recovery positively correlated with family cohesiveness, and negatively associated with both level of distress symptoms and sense of danger (Kimhi, Eshel, Zysberg, & Hantman, 2010).

1.2. Distress symptoms

War and terror attacks may shake people's basic sense of security and give rise to posttraumatic symptoms. These symptoms may include delayed emotional and behavioral problems, depression, anxiety, grief, and PTSD (Hadi, Llabre, & Spitzer, 2006).

A study of over 800 Israeli civilians, who were affected by the 2006 Israel–Lebanon war, has validated the SVR index by demonstrating

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: yesheh@psy.haifa (Y. Eshel).

that it was positively predicted by resilience-promoting factors, and negatively predicted by sense of danger (Eshel, Kimhi & Goroshit, 2014). Somewhat similar results were obtained in a study of 230 high school Druze students whose hometown was threatened by the 2010 Mount Carmel wildfire (Eshel, Majdoub & Goroshit, 2014).

The present study further validates the SVR index of individual resilience by correlating it with resilience-supporting factors and with a resilience-suppressing variable. Following previous findings we hypothesize that sense of danger, will moderate the effects of resilience promoting variables, and will mediate the effects of resilience suppressing factors, on SVR. SOC will have an opposite effects on these variables (Kimhi et al., 2010; Eriksson & Lindström, 2007).

2. Resilience-promoting and resilience-suppressing factors

2.1. Community resilience

Community resilience pertains to perceptions and feelings concerning the ability of communities to recover from, or adjust to adversity or continuous stress (Obrist, Pfeiffer, & Henley, 2010). These perceptions reflect “a process linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance” (Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, & Pfefferbaum, 2008, p. 30).

More resilient communities show higher ability to cope with, prevail, and recover from adversities compared to communities who are less resilient (Kimhi & Shamai, 2004). Research shows that community resilience has positively been linked with individual resilience (Eshel & Kimhi, 2015c; Leykin, Lahad, Cohen, Goldberg, & Aharonson-Daniel, 2013).

2.2. National resilience

Resilience can be investigated as a broader societal phenomenon of national resilience. Ben-Dor, Pedahzur, Canetti-Nisim, and Zaidise (2002) reasoned that national resilience is expressed by people's feelings of patriotism, optimism, social integration, and trust in political and public institutions. These feelings have been displayed with durable stability in face of national adversity (Elran, 2006). National resilience in Israel has been positively associated with level of community cohesiveness (Kimhi, Goroshit, & Eshel, 2013), and negatively correlated with exposure to terror acts (Eshel & Kimhi, 2015a).

National and community resilience refer to perceptions and feelings of people concerning the state of their communities or nations (Norris et al., 2008). Both community and national resilience are assessed, therefore, by individual perceptions of their sustainability, rather than by their actual resources (e.g., Elran, 2006).

2.3. Well-being

Well-being refers to evaluating quality of life as satisfying and fulfilling (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Well-being is positively correlated with individual resilience (Eshel & Kimhi, 2015b).

2.4. Exposure

Exposure to war and terror attacks detrimentally affects resilience (Kimhi & Shamai, 2004). Greater exposure correlated positively with level of distress symptoms (Besser, Zeigler-Hill, Weinberg, Pincus, & Neria, 2015). We hypothesize that exposure to adversity will be negatively correlated with individual SVR.

2.5. Sense of coherence (SOC)

SOC is a major psychologically based stress-resistance resource in Antonovsky's (1993) salutogenic theory. Higher SOC indicates an ability

to cope with adversities such as war (Braun-Lewensohn & Sagy, 2014), or level of depression (Roth & Ekblad, 2006).

2.6. Sense of danger

People differ in their level of fear of future calamities and dangers (Solomon & Prager, 1992). A lingering sense of danger plays a major role in post-war adaptation (Scott, Poulin, & Cohen Silver, 2012). A high sense of danger was associated with higher level of exposure to war afflictions, and distress symptoms, and lower level of recovery from war experiences (Kimhi et al., 2010).

The present study was conducted after the July–August 2014 Israel–Gaza war. Southern Israel was extensively attacked in these months by thousands of rockets and shells fired from the Gaza Strip. The northern part of Israel was not directly threatened by these hostilities. This study has two purposes. First, to further validate a new index of individual resilience (SVR), by correlating it with resilience promoting, and resilience-suppressing factors; and second, to examine the impact of a proximal and a distal war on the general public, by comparing the responses of civilians who were threatened by extensive missile fire, with those who were too far from the war zone, and have not been under missile fire recently.

Effects of wars and acts of terror have often been studied as distinct traumatic experiences (Hadi et al., 2006). This approach seems to be inappropriate for investigating positive and negative responses to war in the Israeli setting. In a small country, which copes with an intractable inter-national conflict, past hostilities are not forgotten, and new hostilities are likely to evoke and enhance prior anxieties and undermine individual confidence. Under these circumstances wars cannot be divided into proximal and distal events due to a constant awareness that immunity is never guaranteed, and terror attacks can reach everybody. We hypothesize that the two investigated samples will respond similarly to a distal and to a proximal war.

The following hypotheses are investigated:

1. Despite their differences in proximity to missile fire, the southern and the northern samples will not differ significantly in their psychological reactions following the Gaza Strip war.
2. SVR will be positively associated with community resilience, national resilience, well-being and SOC, and negatively correlated with sense of danger and exposure to war adversities.
3. The effects of community resilience, national resilience, well-being, and exposure to war on SVR will be mediated by both SOC and sense of danger.

3. Method

3.1. Data collection and sampling

Recruiting of participants for this study was conducted by an on-line Israeli survey research organization which employs a panel of over 30,000 subjects representing every sector of Israel (Ayalon, 2009). The present random stratified sample consisted of 259 adult Jewish civilians who lived in northern Israel, out of the range of missiles, and 251 comparable adults who lived in southern Israel, within the range of missiles. Participants' average age was 42.67 years ($sd = 15.43$), 257 were women, and 253 were men, 55.7% of them have had less than academic education, 75.1% earned no more than average income, 59.8% of them were secular, and 85.1% held right wing or center political attitudes. Their communities ranged between several hundred to over 100,000 people. The research questionnaire, which was carefully pilot-tested, was administered via the internet, on December 2014.

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