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Socio-psychological implications for an occupying society: The case of Israel

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Abstract

Although prolonged occupation of a nation is no longer a common phenomenon, where it does exist, it bears harsh implications for all parties involved. This article examines the socio-psychological implications of occupation on the occupying society, using the case of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip since 1967 as an example. The article first delineates the concept of occupation from a socio-psychological perspective, which supplements the legal-formal aspect. The authors then propose a conceptual framework that analyzes the psychology of the occupying society. Within this framework, they describe the psychological challenges that the occupation may pose to the members of the occupying society. Next, they introduce psychological mechanisms that members of an occupying society may use in order to avoid facing these challenges. Finally, they offer a number of ideas regarding the relationship between these mechanisms and the process of ending the occupation.

Introduction

In a speech that attempted to explain the rationale of his 'disengagement plan', the former prime minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon, said that he had reached the conclusion that 'it is impossible to hold 3.5 million Palestinians under *occupation*' and that 'the *occupation* cannot last indefinitely' (Likud party meeting at the Knesset, 26 May 2003; emphasis added). Although this statement did not convey anything new regarding Sharon's practical plans, his choice of words was astonishingly novel and surprising. One of the founding fathers and major executors of the settlement enterprise in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, who for a long time regarded these territories as *liberated regions of Greater Israel*, Sharon had actually used the word *occupation*. The powerful public reaction to Sharon's

words brought forth a highly significant question – what is it about the term *occupation* that generates such intense psychological reactions?

Indeed, awareness of the psychological significance of the term 'occupation' has been evident in the Israeli social-political discourse for decades. In this sense, Sharon's statement constitutes the closing of a cycle, which may have begun with the summary of a discussion between Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin and Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan that had taken place about six weeks after the end of the 1967 war (for the complete story, see

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Segev, 2005). The original notes referred to one of the topics on the agenda as 'occurrences in the occupied territories'. A few days later, 'an invisible hand' amended the protocol in handwriting and replaced the term 'occupied territories' with the term 'liberated territories' – the latter term having more favorable social-political connotations even at this early stage.

In the present article, we explore the meanings and the processes that accompany a state of occupation from the socio-psychological viewpoint of the occupying society. We attempt to portray the manner in which individuals perceive the state of occupation, the psychological challenges that such a state may pose to the occupying society, and the mechanisms that such a society may employ in order to avoid negative experiences resulting from those challenges. The analysis will be conducted on two levels – one is the presentation of the theoretical and conceptual framework, and the other is a possible application of the model to the Israeli-Jewish society.

Occupation: A conceptual delineation

A review of the literature reveals that most current definitions of the term occupation are found in the field of international law (for an exception, see Carlton, 1992). These definitions deal with situations where international law considers occupation as a formal procedure that has implications for the relationship between the occupying force and the occupied population. The most prominent characteristic of occupation, according to these definitions, is its temporary nature. Hence, the occupant is forbidden from taking actions that introduce permanent changes in the occupied territory (see Benvenisti, 1993; Playfair, 1989, 1992; Roberts, 1985, 1990). In addition, the legal definitions reveal that occupation is usually seen as a possible unplanned by-product of military activities which result in the conquering party ruling a territory that is recognized as belonging to the defeated party. Therefore, such a situation is usually regarded as 'belligerent' or 'military' occupation (McCarthy, 2005; Rivkin & Bartram, 2003).

However, the history of the last two centuries has demonstrated that occupation may also be a long-term outcome of a threat to use force, of agreement and status quo, or may even be created on the basis of peace agreements (e.g. the German occupation of Bosnia in 1939 and of Denmark in 1940). These changes have shifted the emphasis from warlike acts that result in occupation to the phenomenon and its mechanisms (for elaboration, see Roberts, 1985).

Accordingly, a currently common definition for occupation is 'effective control of a certain power (be it one or several states or an international organization), over a territory which is not under the formal sovereignty of that entity, without the volition of the actual sovereigns of that territory' (Benvenisti, 1993: 4). Edelstein (2004) adds that this refers to temporary control of the territory by a state that does not claim the right for permanent sovereignty over the territory. This distinguishes occupation from colonialism or annexation, where the occupant does not necessarily intend to vacate the territory in the future (see Lustick, 1993).

Roberts (1985) distinguished between 17 types of military occupation that vary in terms of the circumstances in which they occur, the degree of consent of the occupied to the action, the identity of the occupying entity, and the former status of the occupied territory. A most relevant aspect to the present discussion is the duration of the occupation, which may reflect its essence as well as the goals of the occupant. If the occupation is perceived – by both occupier and occupied – as temporary from the outset, intended to protect the military interests of the occupier and to prevent the occupied territory from becoming a source of instability, then both the occupier and the occupied will likely strive to end it as quickly as possible (Edelstein, 2004).

Roberts (1990) argued that the legal definition of occupation is based on an implied assumption that it is a temporary state that may end or change status within a short period of time. Accordingly, he suggested that 'prolonged occupation' must be regarded as a category that is entirely distinct from temporary military occupation. He defined prolonged occupation as lasting more than five years and continuing even when military hostilities subside or cease. In addition, prolonged occupation raises legal questions concerning the aims of the occupier, who may intend to change the status of the occupied territory. This situation may occasionally lead to pressure from the international community calling for termination of the occupation (see Roberts, 1990, for elaboration).

We would like to suggest that an occupation that lasts for an extended period may also contribute to the development of specific socio-psychological processes among members of the occupying society. The length of time is a significant factor in the evolvement of the violent relationship with the occupied society and in the need to cope with the views of the international community. Length of time also sharpens the intentions of the occupier and eventually requires socio-psychological clarification of the emerged reality. Hence, in the present discussion, we will refer only to the category of *prolonged occupation* as defined by Roberts (1990).

Delineation of the socio-psychological implications

Although most of the definitions of occupation are found in legal texts, occupation may also have extensive socio-psychological implications. In general, the definition of any given state depends on individuals' perception of reality, which, in turn, is a function of their ideologies, beliefs, values and/or motives – an aspect that is not exhausted in the legal sphere. Hence, we propose that a comprehensive definition of occupation must include a socio-psychological aspect in addition to the formal-legal aspect.

Our discussion of the psychology of the occupation adopts a contemporary Western view of this reality, which is informed by liberal values and norms that have developed since the end of World War II. Lustick (1993) argues that empires in the modern world are expected to break down. Contemporary liberal discourse, with its emphasis on equality and personal and

collective civil and human rights (such as the right to self-determination), presumably influences the moral stance on occupation significantly (Howe, 2002). An example of this can be found in the first Geneva protocol from 1977, which applies to situations where nations fight for their right to self determination against 'colonial domination, foreign occupation and against racist regimes', all of which are mentioned as equivalents (see also Roberts, 1985).

In keeping with this position, it may be suggested that from a psychological perspective, the term 'occupation' bears negative connotations: it indicates an inherent conflict of interest between occupier and occupied; it means that the context is characterized by violence; it reflects wrongdoing, injustice, and immorality; it involves a large degree of empathy toward the occupied and a negative attitude towards the occupier; and finally, it conveys an expectation that the situation is temporary and will be terminated.

This definition, with its associated meanings, confronts the occupants with difficulties relating to their relationship with the occupied population and with the international community. But of special importance are challenges posed to the occupants' individual and collective self-image. These challenges result from the basic need of society members to view their group positively, including a perception of the group as moral, because their personal self-esteem draws from the esteem of groups to which they belong (Tajfel, 1978, 1981). All this adds to the humane, cultural, and occasionally financial cost that prolonged occupation inflicts on the occupying society.

We suggest that, under these circumstances, for an occupation to persist, the occupying society must be driven by deep and significant motives to maintain it. Furthermore, in order to avoid psychological difficulties, occupying societies will likely refuse to accept the definition of their reality as a state of occupation. In this context, certain situations may be defined as occupation according to international law, yet may not be experienced psychologically as such by the members of the occupying group. For example, the Turkish invasion of north Cyprus in the summer of 1974 was defined by Cyprus, the United Nations, and the European Commission of Human Rights as occupation. But the Turkish authorities in the area, who declared the establishment of the 'Turkish Republic of North Cyprus' in 1983, viewed themselves as legitimate sovereign rulers (Roberts, 1985). When the international community defines a certain situation as occupation, but the members of the occupying group do not perceive it as such, voluntary termination of the occupation is unlikely. In contrast, when the perception of the occupants is consistent with the legal definition of the international community, a deterministic state of progress toward terminating the occupation would ensue.

The Israeli occupation

While many countries in the world were moving towards ending periods of occupation, colonialism, and imperialism, Israel, paradoxically, progressed in the opposite direction. A prevalent assumption among most analysts of Israeli policy following the 1967 war, when the territories of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Golan Heights were seized, is that the prolonged occupation, rather than being the result of a well-considered decision-making process, is the product of an inability to decide or a 'decision not to decide' (Gazit, 1999; for an alternative view, see Pedatzur, 1996).

There are profound discrepancies between Israel's formal legal position and the prevalent stance in forums of international law (Benvenisty, 1993). As a rule, ever since June 1967, the Israeli government has maintained in all international forums that the territories do not constitute 'occupied territories'. This argument was based on the supposition that the territories had never been under either Jordanian or Egyptian sovereignty. Thus, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) cannot be seen as an occupier that has taken the territories from their legal owners (Playfair, 1989; Roberts, 1985). Israel preferred to regard the territories as being 'under dispute', which extended the room to maneuver in future negotiations.

Nonetheless, a degree of ambivalence has slipped into Israeli policy, because in practice, it actually has responded to some of the laws pertaining to an occupying force (Roberts, 1990). Shortly after the end of the 1967 war, then Attorney General Meir Shamgar determined that the Israeli military administration of the territories would obey the rules of international law 'out of its own good will', and would even agree to be subjected to the effective scrutiny of the Supreme Court. However, as years went by, the influence of this legal perception on Israel's conduct in the territories weakened, many self-imposed restrictions became loosened, and Jewish settlements prospered.

The socio-psychological challenges of an occupying society

As mentioned, it seems that maintaining a state of occupation may pose considerable challenges to the occupying society. These challenges can be categorized into two general groups: challenges that originate from external sources and challenges that originate within the occupying society. External challenges may include political and physical resistance by the occupied society, as well as pressure from the international community. Internally, an occupation can create economic, political, and psychological strains. While we recognize the importance of these external challenges, as well as internal politics, our focus in the present article is on the internal socio-psychological difficulties that an occupying society may face.

Our entire conceptual analysis is based upon the notion that similarly to individuals, societies are characterized by collective psychological processes. According to this assumption, which is rooted in the seminal writings of Durkheim (1953) and Freud (1915/1961), society members who live in a common physical and psychological context share, at least to some extent, norms, symbols, values, and a repertoire of beliefs,

emotions, and psychological mechanisms (see also Geertz, 1973; or Parsons, 1951).

Social-psychological research has demonstrated that societies are capable of creating common belief systems and imparting them to their members (Fraser & Gaskell, 1990; McDougall, 1920; McGuire, 1986; Moscovici, 1988). Furthermore, additional lines of research indicate that societal beliefs and ideologies may be employed in order to justify a group's advantage over others and portray it as legitimate (Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Hence, it will not be too far-reaching to suggest that in certain situations, societies face common psychological challenges and use collective mechanisms in order to address them (Alexander et al., 2004). In recent decades, scholars have pointed to extensive use of psychodynamic mechanisms, such as denial (Cohen, 2001; Zerubavel, 2006) by groups and collectives (Anzieu, 1984; Volkan, 1999), as well as psycho-social mechanisms, such as creating a common cultural worldview (Greenberg, Solomon & Pyszczynski, 1997).

Based on the reviewed literature, it is suggested that collective processes may also be identified with respect to psychological challenges resulting from long-term occupation as well as mechanisms of coping with them. Having said that, we do not suggest that occupying societies should be considered as homogeneous units. The degree to which society members adopt ideological and religious beliefs that justify maintaining the occupation may vary, leading to differences in the degree to which they experience psychological difficulties resulting from the occupation. For example, in the Israeli context, we may observe a gradual process of change, from a very broad consensus regarding the control of the seized territories immediately after the 1967 war (Stone, 1982) to a deep dispute about the fate of these territories in present times (Peace Index). Nevertheless, we maintain that as far as prolonged occupations are concerned, the societal challenges and mechanisms presented below affect a large majority of society members, characterize the group as a whole, and provide an orientation for the group's behavior in the context of occupation.

As mentioned above, the central psychological challenge that an occupying group faces is *maintenance of positive self-esteem*. Individuals are motivated to create and maintain a positive view of themselves, especially as moral, humane, good, and nonviolent (Dunning, 1999; Kunda, 1987; Swann, 1996). As a result of this motivation, many cognitive and emotional processes are biased in a self-enhancing direction (Dunning, 1999; Kunda, 1987; Larson, 1977; Weinstein & Klein, 1996).

The motivation to maintain positive self-esteem applies to the group level as well. According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals derive part of their self-esteem from the groups to which they belong and with which they identify. Hence, the desire for positive self-esteem creates a tendency to enhance and improve the image of one's ingroup, especially when the levels of identification and commitment to the group are high (Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 2002). One consequence of the motivation to maintain a positive view of the ingroup compared to other groups is the tendency to attribute positive ingroup behaviors and negative outgroup behaviors to stable dispositional factors, whereas negative ingroup behaviors and positive outgroup behaviors are 'explained away' by attribution to unstable situational factors (Hewstone, 1990). This 'ultimate attribution error' (Pettigrew, 1979) is also reflected in the 'linguistic intergroup bias', whereby positive ingroup behaviors and negative outgroup behaviors are described in abstract terms that imply stable dispositional attributions, while negative ingroup behaviors and positive outgroup behaviors are described in concrete terms, which imply more transient attributions (Maass, Ceccarelli & Rudin, 1996).

In situations of occupation (as well as other situations of conflict and war), members of the occupying group find themselves using force and violence, and at times performing acts that contradict moral norms. In addition, significant reference groups in the international community may express criticisms of acts performed as part of the occupation. Such processes pose threats to the self-esteem of the collective and its individual members. Hence, the central psychological challenge of an occupying society is resolving the discrepancies between the motivation to maintain positive self-esteem and the negative implications of the state of occupation.

Cognitive dissonance

The above-mentioned discrepancies may induce *cognitive dissonance*. Cognitive dissonance occurs when individuals hold discrepant cognitions or behave in ways that are inconsistent with their cognitions (Festinger, 1957), particularly if the behavior is inconsistent with their self-concept (Aronson, 1968). The inconsistency creates discomfort and a drive to reduce the dissonance. A later version of cognitive dissonance theory (Aronson, 1968) maintained that the dissonance is especially intense when individuals' behavior makes them feel incompetent or immoral. If members of an occupying group view themselves as moral and nonviolent, but are part of an occupying society that commits acts that are perceived as immoral, they may experience cognitive dissonance and strive to reduce it.

The research on cognitive dissonance has explored numerous strategies of reducing dissonance (Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Festinger, 1957), yet an extensive review of them is beyond the scope of the present article. We mention only those that appear particularly relevant to understanding sociopsychological processes in occupying societies. Early studies found that a necessary condition for experiences of dissonance is an absence of a clear justification for the behavior that contradicts the attitude or self-concept (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). Later studies (Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Linder, Cooper & Jones, 1967) revealed an additional condition for dissonance to arise, namely that the individuals performing the attitude-contradicting behavior believe that they are doing so out of their own free will and assume responsibility for it.

Accordingly, if the members of an occupying society believe that despite their usual moral and nonviolent nature, there is justification for aggressive or immoral behaviors towards the occupied group, they will not experience cognitive dissonance and will evade the resulting discomfort. The justification can be based, for instance, on the perception of the occupation as correcting an historic injustice. In other cases, the occupation may be seen as a situation into which the occupying society is forced in the absence of alternatives. As a result, the occupation will not be seen as an act of free will and dissonance will be reduced.

Self-discrepancies and guilt

The emotional implications of self-concept related discrepancies have been discussed elaborately in Higgins's (1987) 'Self Discrepancy Theory' (SDT), according to which, individuals hold perceptions of themselves as they are, namely 'actual selves', as well as perceptions of themselves as they would like to be, namely 'self guides'. There are two types of self guides: the 'ideal self' represents individuals' hopes, aspirations, and wishes regarding attributes they would like to possess; and the 'ought self' includes attributes that individuals believe they should or ought to have, referring to the their responsibilities and obligations.

Similarly to cognitive dissonance theory, SDT maintains that discrepancies between the actual self and the ideal or ought self induce negative experiences. But unlike cognitive dissonance theory, SDT specifies the emotional consequences of different types of discrepancies. A study by Bizman, Yinon & Krotman (2001) demonstrated that SDT's predictions regarding self-discrepancies and emotions apply to the group level. Israelis were asked to list attributes that the group of Israelis possesses (actual group self), attributes that they wish and hope the ideal Israeli would posses (ideal group self), and attributes that Israelis should possess (ought group self). In keeping with SDT, the findings showed that actual-ideal and actual-ought group discrepancies were associated with different types of group-based emotions. These relationships held true even after controlling for personal self-discrepancies, indicating that group discrepancies are distinct from personal discrepancies.

We suggest that in the context of occupation, the emotional consequences of actual-ought group discrepancies are particularly important. The state of occupation may lead the occupying society to behave in ways that are inconsistent with the manner in which they think they should behave according to their own norms and values, that is, the 'ought group self'. Conversely, an occupation will not necessarily create actual-ideal group discrepancies (as seen from the perspective of members of the occupying group), because the occupation may not contradict society members' aspirations and hopes. In fact, it may even be perceived as partially fulfilling these aspirations.

According to SDT, actual-ought discrepancies induce guilt (Higgins, 1987). Guilt is usually defined as a negative emotion that arises when individuals' behavior violates standards or rules by which they believe they should abide (Lewis, 1993; Tangney & Fischer, 1995). Thus, one of the challenges that an occupying society faces is coping with the guilt that may be evoked by the state of occupation and attempting to reduce it.

In actuality, only some members of the occupying group are directly involved in actions that violate moral standards or rules of behavior. The leaders who determine the occupation policy and the military personnel who execute it are usually those required to perform such acts. However, research has revealed that group members may experience group-based guilt for negative acts performed by their group towards the members of another group, even if they were not personally involved in these acts (Branscombe, Doosje & McGarty, 2002; Doosje et al., 1998; Powell, Branscombe & Schmitt, 2005). An additional study found that, in keeping with SDT, Israeli-Jewish participants asked to consider desired attributes of their ingroup experienced less collective guilt regarding their groups' treatment of the Arab minority in Israel than those asked to think about existing positive attributes of their group (Roccas, Klar & Liviatan, 2006).

Wohl, Branscombe & Klar (2006) suggest that because of the motivation to maintain a positive view of the ingroup, members of groups that have violated moral standards may engage in various group-protective strategies to reduce aversive experiences of guilt. Specifically, they suggest that perceiving the ingroup as responsible for the violation of norms or the harm to the outgroup as legitimate are some of the necessary conditions for emergence of collective guilt. Thus, members of occupying societies should be motivated to deny their group's responsibility for moral violations during the occupation or to perceive such violations as justified in order to reduce guilt.

Psychological mechanisms of coping with challenges of occupation

Examination of the socio-psychological challenges described above seems to warrant contemplation of the ways in which members of occupying groups cope with the challenges that they face. We believe that a comprehensive framework for understanding collective coping mechanisms requires integration of insights from psychoanalysis and from social psychological approaches. In order to achieve such integration, we follow other scholars (see Kruglanski, 1989) and distinguish between the dynamics, or the process, of coping and the content of specific cognitions that take part in this process (see Bar-Tal & Bar-Tal, 1988). Thus, our general description of coping processes is based on psychoanalytic insights, whereas the discussion of the particular beliefs and cognitions (i.e. contents) that serve these processes is rooted in social-psychological theories.

Social-psychological research has also dealt extensively with mechanisms that individuals employ in order to maintain positive self-esteem and avoid threats to self-esteem and negative

experiences resulting from self-discrepancies. This research was not based in psychoanalytic theorizing and therefore employed different terminologies. However, there are many parallels between the self-esteem protective mechanisms identified by social psychologists and the defense mechanisms described in psychoanalytic theory (see Baumeister, Dale & Sommer, 1998). In the present article, we have chosen to describe the mechanisms using psychoanalytic terminology but support them with empirical evidence from more contemporary social-psychological research, if such research exists.

Processes and mechanisms

Freud's (1915/1961) psychoanalytic theory proposes a system of mechanisms and processes to understand individuals' (and collectives') behavior, including but not limited to behavior in the face of the challenges we described. Specifically, Freud (1915/1961) and his successors identified a number of defense mechanisms that help individuals cope with the anxiety aroused by situations in which their own demeanor violates conventional values and norms. The reality of occupation clearly forces the occupier to face such situations.

Repression is a mechanism that suppresses threatening information and forces it to remain unconscious, thus protecting the person from its implications. As a result, individuals may claim that something had not occurred, does not exist, is not true or is unknown (Cohen, 2001). *Denial* is a mechanism that is considered closer to consciousness than repression. It is triggered in the vicinity of threatening information and creates an inclination to deny the information's existence. Evidence for the use of repression and denial may be found in studies, which revealed that individuals experience difficulties in remembering information that threatens their self-esteem (Kuiper & Derry, 1982; Mischel, Ebbesen & Zeiss, 1976), and they process such information in a limited, quick, and superficial manner (Baumeister & Cairns, 1992).

In the context of occupation, repression enables society members to reorganize their memories and knowledge in order to avoid the troubling truth (Zerubavel, 2006). As a result, they remain unconscious of wrongdoings and offensive behaviors towards the occupied population – all violations of accepted values – and therefore cannot experience guilt or pangs of conscience. Denial in the context of occupation may be manifest in the belief that the occupation is fair and just, or that it was needed, as well as in actual denial that such an act as an occupation is taking place (see Cohen, 2001, who suggests different types of denial). Paradoxically, if the occupiers believe that they have a right to the territory and that the occupied party is not entitled to the treatment afforded to any other nation and endangers the existence and safety of the occupying party, they will not consider the situation as an occupation. In the Israeli context, we may consider the denial of the Palestinians' national identity, as well as cover-ups of aggressions against Palestinians during the occupation, as instances of the mechanisms of repression and denial at work.

A similar mechanism is *avoidance*. Individuals using this mechanism distance themselves from situations that are dangerous or that may involve experiences that they find unacceptable. A manifestation of this mechanism may be avoidance of reading or receiving information about topics that arouse anxiety and moral dilemmas, thus avoiding the discomfort of having to face such information. Bandura (1999) noted that authorities that implicitly sanction harmful conduct would often intentionally keep themselves uninformed of the specific activities carried out in their name as a mechanism of morally disengaging from such acts.

In the context of the Israeli occupation, many Israelis refrain from exposing themselves to media reports that describe the situation in the occupied territories and especially the suffering of the Palestinians (Herzog & Lahad, 2006; Levy, 2006). The news media on their part are mainly interested in reaching the widest audience possible and therefore marginalize such reports under the pretext that 'the public is not interested' and so facilitate the use of the avoidance mechanism.

Projection appears when individuals find it difficult to accept their own negative qualities, particularly their aggressive tendencies, and therefore attribute these qualities or tendencies to others. Research has shown that the tendency to deny or avoid information about one's negative characteristics increases the tendency to attribute the same characteristics to others (Newman, Duff & Baumeister, 1997). In cases of international conflicts and situations of occupation, projection at the social level is manifested in the delegitimization and dehumanization of the opponent (Moses, 2002). In this context, Memmi (1957) argues that racism against the occupied is an inherent element of occupation. The attribution of hostility to the occupied group enables the perception of the ingroup's aggressive actions as self-defense. As a result, any guilt or distress that might have emerged had the opponent been perceived as more humane, is reduced (Bandura, 1999; Moses, 2002).

Mechanisms of *intellectualization* and *rationalization* are evident when complex and sophisticated reasons and explanations are provided to account for the violent behaviors of the occupier. What is characteristic of these explanations, which often appear logical and reasoned, is that they are actually irrelevant or based on erroneous premises, which their proponents fail to notice. The claim that the Israeli occupation has provided the Palestinians with opportunities for economic and social development is a prime example of the use of the rationalization mechanism. This contention is unfounded, because it is based on the assumption that Palestinians have profited from the occupation and that they prefer economic progress under Israeli rule to political independence, which the reality of the conflict shows to be untrue. Proponents of such arguments are usually sincere in believing their own claims and do not realize that by suggesting them they are, in fact, protecting their positive self image.

Contents

As mentioned, while the psycho-dynamic defense mechanisms constitute the system or process of coping, societal beliefs (Bar-

Tal, 2000; Fraser & Gaskell, 1990; Moscovici, 1988) that society members develop in such shared reality provide the content of those processes. Societal beliefs are cognitions that members of a given society share, which address issues that are of particular concern to the society and that contribute to its members' sense of uniqueness (Bar-Tal, 2000). We propose that, collectively facing the challenges of occupation, members of an occupying society develop a system of societal beliefs that prevent perception of the occupation as an illegal, non-normative, and/or immoral activity. These beliefs, which provide content to defense mechanisms, serve as building blocks in the construction of the reality of occupation and enable its continuation by reducing the psychological difficulties that it might create. We shall now describe three types of such beliefs, by examining their manifestations in the Israeli context.

Societal beliefs referring to justifications of the occupation These beliefs describe the reasons for the occupation and its continuation. They portray the goals that the occupation serves and the means of attaining them as legitimate and moral, which enables continuation of the occupation and provides a basis for social mobilization. Bandura (1999) suggested that individuals would engage in acts that harm others only if they can justify the morality of their actions, thus avoiding the negative experiences that result from the violation of moral standards. The process of moral justification may involve cognitive reconstruction, whereby detrimental conduct is portrayed as serving socially worthy or moral purposes. In keeping with this proposition, research has shown that a clear justification for attitude-contradicting behavior reduces cognitive dissonance (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959), and numerous studies have demonstrated that the use of exonerating cognitions and justifying beliefs reduces collective guilt (e.g. Branscombe & Miron, 2004; Miron, Branscombe & Schmitt, 2006; Roccas, Klar & Liviatan, 2006; Wohl, Branscombe & Klar, 2006; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008).

Accordingly, we suggest that in the rare instances where prolonged occupation occurs, the occupiers construct justifying beliefs of two types: initially, they develop justifications for engaging in occupation, and later, a system of beliefs that justify sustaining the occupation.

In the Israeli case, going to war in 1967was explained both internally and externally as a preventive act (Gluska, 2004). The official decision of the Israeli government, dated 4 June 1967, maintained that Israel's action was directed against 'the hostile ring that is tightening around the state'. Immediately following the outbreak of the war, an element of liberation was added to the justifications. At first, the focus was only on the liberation of East Jerusalem, but soon it was expanded to all the captured territories. Thus, the occupation was presented and perceived as the liberation of Judea and Samaria, the Gaza region, and even the Sinai and the Golan Heights, which were ostensibly intended to be parts of the Jewish state according to the borders delineated in the Bible and the Balfour Declaration.

By the end of the war, three additional explanations for the continuation of the occupation appeared. The first spoke of the necessity to maintain 'buffer zones' that would keep future military invasions and terror attacks away from civilian centers and create defendable borders. This security-based rationale has become a very important element in the consciousness of Israeli society members. A second, rather paradoxical, justification maintained that the extent of Israeli settlement in the occupied territories had reached 'a point of no return' (Lustick, 1993). A final justification was based on the aspiration to attain peace with the Palestinians and with the Arab world, which would include a formal declaration of the end of hostilities in exchange for withdrawal from the occupied territories. Thus, the possibility that the occupied territories might constitute 'bargaining chips' served as justification for continuing to hold them.

A survey conducted in February 1968 found that 91% of Israeli-Jews believed that none or only a small part of the West Bank territories should be relinquished. About 85% thought the same regarding the Gaza Strip, about 93% thought so regarding the Golan Heights, and about 57% believed this about Sinai. These rates remained almost unchanged until November 1973 (Arian, 1995). More than two decades later, Arian (1995) found that most of the Jewish-Israeli public objected to significant territorial concessions in the West Bank. Despite gradual change, even at present most of the Israeli-Jewish public does not see the blocs of settlements along the Green Line and in Jerusalem as occupied territories (Bar-Tal & Eldar, 2006).

As for the roots of justification of the occupation, public opinion polls showed that until the late 1980s, most of those who objected to territorial concessions in the West Bank did so on the basis of their belief in the exclusive right of Jews to the Biblical Land of Israel. Additional justifications mentioned were 'prevention of the establishment of a Palestinian state' and 'maintaining strategic depth for military operations'. A minority maintained that the territories must be held in order to serve as bargaining chips in future negotiations (Arian, 1995).

Societal beliefs referring to delegitimization of the occupied nation A second theme in the societal belief system of the occupier focuses on delegitimization of the occupied nation. Delegitimization is the ascription of the occupied group to 'extreme negative social categories, which are excluded from human groups that are considered as acting within the limits of acceptable norms and/or values' (Bar-Tal, 2000). Bandura (1999) proposed that stripping others of their human qualities enables moral disengagement from the harm done to them and prevents experiences of distress and self-condemnation (see also Wohl & Branscombe, 2008).

These propositions suggest that negative delegitimizing portrayal of the occupied group may alleviate or prevent negative experiences among an occupying group. Specifically, the occupier may attribute characteristics to the occupied society

that explain and justify the occupation. Such characterization implies that the occupied group is not entitled to the treatment afforded to all other nations and that the occupation is not an offense against this type of group.

In the Israeli–Palestinian context, the delegitimization of the Palestinians did not begin with the occupation (Gorny, 1987; Lustick, 1982). The Arab residents of Palestine were labeled by Jewish newcomers (mainly from Eastern Europe) as primitive, uncivilized, savage, and backward. When the conflict escalated and became more violent, they were seen as murderers, a bloodthirsty horde, traitors, cowards, cruel, and evil (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005). Jews most commonly used the homogenizing label 'Arab', which does not distinguish between – and hence does not recognize – the different Arab national groups. The use of this label is not coincidental (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005). Its objective is to deny the existence of a Palestinian nation and to imply that the entire population of the Middle East belongs to a single national category. This denial of different Arab identities was of particular significance because it implied that the territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip could not be seen as occupied, because these territories could not have belonged to the Palestinian people, since such a group did not exist. In keeping with these perceptions, any Palestinian act of resistance to the occupation has been presented as an act of terror.[1]

Naturally, the attribution of extremely negative labels to the occupied population, such as murderers, terrorists, or Nazis, relieves the occupier from any responsibility for the occupied population's human rights or their self determination, at least in the internal-perceptual sense. Thus, the delegitimizing beliefs fuel the beliefs in the justification of the occupation.

Societal beliefs referring to positive collective self-image of the occupant   A third strain of societal beliefs constructs a positive collective self-image of the occupying society and suppresses information that may damage this positive image. As noted above, extensive research in social psychology demonstrated individuals' desire to maintain positive self-perception both at the individual level (Dunning, 1999; Kunda, 1987; Swann, 1996) and at the group level (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Tajfel, 1981). This tendency is enhanced in the face of threat to individual or collective self-esteem (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 2002; Steele, 1988). Roccas, Klar & Liviatan (2006) found that glorification of the ingroup was positively related to exonerating cognitions regarding negative acts by the ingroup toward other groups and contributed to reducing collective guilt related to these acts. This emphasizes the importance of group enhancement as a mechanism for dealing with threats to the collective self-esteem.

Like most nations, the Jews have ascribed positive qualities to themselves since the early stages of nation-building. Their self-stereotypes present Jews as modern, enlightened, educated, intelligent, diligent, and determined people, as well as courageous, moral, and humane (Hofman, 1970). These perceptions are in direct opposition to the above-described delegitimizing beliefs about the Arabs, and they were intended to create a clear differentiation between the groups (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005).

As part of the effort to create a positive self image, emphasis was placed on the moral and humane conduct of the Israeli warriors of the 1967 war, who allegedly joined the war effort, moved not by hatred or aggression, but rather for self-defense, while continually adhering to moral values. The term 'purity of arms' was frequently used to indicate that Israeli soldiers only used force and weapons in moral and humane ways. 'Purity of arms' was presented as a supreme value that guided the soldiers during battle. Moreover, following the war, a book named 'Shooting and Crying' was published, which presented the moral dilemmas and torments of conscience of troubled fighters from left-wing groups in Israeli society.

Even in present times, political and military leaders alike refer to the IDF as the most moral military force in the world. A recent example can be found in the statement of prime minister Ehud Olmert at the opening of a cabinet meeting after seven members of a Palestinian family had been killed: 'the IDF is the most moral military force in the world . . . it has never implemented a policy of hurting civilians and does not do so presently either' (11 June 2006). Olmert's statement is just one of many examples of this use of positive labeling in reference to violent Israeli conduct as part of the occupation.

In addition to declarations regarding the military's morality, a new central perception has appeared in recent years, which lends further support to the societal beliefs affirming Israelis' positive self-image. This perception was most prominently expressed after the failure of the Camp David peace summit. It maintains that Israel is willing to make considerable painful concessions in order to bring an end to the conflict, whereas on the Palestinian side 'there is no partner' willing to make similar concessions (Drucker & Shelah, 2005). This view has become a widespread belief among considerable segments of the Israeli public (Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2007).

Finally, the term 'enlightened occupation' appeared in the early years after the 1967 war, mainly among segments of the Jewish population who did not accept the Greater Israel ideology. This term also reflects a positive self-perception that members of an occupying society developed for themselves (Segev, 2005). Two elements go into this positive self-perception: (1) the occupying nation behaves in an enlightened manner towards the occupied; and (2) the occupied group enjoys economic, social, and cultural benefits resulting from the occupation.

Conclusion

Although prolonged occupation is not a common phenomenon in the modern world, in the few places where it does exist, it clearly bears immensely harsh implications for the

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[1] Clearly, actual acts of terror, with their severe psychological consequences, feed delegitimization.

occupied society. However, paradoxical as it may seem, the consequences of occupation may also pose some considerable challenges to the members of the occupying group. We maintain that the perspective of the occupant, who must cope with the situation psychologically, has been relatively neglected by researchers. However, the examination of the dynamics of occupation from the occupant's psychological point of view may have significant implications for understanding situations of occupation as well as processes that may lead to their termination.

The analysis presented in the present article suggests that the definition of a situation as occupation poses important socio-psychological challenges to the occupying society and its members, particularly challenges to the maintenance of positive collective self-esteem. However, despite these challenges, many members of the occupying society do not experience psychological difficulties, because they employ defense mechanisms that allow them to avoid facing the contradictions between their group's behaviors and the moral values that are acceptable in modern societies. The use of defense mechanisms is manifest at the collective level by the development of a system of societal beliefs. These beliefs refer to justifications of the occupation, delegitimization of the occupied population, and enhancement of the occupying society's collective self image.

Therefore, in addition to political and military interventions, any movement toward termination of an occupation must involve considerable erosion of the psychological mechanisms that members of the occupying collective use to avoid facing the challenges that the occupation poses. Undermining the defense mechanisms may weaken the confidence in the central societal beliefs that support the occupation and, therefore, may facilitate its termination.

Moreover, it appears that willingness on the part of the occupying society to recognize the situation as occupation may be a necessary (albeit not sufficient) condition for termination of the occupation. The principal bases for this argument are the direct socio-psychological implications of defining a situation as occupation. It may therefore be suggested that in the process of progress toward termination of the occupation, an occupying society must come to *recognize the situation as occupation* and at the same time *experience erosion of the defense mechanisms and the basic societal beliefs about the occupation*.

The Israeli arena constitutes a convenient example with which the important contribution of the socio-psychological factors to the continuation of the occupation may be demonstrated. The sincere longstanding belief, held by a majority of the Israeli public, that the domination of the territories of the West Bank, Gaza, and Golan Heights is an act of self-defense based on historical justifications, allowed the Israeli public to avoid facing the negative implications of the occupation for many years. Obviously, this belief is fed by the grim reality of continuous terror attacks that lead to fear and insecurity. In addition, Israelis' positive self-perception, rooted in beliefs regarding their own morality along with delegitimization of Palestinian individuals and the Palestinian nation as a whole,

further helped Jewish-Israelis to avoid negative experiences in the face of the reality of the occupation. Analysis of the changes that Israeli society is experiencing in recent years may shed light on the functioning of the discussed psychological mechanisms in times of transition characterized by internal and external conflicts, as well as political change.

The socio-psychological coping mechanisms that an occupier develops may also bear substantial costs for the occupying side itself. The psychological and social costs of occupation are worthy of comprehensive and separate consideration. Here we shall only briefly mention some. First, the justifications given to violent and exclusionary behaviors, in the service of reducing cognitive dissonance and guilt, will likely permeate other domains of life in the occupying society, even if unintentionally. This may lead to the development of a culture that justifies the use of force in order to achieve personal and collective goals. Furthermore, a culture of domination and delegitimization of the occupied is likely to lead to a general decline in the value of human life and consequently to an increase in – and increased tolerance of – interpersonal violence within the occupying society. Such diminution of the value of human life, combined with the expansion of social processes of repression and denial, may lead to disregard and negligence of weakened groups within the occupying society.

In addition to these costs, the need to justify the occupation and maintain a positive self-image may result in conscious disregard for the law in the context of the occupation. In the Israeli case, authorities have practiced leniency and understanding toward Israeli violations of the law in the occupied territories. In fact, the authorities often collaborate with these violations (Zertal & Eldar, 2004). This civilian and governmental conduct poses a genuine threat to the rule of law in Israel and likely infiltrates other domains of conduct by individuals, groups, and leaders in Israel (Negby, 2004).

Before concluding, it is important to briefly discuss the possibility of generalization from the proposed conception. Throughout the article, we highlighted and demonstrated the applicability of the model to the Israeli occupation. Yet we suggest that despite some dissimilarities in specific belief contents, the same framework may be suitable for understanding the psychological perspective of occupiers in most long-term occupations. Finally, the present article introduces only a preliminary theoretical framework. We believe that this framework may serve as a starting point for many empirical studies regarding the psychological aspects of occupation. As noted above, the Israeli arena, which is in the course of transitioning from absolute to partial occupation or to occupation termination, may serve as a stage for such research.

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