

Effects of Drastic Changes in Living Environment: A Displaced Community

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were to understand the implications of the forced transfer of a community to a different physical environment, and assess the effects of such an environmental change on the community's sociological structure and on restructuring people's cultural identity. We used Ingelhart's methodology of cultural shifts to describe these cultural changes. In the K.D. community, changes in the physical environment caused significant changes in the community's social structure. As a result, the collective characteristics that had once united and strengthened the community's social structure began to dwindle. Meanwhile, a growing tendency towards individualistic characteristics gradually increased, causing the weakening and eventual dissolution of both the community and its social structure.

Introduction

Community displacement and resettlement effects on population well-being have been subjects of extensive academic research in recent decades. A vast body of evidence has been collected about the difficulties encountered by resettled populations as they try to adapt to their host environments (Oliver & Smith, 2013; Fong & Green, 2011; Bhugra & Becker, 2005). In their review of recent migrants' adaptation in an Australian community, Hutchinson & Dorsett (2012) identify several elements that may impede this process, including: language barriers, discrimination, and labeling of the trauma story. Bhugra & Becker (2005) further emphasize the loss of cultural norms, religious customs, and social support systems, adjustment to a new culture, and changes in identity and concept of self. The authentic identities brought by migrants to their new environment are perceived by them as a source of pride, self-respect, a sense of community, and moral strength. This is in contrast to mainstream psychology's universal, linear models of immigrants' acculturation and adaptation, which emphasize the dissimilation of migrants' identities in a common, nationwide identity of the host community (Sunil, 2009). According to Bhugra & Becker (2005), we should preserve migrants' foundations of cultural identity to promote their well-being and successful integration into the receiving community.

Accordingly, researchers of disaster-related, forced displacement and resettlement have theorized that mobilizing the internal powers from within the resettled community itself may be the most effective strategy in assisting a population's adaptation to the new environment. This theory condones the preservation of original identities and the social structure of the community, instead of merging its social mechanisms with that of the host community and delegating responsibility for community functioning to external agents (Perry & Lindell, 1997).

A number of migrant studies were recently performed on the role of identity processes in resettled populations that encounter a new environment. Among other identity dimensions, the so-called concept of *place identity* was found to have a profound influence on the migrant adaptation process (Marcu, 2011; Sunil, 2013; Sinn & Wai-Ling, 2013). According to this line of research, physical environment and housing type may have a prominent effect on the preservation of community structure and community members' place identity. A special role is ascribed to the similarities between the new physical environment and the preceding environment and its conditions before resettlement (Heller, 1982; Kliot, 2005).

The aim of the current study was to examine the displaced community's ability to adapt to their new environment. The current study is unique in that it focuses on a normative community, one that was adequately stable from an economic and cultural point of view, and which enjoyed a high level of cultural unity and social resilience before its displacement. From a variety of possibilities that were offered, the community chose a living environment that greatly differed, from a physical aspect, from their previous home. However, they believed it was an environment that would provide them with a sufficient quality of life level, and most importantly, it would allow all of the community members to stay together.

Value analysis methodology (Inglehart & Baker, 2000) will be employed to reveal the process by which changes in physical environment and housing conditions bring about gradual shifts in community values, loss of identity, communication deficiency and, consequently, to the ultimate breakdown of the resettled community.

In contrast to prior studies that appear in the literature, which indicate a connection between environmental and cultural factors in creating place identity, the current study systematically shows the specific connection between each of the physical and social variables, and how they contribute to the concept of place identity.

The study findings will be incorporated into a framework for resettlement policy on appropriate housing for resettled communities.

Methodology

The current qualitative-phenomenological study examines the significant structures and insights of the participants throughout the subjective narratives they present in regard to the place and the community (Smith, 1993; Geertz, 2003).

Study Population: The insights that appear in this chapter are based on in-depth interviews conducted four years after the evacuation, in the new homes of the K.D. residents. A total of 30 interviews were conducted, which included 6 residents who lived in the building, 14 community members who had chosen to leave the building and move elsewhere, and 4 professionals who had accompanied the community before the evacuation¹. Sixty percent of the interviewees were women; the rest were men. Two women were housewives; one had been injured in a terror attack.

Among the interviewees were people who had been farmers, teachers and other types of professionals before moving to the city. After the move, some continued to work in their previous profession, while others changed their profession, and four became unemployed.

Research Tools: The study included in-depth interviews, according to the subjects raised by the interviewer and the interviewee and their ensuing dialog. Interviewees were asked to focus on the experience of the move to the building in Ashkelon and its influence on their lives – as both a family and a community. The interviewees were not asked about their lives in K.D., so as not to cause them any unnecessary pain, and to allow them to focus on the research questions. In spite of this, many chose to compare the reality they remembered whilst living in K.D., with the current reality of life in the building in Ashkelon.

1. The K.D. Community Settlement

The community settlement of K.D. was established in 1989. The founding families of the community wanted to establish an agricultural community settlement with a religious character (Haredi Leumi), wherein a modest lifestyle would exist; the religious Jewish law

¹The remaining six interviews were filmed interviews taken from a documentary project done by Gush Katif residents.

(*Halacha*) and the study of Torah would be its supporting pillars. Sixty families, most with many children - between 5-10 children, sometimes more per family - lived in the settlement.² The settlement area included 124 acres. Since K.D. is a border settlement, a fence was erected around the entire village and a guard was posted at the front gate for security purposes.

The residents lived in houses built by a government-run construction company, one-family and two-family homes measuring 750-1,500 sq. ft., each surrounded by a garden. As befits the needs of expanding families and according to economic ability, some of the houses were expanded over the years to 3,000 sq. ft. Despite this, the houses were simple and modest. In the settlement, educational institutions were established and a large and spacious synagogue was built. The synagogue's basement was used as a gathering space by settlement members. Likewise, additional public buildings were erected in the settlement: a library, a youth clubhouse, and a building that housed a secretary's office, emergency clinic and small grocery store. The industrial area was built within the area of the settlement; no clear physical separation existed between this area and the commercial and residential areas, and some of the residents were employed there. An area of 7.4 acres was defined as the "village green" and made into public gardens. After the settlement was evacuated, within the framework of the one-sided disengagement plan, the community was moved to a hotel in Beer Sheva, after which members were moved to a high-rise building in the city of Ashkelon, which had been rented specifically for this purpose.

2. The High-rise Building

After the residents of K.D. were evacuated, they moved to live in an apartment building in the city of Ashkelon, bordered by the sea. The high-rise building is located next to a busy, 5-lane highway, lined by other large buildings. The building was built in 2000, but by 2005, the owners had only managed to sell 40% of the apartments. In 2005, after the evacuation process from the Gaza Strip had begun, the State rented some of the empty apartments for the evacuees. The building has two entrances and a lobby. Rising above each entrance is a 20-floor tower, four apartments on each floor. Each tower houses a total of 80 apartment units, so the entire building houses 160 units, and has three elevators. Beneath the lobby are two floors that serve as a common storage area for both buildings and an under-ground parking area. The evacuees who were moved to the high-rise building received spacious

² The average age (in 2005) of the heads of families was 30, while the average age of the older members was 40+.

apartments, most of which had 5-7 rooms, each apartment's dimensions ranging from 1,200-1,900 sq. ft. Next to the parking area, a playground and sandbox were erected but, as there was no shade, most of time, this area was not used.

The move of the K.D. residents to the high-rise building didn't take place in the usual manner in which people move house. Before the decision was made, the members of the community were given a tour of the building, after which, a heated discussion was held by the general assembly, in which all of the community members took part. The majority were in favor of moving the community to the high-rise building.

Several months after the move, individual families from the community began to leave the building and look for alternative living arrangements in other communities. By the end of one year, most of the young families had left the building, leaving only 30 families from the K.D. community. Two years after the evacuation, another group, comprised of 16 families - who preferred to live in a caravan³ rather than an apartment - left the building. One year later, all of the remaining residents had left the building. Hence, within four years, the K.D. community broke up, most of its members spreading out to live in various other areas.

The uprooting of K.D. residents from their ground-floor, private homes, and their removal to a high-rise apartment building in the city was the first attempt of this type in Israel - to graft an entire community on to a new living area, which was extremely different from the previous living space. The circumstances surrounding the forced evacuation, and the need to cope with the trauma stemming from displacement, certainly did not make the process of adapting to the new environment any easier, but this was not the decisive factor for the break that was created within the community, as a result of this change in living environment.

Findings

Members' feelings about their first experience upon seeing the high-rise building in Ashkelon were expressed in most of the interviews conducted with them four years later. They spoke about a feeling of shock, and described how, from the very first glimpse, the building looked frightening and threatening; they emphasized how this fear never left them during their first months of living in the building. In contrast to the description of these fears and difficulties, many expressed the importance of the entire community staying together. Therefore, the "solution" of the building provided an answer to this immediate need. The spacious

³ These were 450-sq-ft. caravans, located in the East Lakish.

apartments and the feeling that the family had somewhere to live after their insufferable stay at the hotel persuaded them, on that night-time visit to the building, that the move to the high-rise was the right step to take. In addition, the promise that soon they would be moved from the building to a permanent settlement, also contributed to this decision. After the K.D. residents moved into the building, however, everything looked different.

From the interviews, we see that the first period of living in the building was difficult from a mental point of view. Many mentioned an accumulation of feelings of anger and resentment; others reported stomach pains that accompanied them upon arrival to the building, and which continued for a long time afterwards. The interviewees said that nothing they had experienced in the village settlement remained – everything had changed: the environment, the community itself. Changes began to occur within the families and within the feelings of the people about their new living space. In turn, these changes caused other significant changes within the structure of the community, and which in the end, resulted in its dissolution. We will now briefly describe the changes of cultural identification experienced by the community members, as a result of their forced uprooting and removal from a village environment to an urban, high-rise apartment building, as expressed by community members.

3. Physical-environmental Identity Components

3.1 Residence: In K.D., the dwelling space was that of a village environment. Residents lived in ground floor, private homes, which could be expanded and designed to fit the needs of a religious family's lifestyle – a family with many children. The families made sure to maintain their gardens, and planted fruit trees. The yard around the home also served as a play area for the children, a place in which to host neighbors and conduct family celebrations. The yard was also a place for hanging laundry and parking bicycles. There were also 20 houses which were used as temporary housing for absorbing new residents into the community, and the next generation, which allowed for the growth of the community. In addition, certain tracts of land were allocated for the building of new homes for these new families.

Although the apartments in the building were spacious, they did not necessarily fulfill the needs of a family with many children. There was no room in the kitchen for a double-oven or double-refrigerator, appliances that the families had used in their old homes. Since the apartments were rented and because of the building's limitations, it was not possible to

make any renovations or expansions as the number of family members increased. Despite the pretty view from the small balcony, it was no substitute for the garden, and the potted plants did not receive the same attention and care as the trees in the village gardens. The cost of renting an apartment in the building was high, and beyond the budgets of most young families and that of their children; therefore, the next generation could not join an apartment community without government support. The departure of individual families and groups of families from within the community to other places led to the return of these now-empty apartments to the authorities, and the community began to dwindle.

3.2 The Public Space: In the village community, there was an abundance of green spaces and beautiful, quiet areas that were tended lovingly, blending in perfectly with the surrounding natural landscape of pristine sand dunes. Most people in the settlement got around on foot or by bicycle; the settlement was filled with quiet tranquility, birdsong, and the happy clamor of playing children. The ground-floor, private homes allowed for frequent eye contact, as people moved slowly between the private and public spaces. The settlement gate surrounded and defined the public space and imparted a sense of belongingness and responsibility to the residents in regard to the space. Walking in the public space invited frequent inter-personal contact among the residents and contributed towards strengthening social relationships and a sense of both belongingness and identification among community members.

In contrast, the public space in the high-rise building was neglected and unfamiliar; the great number of tenants from many different cultures, most of whom rented their apartments, and the many empty apartments in the building all led to a sense of foreignness and alienation, isolation and emptiness. The building overlooked busy highways, full of traffic lights and flashing billboards. The public space is described as being borderless and infinite, strange and detached from nature. From the apartment building, there was no direct eye contact with the public space and mothers could neither watch over their children from their homes, nor initiate contact with neighbors who had gone down into the street. Because of the large distances, most residents had no choice but to use private cars or public transportation.

3.3 Services and employment: In the village settlement, there had been a wide variety of educational as well as public institutions in which leisure activities took place for both adults and children, along with cultural and social events. In addition, the settlement provided only the very basic services. Thus, in order to attend to various errands and more extensive

shopping needs, residents would plan an outing once a month or once every two months and make their necessary purchases in the nearby city. The settlement's guiding ideology encouraged residents to make do with what they had – adhering to a sense of “ascetic” consumerism. A large number of residents were employed within the settlement itself in the educational institutions, services, and trade.

In the high-rise, there was no place in which to hold social gatherings and, as a result, meetings in which the entire community participated were non-existent. Although the urban environment offered an abundance of entertainment and leisure activities, these activities weren't suited to the religious lifestyle of the families from K.D. The plethora of shops meant that no planning in advance was needed; everything could be purchased in daily outings in the city and members were exposed to the city's constant sales. Many described the development of a type of obsessive purchasing of “everything in sight”; the buying of luxuries and unnecessary items became a sort of psychological compensation. In the city, there was a separation between the residential space and one's place of employment; educational institutions were also far away and the children went to school by bus, so that opportunities for meeting community members decreased.

3.4 Security and Safety: Despite the security threat and the large number of injured, settlement residents of K.D., in their descriptions, do not mention fear of terrorism or how it was to live under a constant security threat. They related to the strength of the community and the mutual support, which allowed them to live in K.D. They described the living space in the village as a safe environment for children, both from the perspective of protection from strangers as well from a security perspective. From an early age, the children wandered freely and independently around the settlement, at all hours, alone or in groups, with little supervision; front doors were never locked and always open, and mothers did not worry about leaving their children home alone.

The high-rise building, on the other hand, was perceived as a place of danger, because of the unfamiliar people who lived there - some of whom were often drunk - or the criminals who might wander in off the street. There were other dangers as well: open balconies of up to 20-storeys high. The many elevators and the fear that children would get lost in the huge building was perceived as a safety threat, one which might lead to contact with criminal elements; the heavy traffic was also a constant source of concern for the children's safety. As a result, residents locked their doors at all times and children were not allowed to go out

alone. The dependence upon the elevators in the building was also a difficulty in relation to family management; mothers of young children preferred to stay at home, rather than experience the difficulty and danger of getting in and out of the elevator. Afternoon meetings between the children after school stopped almost completely, and any such meetings were always supervised by parents.

4. Social Identity Components

4.1 Face-to-face relations: The private homes and unfenced yards of the village and the habit of walking on foot from place to place within the settlement encouraged eye contact among members. This type of eye contact created “face-to-face” relations which, in turn, created a sense of responsibility and mutual trust among members, stemming from the fact that everyone knew everyone. Relationships operated according to an “open door” policy: neighbors were friends, who could drop in for a visit at any time. No invitation was necessary; group meals and trips were frequent. Practical, daily chores like hanging up laundry, gardening and yard work or watching over small children in the garden were something of a public affair; each task of this type was a possible opportunity to converse with neighbors or to make eye contact with passing guests and invite them in for a visit.

Alternatively, in the high-rise building, people stayed shut up behind locked doors, and the door was never opened to strangers; there was no contact at all with the other neighbors. Sometimes a week or month might pass by without seeing a neighbor from the K.D. community, something that could never have happened in the settlement. Life in the building was dependent upon the elevator moving up and down between the floors; there were few opportunities to establish eye contact among community members. At times, a competition developed among community members in regard to entering the elevator, when everyone was trying to get to the same destination. This caused a great deal of tension and frustration. The move to the city transformed daily chores and tasks that had once been “shared” into completely private activities, since whatever was done at home or on one’s balcony remained singularly anonymous. Leaving the home to run private errands became activities completely lacking in social interaction, and were only experienced on the individual, private level.

4.2 Community Skills: In the settlement, all of the members belonged to the community simply by living there. The community life was very intensive; people were naturally interested in one another’s doings, and relationships were spontaneous, based on daily

contact. Most of the community members were involved in activities geared towards the good of all, and in the settlement committees dedicated to promoting the village's culture and education. During times of security threats, members came together to strengthen the community, and before the evacuation, most of the community's efforts were invested in activities related to propaganda and protests. The unique views and weather of the village and its close proximity to the sea were a source of attraction to visitors. The large and spacious homes allowed for the inviting of guests: friends and children of all ages on weekends, holidays and during vacation times.

Contrariwise, life in the high-rise building led to a reclusive lifestyle, members stayed at home, and the relationships among community members became much more formal and less frequent, rather than something that could be taken for granted. Community activities dwindled. Therefore, a great deal of energy was suddenly required to maintain close community relations. After moving to the city, the community set up new goals for itself, but members did not cooperate or make enough of an effort for the good of all as they had in the village; most people focused solely on the advancement of their own families. Moving to the apartments in the high-rise also changed the codes of hospitality: community members went from being families that were used to being hosts to families that were now the guests of others. The lack of an atmosphere of Shabbat and the holidays also brought about a change, causing families and teenagers to travel to others in order to celebrate with relatives and friends living in village settlements, and in an attempt to get away from the city.

4.3 Parenting and Family: In the village settlement, parents and children alike had to cope with the difficulties of terror attacks. They shared their fears and worries, as well as the struggle against the disengagement. These shared experiences contributed to the nuclear family's functioning as a unified and consolidated family unit. Together with this, the parenting style in the settlement was described as "casual" – for most of the day, children were not at home; after school, they played and wandered around the settlement together, under the watchful eye of "everyone". The relative isolation of the village from other settlements, as well as the security threat, served to minimize the arrival of the extended family to the settlement. Thus, neighbors and friends served as a replacement for the extended family, as reflected in group meals on Shabbat, holidays and celebrations; the families also supported and cared for families that were injured or in need of help, accompanying one another through difficult times.

In the high-rise, members related how parenting suddenly became a full-time job, without a break, 24 hours a day, all week long, without the help of other community members. In some of the families, the status of the parents was suddenly threatened. Some parents became unemployed and were forced to seek out support from external sources, thereby becoming dependent on others. In some cases, children supported parents. The move to the city caused each family to turn in upon itself, resulting in a decrease of the mutual support that had once among community members and an increased connection with the biological, extended family. As a result, the sense of belongingness with the family constituted an alternative for the previous sense of community belongingness.

4.4 The Religious Lifestyle: The framework of the village community allowed for community control over the religious lifestyle in the living environment. Certain standards were established regarding the community lifestyle and the extent to which religious customs and prohibitions would be followed – in both the private and public sphere. Most community members held places of significant authority in the community; decisions were made based on meetings, in which all members participated on an “as needed” basis. The synagogue that was erected in the settlement served as its spiritual and cultural center; the routine daily meeting for prayers formed close bonds of friendship among residents. After prayers, the entire community would often share a meal, and various matters would be discussed. In addition, the settlement offered many enrichment classes for men, women and children.

The move to the building in the pluralistic city meant that the community could no longer control the community’s religious lifestyle through the residential environment; no social supervision was possible, and the status of the community rabbi declined. Community members became exposed to the desecration of Shabbat, immodest dress, billboard images which they considered improper; and each person chose a way in which to cope with the new reality. A synagogue was established in the building’s basement, but many chose to attend different synagogues in the city, and women preferred not to come to pray at all. There were several attempts to arrange group meals among the community members and to hold lessons in the building, but the feeling of being crowded, the lack of windows, and the smell of dampness caused bad feelings among members and these types of meetings soon came to an end.

5. Place Identity Components

Patrilocality and collectivity: In the village settlement, residents were connected to their living space through the history of the place, the religious ideology, and through the memory of those that had died there. The state of the community was tested and ratified anew as the disengagement date drew closer. Community interaction and social unification grew and community members perceived themselves as one, big family. The rabbi led the community and residents held onto their religious faith, and believed they would win their struggle. There was a strong sense of identification and patrilocality, along with a great feeling of loyalty from the adults and youth – for both the community and the surrounding area. After the settlement's displacement, the evacuees expressed great longing for the village and a sharp desire to return to it.

5.1 Alienation and Individuality: The move of the residents to a high-rise building in an urban environment was perceived by them from the beginning as a temporary solution, and no one thought of staying in the place. Many community members could not find their place in the city or relate to either the city or the people in the area on an emotional, spiritual or ideological level. Many of the teenagers refused to live in the building and were ashamed to be living in the city. The lack of meeting places and eye contact among community members, and the transformation of daily practical tasks - that had once been shared and had now become completely private activities - were all factors that added to the members' sense of isolation and alienation.

Members spent much less time together, which led to a minimization of the collective components that had once strengthened and unified the community's social structure. Instead, in the city, individualistic components became dominant, serving to weaken the social structure, and concluding with the complete dissolution of the community.

Discussion and Conclusions

The events of the K.D. community gives us a deeper understanding of the process by which a community is structured, which develops as a result of specific characteristics - such as the type of homes and structures built, and the physical characteristics of a particular living environment within a certain culture. The use of Inglehart's (2000) methodology in describing the *cultural shift* process helped to present a clear picture of the different states of the community, resulting from each of the living environments.

The findings show that the type of lifestyle one leads in the village environment, and the variety of public structures and services established within the enclosed space of the settlement, created clear borders for the community and enabled it to maintain its religious lifestyle. Residents encouraged eye contact and frequent formal and informal opportunities to meet with one another. This contributed to developing and maintaining “face-to-face” relationships, and an “open-door” policy. The security risk and the number of injured among residents also contributed to the members’ sense of unity and social resilience. All of these factors played a part in the adoption of a collectivist structure, which was shared by all of the residents, and which encouraged the development of communal functioning, responsibility and concern for all of the community members. This type of community situation created a sense of *patrilocality* (place identification), and the desire of residents and their children to continue living there.

In contrast, the move to the high-rise building and urban environment, where there was no defined public spaces and no special public structures or services in the area, led to a blurring of the community’s borders, making it difficult for them to engage in direct eye contact with other community members. People tended to either stay at home, behind locked doors, or wander aimlessly and alone throughout the city. Hence, opportunities to meet became less and less frequent. All of the above brought about the adoption of an individualistic structure, which weakened the social structure, and did not allow for the development of place identity among the community members.

Apparently, the social structure, which had become increasingly strengthened and unified in the days before the evacuation, and the sharp desire of community members to remain together afterwards were simply not enough to help the community get through the great dramatic change in their living environment. The lack of appropriateness of the high-rise building for families with many children; the lack of a place where all of the community members could gather and meet; and the fact that there were no clear borders – only they were all key contributing factors that served to destabilize the foundations upon which the community was built, and which eventually brought about the community’s failure to adapt to the move. Study findings show how important it is to have an accurate prior understanding of the community structure, and the need to describe the important functions that will enable the maintenance of its stability during times of significant environmental change. We can assume that if the community had been moved to an environment that was more similar to K.D. or an environment where the group could have been isolated, instead of having

strangers in their midst, the community would perhaps have managed to better adapt to the new environment. This, in turn, may have prevented the community's breakdown and its eventual collapse.

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Housing in K.D communal Settlement



High-rises Building in Askelon

