Sense of Community among Palestinians

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the state of sense of community (SOC) in the Palestinian society as a multidimensional phenomenon. A national representative stratified sampling survey design consisted of three hundred eighty-four participants from the West Bank was used in the current study. A self-administered of 45-item questionnaire developed by the researcher was used, based on the (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) SOC model. Findings showed high level of SOC among Palestinians. In light of study data, (77.4%) of the Palestinians have experienced a strong SOC belonging. Current statistics revealed that gender, place of residence, community and political affiliation and age were significant predictors for SOC. SOC belongings have become firm in the collective conscious of Palestinians after sixty-six years of the Nakba (Catastrophe).

Keywords: SOC, Palestine, Quantitative methodology, Nakba, Collective conscious

INTRODUCTION

Sense of community (SOC) is an important topic in community research and applied social psychology, several articles and studies were published that tackled this topic as a multi-dimensional phenomenon addressed by both theoretical and empirical researches.

Over the past 25 years, SOC among citizens has gained increasing attention in the literature, as well as among policy makers (Cicognani et al., 2008). According to Peterson et al. (2008: 61) SOC is a key theoretical construct for community psychology and other disciplines. SOC refers to the fundamental human phenomenon of collective experience, which has been studied in a variety of contexts such as neighborhoods.

The concept of SOC relates to the feeling of belonging to a group or a community, and to the awareness of such belonging based upon the perception of similarity among members and where reciprocal relations facilitate the satisfaction of individual needs (Sarason, 1974; Abdelkader & Bouslama, 2014).

According to Abdelkader & Bouslama (2014) SOC in the previous studies was considered from a geographic perspective and highlighted the link between individuals and their residential communities. However, the study of this construct was to score its original and significant contribution to sociology.

The society consists of several communities which interact with one another in a systematic manner and share stable and organized social relations. They share joint interests and goals governed by a group of values, customs, traditions and norms which organize their behavior and relationships to guarantee the survival and sustainability of the society. Every group is characterized by the interest of its members in certain behavioral norms based on their own values so as to distinguish them from members of other societal groups; each group exerts pressure on its members to hold fast to these norms in order to preserve and sustain their group entity (Othman, 1999).
The concept of SOC is used to describe feelings of belonging to different kinds of communities. These include formal and informal social organizations bounded by a physical or geographical location, like the local community, the town or city, the neighborhood, the school. Moreover, the term has been used to refer to social entities based on common interests, goals or needs, like sport groups, political groups, volunteering groups. In general, the definition of SOC focuses on the reciprocal relationship between the people and the community to which they belong from a psychological perspective (Cicognani et al., 2008; Qingwen, 2010).

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of SOC occupies a central place within different disciplines in social sciences and community psychology, and has been the focus of many conceptualizations and theoretical perspectives.

Literature review of SOC contains several useful conceptualizations. In his seminal 1974 book, the psychologist Sarason proposed that psychological SOC become the conceptual center for the psychology of community, asserting that it’s one of the major bases for self-definition. By 1986 it was regarded as a central overarching concept for community psychology (Sarason, 1986; Chavis & Pretty, 1999). According to the classic definition proposed by Sarason (1974), SOC is defined as the sense that one belongs in and is meaningfully part of a larger collective, while Unger & Wandesman (1985: 155) define it as feelings of membership and belongingness and shared socio-emotional ties.

Moreover, Sarason (1974: 157) identifies the basic characteristics of SOC as: the perception of similarity to other community members; acknowledged interdependence between members of community; the desire to maintain this interdependence, that is, behaving towards others as we expect them to behave towards us; and the feeling that one is part of a stable superior social structure on which one depends.

Additionally, McMillan and Chavis (1986) offer the following definitions of SOC: a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together, a feeling that members have of belonging and being important to each other, and a shared faith that members’ need will be met by their commitment to be together.

Recently, McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed a four-dimension model of SOC that is more widely accepted in the literature. This model includes: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection, which often interact with one another. According to McMillan & Chavis dimensions model, membership refers to the feeling of belonging or a sense of interpersonal relatedness; it provides emotional security and a means of identification, group acceptance, and willingness to sacrifice for the group. Influence allows for individuality while maintaining group unity through conformity; it’s a sense that one matters, or can make a difference, in a community and that the community matters to its members. Integration and fulfillment of needs is a realization that individual and community needs are reciprocal, that refers to the benefits that people derive from their membership to a community; individuals’ needs are fulfilled through membership, not to the detriment of the community’s needs. Shared emotional connection is based on a sense of shared history, shared place, shared experiences, and quality of social interaction that developed over time through positive relationships with other community members.
Furthermore, the sense of community index (SOCI) developed by Chavis, Hogge, McMillan & Wandersman (1986) was the first attempt that provides a quantitative methodology to evaluate the SOC experienced by an individual within a given community. In the year 1996 Plas and Lewis suggested SOC as an explanatory tool mediating the influence of environmental context toward individual well-being. Moreover, sense of community index (SOCI) that developed by (Perkins, Florin, Rich, Wandersman & Chavis, 1990) was able to measure the four components of SOC. Recently, Peterson, Speer and McMillan (2008) have conducted a study to develop and validate a brief scale measuring SOC, known as Brief Sense of Community Scale (BSCS) and another examining the relationship with set of theoretical variables (Abdelkader & Bouslama, 2014).

Although specific definitions vary, depending on one’s research interests and disciplinary background, SOC essentially represents the latent aspect of a community’s social environment, such as sense of mutual, neighborhood security, sense of belonging, shared values, and so forth (McMillan and Chavis 1986; Nasar and Julian 1995).

Initial theoretical and empirical proposals of SOC were developed in the USA. Since 1990, several researchers from different countries and cultures started to focus on studying SOC. Their studies provided a proof of the global nature of this construct. A recent study by Abdelkader & Bouslama (2014) confirms the relevance of SOC in adolescents; adolescence develops a strong sense of belonging by creating links with their friends; and this emotional experience reinforces their identification with the group.

The study of Moscato et al. (2014) analyzed how cultural identification, perceived discrimination and the SOC are related to life satisfaction among foreign partners in intercultural families. Moreover, Siti et al. (2013) emphasized that SOC is one of the components or domains of community relationship in residential areas. The strength of community relationship believed to eliminate criminal activities at residential area.

Additionally, the study of Francis et al. (2012) concluded that a strong SOC has been associated with improved well-being, increased feelings of safety and security, participation in community affairs and civic responsibility. While the study of Siti et al. (2012) concluded that neighborhood design is one of the factors contributing towards the establishment and maintenance of local community ties. Besides, the study of Dassopoulos et al. (2012) helps to disentangle the mutual effects of neighborhood disorder and social cohesion on how residents evaluate their neighborhoods.

In spite of extensive studies on SOC all over the world, literature and empirical studies of SOC in Arab countries in general and in the Palestinian society in particular is scarce. Perhaps Palestinian experience under occupation was and still the most tragic one in terms of the victims and violence it has left behind as a result of acts of killing, injury, handicap, physical and psychological torture as a result of house demolition, confiscation of lands and water, arrests, raids, pursuits and other forms of Israeli violence after sixty-six years of the Nakba (Catastrophe).

AIMS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Scholars have just begun to attend to the conceptualization of SOC in normal societies rather than the conflicted societies. However, far less attention has been devoted to the empirical test of such assumptions, especially in the Palestinian occupied society which remains unclear. According to Weisenfeld (1996), the concept of SOC has been blamed for promoting a unitarian ideology of community neglecting the importance of conflicts that, when negotiated, accept and facilitate diversity.
The general purpose of the current study is to investigate the unique contributions of SOC in the occupied Palestinian society. A measure for SOC among Palestinians with demographic variables and auxiliary measures are presented. Differences of SOC between the participants were also assessed, to determine the characteristics of demography that influence the SOC among Palestinians.

The study investigated the construct of SOC among Palestinians, where empirical studies of such an important topic are scarce. The current study is considered one of the leading studies that deal with SOC in the Palestinian occupied society. It is expected to add a new scientific knowledge regarding SOC in conflicted societies. In this regards, (Hill, 1996; Abdelkader & Bouslama, 2014) identified the need for extensive research in a variety of contexts to fully understand SOC as a universal concept.

DEFINITION OF TERMS
SOC: according to the classic definition proposed by Sarason (1974), the SOC is defined as the sense that one belongs in and is meaningfully part of a larger collective. Also, it was defined as feelings of membership and belongingness and shared socio-emotional ties (Unger & Wandesman, 1985: 155). McMillan & Chavis (1986) define this concept as a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together. Moreover, they concluded that SOC consists of four main dimensions: membership, influence, needs reinforcement and shared emotional connection, which often interact with one another.

Palestinians: the term Palestinian, refers to both male and females over fifteen years old in the West Bank regardless of their social, legal status, race, religion, class or any other factor.

LIMITATIONS
The population of this study was limited to Palestinians male and female over fifteen years old in the West Bank 2014.

HYPOTHESES
Taking into consideration, the set objectives, questions and variables of the study, the study addresses the main following hypothesis:

There are no statistical significant differences at $\alpha=0.05$ in the SOC among Palestinian according to their age, religion, marital status, place of residence, qualifications, work status, refugee status, and political affiliation.

In terms of the study variable, independent variables were age, religion, marital status, place of residence, qualifications, work status, refugee status, and political affiliation, while the dependent variable was SOC among Palestinians with its different dimensions.

METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN
This study is quantitative in nature using a questionnaire, to assess SOC among Palestinians; that considered the most suitable research approach to fulfill the study objectives and understanding the phenomenon and its different factors using convenient research instruments.
Three hundred eighty-four Palestinians over fifteen years of age stratifiedly selected, due to gender and place of residence. The sample size was calculated using the sampling web of http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm, sample size calculator, with a margin error 0.05. The target population consists of Palestinian citizens, in the West Bank 2014, which includes 1361065 citizens; the population comprised 687821 males and 673244 females (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

**Instrumentation**

The instrument was a self-administered questionnaire developed by the researcher, based on the (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) SOC model. Participants to the research were approached in the West Bank by trained researchers, and were asked to complete the questionnaire. The interview was conducted with the person in the household who was more than fifteen years of age. The sampling survey instrument sought background information about participants’ mainly age, religion, marital status, place of residence, qualifications, work status, refugee status, and political affiliation. Moreover, SOC has been measured as an index of a 45-item scale. 5-point Likert Scale (Strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree and strongly disagree) was used to measure responses.

Concerning validity and reliability, validation of the instrument proceeded in two distinct phases. The initial phase involved a group of referees and expert arbitrators, who provided some comments on the tool. The second phase involved the implementation of a pilot study (N=60) to validate the survey using exploratory factor analysis. Factor loading for all items exceeded 0.60 (0.61 to 0.89), which means that those items are suitable in measuring every item of SOC among Palestinians, in light of the theoretical framework that the scale of study is based upon.

The reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha and Guttman split-half coefficients to ascertain reliability and consistency of the survey. Cronbach's Alpha and Guttman split-half for the survey instrument was 0.88 and 0.84, respectively, indicating excellent reliability and consistency.

Contextual variables distribution includes gender, religion, marital status, place of residence, qualifications, community and political affiliation. There were a total of three hundred eighty-four completed interviews. Respondents were between 18 and 75 years of age, with an average age of 32 years. Males represented 50.5% of the participants, while the remaining 49.5% were females; and the vast majority (90.9%) was Muslims. In relation to marital status, 49.2% were singles compared to 46.4% married. Half (50.8%) of the participants were rural, 36.5% urban, while 12.8% from refugee camps; and 58.6% had a college or graduate degree. 41.9% of the participants classified themselves as an active community member; and most of them (71.1%) were politically affiliated.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

Data analyses were undertaken using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 20. The questionnaire items were ranked according to a 1–5 Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree and strongly disagree). These rankings were codified into a quantitative score from 1 to 5, with higher aggregated scores indicating a stronger SOC among Palestinians and vice versa if the score obtained is low. Descriptive statistics were generated to gauge the rate of SOC among the sampled Palestinians population. Additionally, the following statistical techniques were measured: Pearson correlation, T.test, One way analysis of variance, Tukey test, Cronbach's Alpha, Guttman Split-Half Coefficient and Factor Analysis.
In terms of results, the mean SOC score for the sample of three hundred eighty-four participants was high (M 3.87 SD 0.40). The SOC total score showed that (77.4%) of the Palestinians have a strong SOC. Furthermore, findings revealed the SOC indicators among Palestinians ranked in a descending order as follows: I feel belongings to this country (M 4.59 SD 0.74); I feel sad when a disaster occur in any place of my country (M 4.55 SD 0.75); I dislike other’s assaults on public domains in our country (M 4.48 SD 0.75); I don’t hesitate to sacrifice myself for the cause of my country (M 4.46 SD 0.88); I like to visit districts I never visited in my country (M 4.42 SD 0.95); the citizen is good citizen, no matter what his/her name or creed was (M 4.35 SD 0.82). Besides, community development is the responsibility of each citizen (M 4.29 SD 0.78); I like all to exchange knowledge about our national achievements issues (M 4.24 SD 0.90); every citizen is accountable to do his/her job perfectly without negligence (M 4.22 SD 0.91); and I am trying to act in correct way in my community (M 4.21 SD 0.78).

Furthermore, the study investigated demography over SOC among Palestinians based on locational differences with the aim of identifying any differences. Findings show that religion, marital status, and qualifications do not indicate any significant difference. However, it was found that gender, place of residence, community and political affiliation and age are significant variables. In relation to gender, the differences were in favor of males (M 3.97 SD 0.33) compared to (M 3.75 SD 0.43) for females: T.test value was (5.638 P=0.000). As for place of residence, the differences were in favor of refugee camp residents (M 4.05 SD 0.38) compared to (M 3.87 SD 0.41) for rural residents, and (M 3.79 SD 0.38) among urban residents: F-value was (7.587 P=0.001). In terms of community affiliation, the differences were in favor of active community members (M 4.06 SD 0.32) compared to (M 3.72 SD 0.38) for inactive community members: T.test value was (8.999 P=0.000). In regards of political affiliation, the differences were in favor of politically affiliated members (M 3.95 SD 0.32) compared to (M 3.66 SD 0.48) for non-politically affiliated members: T.test value was (5.634 P=0.000). Finally, findings indicated that there are statistical significant negative correlation between age and SOC: R-coefficient was (-0.462 P=0.000).

DISCUSSION

Findings of the study indicated that Palestinians had a strong level of SOC belonging. Feelings of SOC belonging to a collective group are based on sharing of values, norms, experiences, a common destiny, and a common history, that are more widespread among Palestinians taken into consideration their most tragic experience under Israeli occupation which is the longest one in the history of human being, after sixty-six years of the Nakba.

In the Arab Palestinian society, SOC carries features that might be different from Western societies. Historically, Palestinians community is based on a patrilineal kinship relation, in an extended family and the cared for each other in times of need. Palestinians were able to build what is called collective conscious in sociology. According to Durkheim (1893), collective conscious is the set of shared beliefs, ideas and moral attitudes which operate as a unifying force within society; it's a social group’s identity is constructed with narratives and traditions that are created to give its members a sense of a community.

Additionally, the Palestinian family has played a role and is still playing a distinctive role in the preservation of the social, SOC belonging, cultural, political and economic identity in the Palestinian society, especially if we look at the difficult conditions and the huge events that the Palestinian society has been exposed to since more than sixty-six years and even before. The family concentration on the land means that there are face to face social relationships
among individuals; they focus on the father and kinship based on blood bond. Family solidarity is often considered one of the main features of the Palestinian family where the child is raised on family solidarity at different levels including responsibility for children care and guidance (Banat, 2010. The father, mother, brothers and sisters, some aunts, uncles, and cousins take part in this, which increase in a way or another the SOC belonging.

Moreover, the announcement of Palestine as observer state member of the United Nations 2013; the international recognition of the State of Palestine; the Palestinian reconciliation agreement 2014, and the latest offensive launched by the Israeli occupation forces on Gaza Strip 2014 are implicitly considered indicators for the high level of SOC among Palestinians.

Differences according to gender were also found, consistently with the traditional gender role expectations in the Arab Palestinian society. Palestinian society has conservative customs and traditions, male patriarchal dominance and social upbringing that are based on gender inequalities of power and discrimination. Patriarchal ideology is deeply rooted in the Palestinian society, where the notions of father and brother are prevalent. According to these notions, male dominance supports the structure that keeps men in positions of power, authority and control. This allows for a larger space for males compared with females in relation to nature of social ranks, roles, freedom, participation in decision making, responsibility, large scale engagement in labor market and development of potentials and skills (Banat & Rimawi, 2014). Consequently, this reflects on the development of personalities; their emotions stability and thus increase SOC among males.

Urban, suburban, and rural communities provide distinct ambient contexts for SOC in the Palestinian society; this result shows the sub-cultural differences within the Palestinian community; whereas refugee camp residents have a strong level of SOC. Palestinian camp does not basically involve the structure of the Palestinian society since it's a foreign and urgent body to the social structure; the cultural and political systems of the Palestinian society. The camp is an expression that represents the urgent Palestinian concentrations through compulsory Diaspora which the Palestinian 1948 and post 1967 war were exposed to.

Palestinian refugees constitute the largest group of refugees on the globe. Palestinians have been uprooted from twenty cities and about four hundred villages; about seven hundred thousand Palestinians i.e. 66% of the residents of Palestine became homeless; this was the complete deterioration of the Palestinian society with all its components and bases; it lead to the emergence of a new phenomenon in the Palestinian society which is the Palestinian Refugees Camps which spread in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and neighboring countries: Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon and the rest of the world. These camps which bear witness to the catastrophe, homelessness and uprooting of Palestinians from their lands and homeland symbolize their daily sufferings on all levels: cultural, social, economic and political. They are still waiting for a political decision to put an end to their pain and suffering. In fact, in the human history there is not any crime that is as brutal as the crime of forcing Palestinians out of their homelands in 1948 at the hands of the Zionist gangsters; this was later called the Palestinian Nakba (Sayegh, 1983; Kana’na, 2000; Banat, 2002).

When growing up, refugees heard their parents' stories about houses that were left behind, or about land that was lost when Zionist movement declared the formation of the "nascent state of Israel" on 78% of Palestinian lands. The camp residents are still giving lessons in patience and steadfastness that settled in their minds and will not be erased from their memory, which has positively reflected on their SOC.

Moreover, findings revealed that social and political active community members have a strong level of SOC. Basically; SOC is based upon the interaction and contact between
community members. Social participation takes place within a community context, where people engage in social activities in many formal and informal social networks. Forms of participation are determined by issues arising within a community, a place, and include its culture, norms, values, institutions (Cicognani et al., 2008). Considering the degree of involvement in social activities, results of descriptive studies conducted in several nations in the last 20 years have provided a fairly consistent picture of increasing apathy toward traditional politics among youth, but also showed evidence of interest in a range of no mainstream forms of civil involvement, including voluntary activity (Verba et al., 1995; Youniss et al., 2002) as cited in Cicognani et al. (2008). Additionally, the study of Cornolti et al. (2005) concluded that the most popular ways of being politically active are participation to public meetings dealing with political and social issues.

The study results also revealed that religion, marital status, and qualifications do not indicate any significant difference in SOC among Palestinians. This indicates that SOC are not very much influenced by these variables and are more likely to be affected by other factors other than religion, marital status, and qualifications.

Furthermore, at younger ages, the likelihood of reporting a strong SOC belonging gradually increased. According to Hughey et al. (1999) community participation enhances SOC. Community participation offers young people the opportunity to cultivate social ties with persons other than the family and peers within different social settings, and through this, helps them to gain a sense of connectedness and belonging as well as to strengthen their social identity and identification processes.

During adolescence, young people express a strong need to belong to a group. This latter helps them to take distance from their parents and find their own identities. Moreover, young people develop a strong sense of belonging by creating links with their friends. This emotional experience reinforces their identification with the group. Certainly, when the child feels accepted and esteemed by his/her peers, he/she confirms his/her identity, and trust to others increases. He/she looks for the occasions or situations where he/she is in a group, because he/she feels confidence and knows that he/she will be recognized (Abdelkader & Bouslama, 2014).

In Fact, worldwide youth played a pioneering role in being the leaders and impetus for liberation revolutions. With more focus, we will find that Palestinian people starting with the family, school and the larger society respectively raise the child on an authentic culture of belongings to their country and its just cause; this culture grows inside the child without any barriers or hesitations. Another feature of the Palestinian social socialization is the highlighting of duties more than of rights; the Palestinian family and the educational systems stress raising the members to qualify them for making sacrifices and offering more services than obtaining rights and gains. If we go deep into the behavior of the original Palestinian personality which represents the outcome of this type of education, it will become clear to us the extent of its interest in its duties towards others and its keenness on preserving its social reputation and bonds to those who care about those duties (Banat, 2010). All of these are considered fundamental dimensions of SOC that raise the level of SOC among Palestinians in a way or another.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SOC is an important concept in community, social psychology, and sociology. Sociologically, humans are sociable by nature and live within groups. Ever since the existence of man on Earth, he moved towards living in social groups. An individual cannot
survive and exist for his livelihood without a society; he should be in constant contact with others sharing their lives and everyday activities (Banat, 2014). By doing so, he can fulfill his different needs within the laid out values, customs and traditions by the group. Thus, he would be sociably acceptable. In light of this, we realize the big role of the group and the surrounding social environment in shaping the personality and social behavior of the individual living in them.

SOC belongings have become firm in the collective conscious of Palestinians after sixty-six years of the Nakba. A review of the size of physical and moral sacrifices which the Palestinian people made in their attempts to preserve their national personality and belonging to the place and time indicates the depth of the link between the national personality and the land which is the bone of contention with the Israeli occupiers. According to Sayegh (1983) we are Palestinians; we were Palestinians; we are still Palestinians; we will stay like this for ever; we will return to Palestine sooner or later. This determination means one thing; Palestinians whether members or society view themselves as meaningless without the national dimension in their personality, since the story of Palestinians is a story of perpetuation of man, land and identity.

In light of the study results and discussion, the following recommendations are made:

1. Given the concept of SOC belongings the utmost importance in the curriculum and the different media outlet.
2. Further research is essential to expand understanding of SOC and its measurable impact on personal aspects of Palestinians using case study and qualitative research design.
3. Moreover, a comparative study of SOC among Palestinian Diaspora is recommended.
4. Across-sectional study would be interesting for more understanding of SOC in different cultures.
REFERENCES


