

MODERATING ROLE OF INTERGROUP ANXIETY BETWEEN LIFE SATISFACTION AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY COHERENCE IN A DIVIDED SOCIETY

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Intergroup conflict has drawn scholars' attention in terms of negative experiences which can potentially diminish attitudes towards the opposing group and reconciliation as a whole. However, subjective wellbeing of members of groups in conflict is still at the margins of scholars' attention. The present study explored the relationship of sense of community coherence and life satisfaction, and the moderating role of intergroup anxiety. The study was conducted in a divided society context among members of the ethnic groups in conflict. The survey was conducted among 441 participants who are members of the groups in conflict, i.e., 202 ethnic Albanians and 239 ethnic Serbs living in Kosovo. The findings indicate that there is a positive relation between sense of community coherence and life satisfaction, which is stronger among those who reported lower levels of intergroup anxiety and weaker among those who reported higher levels of intergroup anxiety. The findings are discussed in terms of theoretical and practical implications for interventions aiming at reconciliation.

Keywords: *life satisfaction, sense of community coherence, intergroup anxiety, divided society*

1. Introduction

Intergroup conflicts have been a particular focus of researchers dealing with intergroup relations. They have mainly investigated this from the perspective of the destructive consequences of conflict, the negative impact of conflict on attitudes towards the opposing group, and the potential to hinder reconciliation processes (e.g., Boin et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2006; Hodson, 2011; Mana, 2019; Maunder et al., 2019; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Sagy, 2002; Tausch et al., 2010; van Zalk et al., 2021). However, the study of the well-being of individuals living in such contexts is on the margins of researchers' attention. It is well known that such conflicts generate tensions between conflicting groups, foster mistrust, hatred and hostility between them, and undermine social cohesion. Given the ecological perspective, it is expected that living in such circumstances may have negative consequences on well-being.

Group membership plays a significant role on individual wellbeing. It enriches people with a sense of belonging and meaningfulness. The sense of security within an ingroup is an important factor too. It contributes to identification with ingroup and promotes confidence as a member of the group (Levine et al., 2005; Wakefield et al., 2017). An important element of group membership and identification with ingroup is sense of community coherence which refers to

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the potential of coping with stressors at community level (Braun-Lewensohn & Sagy, 2011; Mana et al., 2016). It can contribute to resilience within the community, life satisfaction and overall well-being. In a study conducted on a cross-cultural community sample, it was found that higher identification with each group predicted higher satisfaction with life (Wakefield et al., 2017).

In deeply divided societies after the armed conflict, the binary divisions “us” vs “them” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) represent the contrasting segments of population. Identification with own population segment, security threats, and distrust between groups in conflict becomes more pronounced. Fear, which is the core emotion of such kind of conflict (McDoom, 2012), imposes a big challenge in the reconciliation process. Intergroup contact between members of groups in conflict arouses intergroup anxiety. If intergroup anxiety is high, this contrast between the in-group (one's own community) and out-groups (others) can become more pronounced. Individuals may then perceive out-groups as more threatening or alien, which can reinforce in-group cohesion but at the cost of increased tension and anxiety in intergroup contexts. It is well established that perception of security threats, including negative emotions, expressed through collective narratives is prevalent among groups in conflict (e.g., Ayalon & Sagy, 2011; Mana et al., 2019; Sagy et al., 2011; Srour et al., 2013; Telaku & Sagy et al., 2018; Telaku, 2021; Telaku et al., 2021) and negative emotions are negatively related to life satisfaction (e.g., Kuppens, 2008).

Given the ecological perspective, it is expected that living in such circumstances may have negative consequences on well-being. Since the study of the well-being of individuals living in such contexts remains relatively underexplored, this research aims to examine the tendency of intergroup anxiety to undermine the potential that a sense of community coherence within one's own group has to increase life satisfaction.

2. Research background

2.1 *Life satisfaction*

Life satisfaction refers to a cognitive, judgmental process, which is a comparison of one's circumstances with what is thought to be an appropriate standard (Diener et al., 1985). Veenhoven (1996) defines life satisfaction as “the degree to which a person positively evaluates the overall quality of his/her life as a whole. In other words, how much the person likes the life he/she leads.”

Life satisfaction is considered as one of the components of subjective well-being (e.g., Larwin et al., 2020). There are studies that examined the relation of group identification with subjective wellbeing. A study conducted among South Asian Canadians proved that identification with one's group promoted well-being for racial/ethnic minorities (Outten & Schmitt, 2015). Another study with participants from Scotland and Italy indicated that the level of family, local community and group of choice identification were positively related to subjective wellbeing (Wakefield et al., 2017).

2.2 Sense of Community Coherence

According to Sagy and Mana (2022), the concept of sense of community coherence (SOCC) is related to a specific in-group and not to the “global orientation of the world” as it is defined for individual SOC. It constitutes the three components of SOC: comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. Community comprehensibility relates to the perception that life in one’s community is predictable, safe, and secure and that one’s community is a place that is known and understood. Community manageability relates to the perception that one’s community can assist its members, is available to them, and meets their demands and needs. Lastly, community meaningfulness relates to the perception that the community gives meaning to its members, provides challenges, and is worthy of investment and engagement (Sagy & Mana, 2022). In studies conducted in contexts with intergroup conflicts, SOCC was found to be negatively related to openness toward the other group, intergroup relations, and readiness to reconcile (Mana et al., 2019; Sagy, 2017; Srour, 2013; Telaku et al., 2021). However, there are no studies regarding the relation between SOCC and life satisfaction. However, there are studies that indicate that there is a positive relationship between personal sense of coherence and life satisfaction (e.g., Bränholm et al., 1998; Krok, 2015; Maass et al., 2016; Moksnes et al., 2013; Sagy et al., 1990).

2.3 Intergroup anxiety

Anxiety is defined as “an unpleasant emotional state characterized by concerns, fright, distress, and restlessness that is a response to perceived physical and/or psychological danger” (Fila & Eatough, 2018, p. 155). Whereas, intergroup anxiety is defined as “a type of anxiety that people experience when anticipating or engaging in intergroup interaction. It is more specific than social anxiety because it is restricted to intergroup contexts. Intergroup anxiety may be aroused only by specific outgroups or by outgroups in general” (Stephan, 2014). Factors at the group level, such as stereotypes, etc. and factors at the individual level, such as negative experiences with outgroup(s) are considered as potential causes of intergroup anxiety. Potential consequences, among others, include: negative expectations, fear, anger, etc. (Stephan, 2014). People will naturally be anxious about interacting with members of the outgroup if the past relations have been characterized by conflict (Stephan & Stephan, 1985).

Several studies have found negative relation between anxiety and life satisfaction in different contexts, such as in workplace (e.g., Nauman et al., 2019), among students (e.g. Shin, 2019), and intergroup anxiety and outgroup attitudes in a divided society (e.g. Author, 2021; Van Zomeren et al., 2007).

3. Study context and research hypothesis

The 1998-1999 war in Kosovo left the society divided along ethnic lines, primarily between two groups involved in the armed conflict: Albanians and Serbs. Albanians make up the majority of the population, while Serbs form a minority group. During the war, the Albanian ethnic group was attacked by Serbian forces, and in the aftermath, the Serb ethnic group faced retaliation. Following the conflict, Serbs were internally displaced, forming mainly monoethnic enclaves. This

displacement reduced opportunities for interethnic contact, further deepening ethnic divisions. The last significant experiences that members of these two groups had with each other were the traumatic events of the war and its aftermath. These circumstances likely exacerbated interethnic anxiety. Moreover, living in ethnic enclaves has reduced interethnic contact, undermining the potential to overcome intergroup anxiety and reduce interethnic prejudice (Author, 2021).

Both Albanians and Serbs claim historical and cultural ties to the land of Kosovo. However, the modern conflict dates to the 20th century, when Kosovo became part of Yugoslavia. Ethnic tensions and nationalist movements intensified during the 1980s and 1990s, with the Albanian population feeling marginalized under Serbian control. The conflict was further exacerbated by Milosevic's policies and oppression. This increasing oppression led to the Kosovo War (1998-1999), where Albanians sought independence.

Cultural aspects play an important role in shaping the ethnic identities of these two groups and have been instrumentalized to foster interethnic conflict. The two groups speak different languages and follow different religions. Albanians are predominantly Muslim, with a small Catholic Christian minority, while Serbs are primarily Orthodox Christian. Conflicting collective narratives include historical stories that emphasize contradictions over the ownership of the Kosovo territory, based on religious heritage and ancestral ties. For instance, Serbs claim that Kosovo is historically significant to their national and religious identity, particularly within the Serbian Orthodox Church. On the other hand, Albanians assert ownership of Kosovo based on their Illyrian ancestry. Additionally, these conflicting narratives often highlight past wrongdoings by the opposing ethnic group, which are used to justify their own claims and hostilities toward the other group.

The study was conducted among members of these two ethnic groups in conflict in Kosovo: Albanians and Serbs. These two ethnic groups still live with interethnic hatred that mainly originates from the interethnic tensions during the 90s and armed conflict in 1998-1999. Furthermore, Serbs in Kosovo live in their own enclaves, which prevents interethnic contact with Albanians and other ethnic groups.

Based on the empirical evidence indicates that (a) there are positive relations of life satisfaction with sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1987; Dymecka, 2021; Jakovljevič, 2018; Länsimies et al., 2017), group identification (Wakefield et al., 2017), and negative relation with anxiety (Beutel et al., 2009; Foroughi et al., 2022; Goryczka, et al., 2022; Mahmoud et al., 2012), and (b) that intergroup anxiety is more prevalent in contexts where groups in conflict have limited contact with members of the opposing group (e.g., Bettencourt et al., 2019; Dixon et al., 2020; Halperin et al., 2012; Islam & Hewstone, 1993; Kauff et al., 2021) such as divided societies, the study explored the moderating effect of intergroup anxiety on the relationship between life satisfaction and sense of coherence at ethnic community level in the context of a divided society.

4. Method: Sample, Procedure and Measures

A total of 202 Albanians and 239 Serbs participated in this study, selected in different localities throughout Kosovo. The age range of participants varied from 18 to 69 years old with a mean of 34.5 and a standard deviation of 12.18.

The package of questionnaires was administered in different municipalities throughout Kosovo. Survey assistants from local communities approached citizens on the main streets of the towns where most citizens commute and assured them anonymity and voluntary participation. The package of questionnaires was self-administered. Survey assistants were available for further information and clarification if participants needed that.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample

Gender		Ethnicity		Residence		Education	
Male	55.9%	Albanians	45.8%	Urban	56.4%	Primary	2.1%
Female	44.1%	Serbs	54.2%	Rural	43.6%	Secondary	34.9%
						Undergraduate	47.7%
						Postgraduate	15.3%

The following measures were used:

Life satisfaction was measured by Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al., 1985), which is developed as a measure of the judgmental component of subjective well-being (Pavot & Diener, 1993) and has five items. The Cronbach's alpha of this scale in Albanian language was 0.78 and in Serbian language was 0.82.

Sense of Community Coherence Questionnaire (Sagy, 1998) is a seven-item questionnaire related to the three components of SOCC: comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness of the ethnic community. Two items of this scale were eliminated due to the unacceptable level of Cronbach's alpha of the scale with these two items. The Cronbach's alpha of this questionnaire was .83 among Albanians and .71 among Serbs.

The *Intergroup Anxiety Scale* was adopted from the Stephan's prejudice scale (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). The adopted scale first presents the context "*When I meet Albanians/Serbs I usually feel:*" followed by the items of feelings: *uneasy, nervous, threatened, uncertain, uncomfortable, and anxious*. Each item has a 7-point scale ranging from 1=not at all to 7=very much. The Cronbach's alpha of this questionnaire was .72 among Albanians and .86 among Serbs.

5. Results

Pearson's correlation was computed for the three variables of the study (Table 2). The results indicate that there are significant relationships between all three variables: life satisfaction and

SOCC $r(324) = .36$, SOCC and intergroup anxiety $r(324) = -.22$, and life satisfaction and intergroup anxiety $r(324) = -.12$.

A moderation model was run to test the research hypothesis with SOCC as predictor, life satisfaction as dependent, and intergroup anxiety as moderator. As Table 3 shows, there is an association between SOCC and life satisfaction ($b1 = 0.38$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$), and intergroup anxiety ($b2 = -0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .05$). There is a significant interaction between SOCC and intergroup anxiety ($b3 = -0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .01$). The results indicate that intergroup anxiety inhibits the positive relation between life satisfaction and SOCC.

Table 2. Correlations for the study variables

	1	2	3
1. Life satisfaction	–		
2. SOCC	.36**	–	
3. Intergroup anxiety	-.22**	-.12*	–

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 3. Results from Regression Analysis Examining the Moderation of SOCC on Life Satisfaction by Intergroup Anxiety

		Coeff.	SE	t	p
Constant	<i>i1</i>	4.39	0.07	66.45	< .001
SOCC (<i>X</i>)	<i>b1</i>	0.38	0.05	7.71	< .001
Intergroup anxiety (<i>M</i>)	<i>b2</i>	- 0.07	0.04	- 2.01	.05
SOCC × Intergroup anxiety (<i>XM</i>)	<i>b3</i>	- 0.07	0.03	-2.63	.01

$R^2 = 0.19$, $MSE = 1.40$

$F(3,320) = 24.74$, $p < .001$

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Those with higher levels of intergroup anxiety have weaker positive relationship between life satisfaction and SOCC compared to those with lower levels of intergroup anxiety. Figure 1 presents the slopes of this interaction.

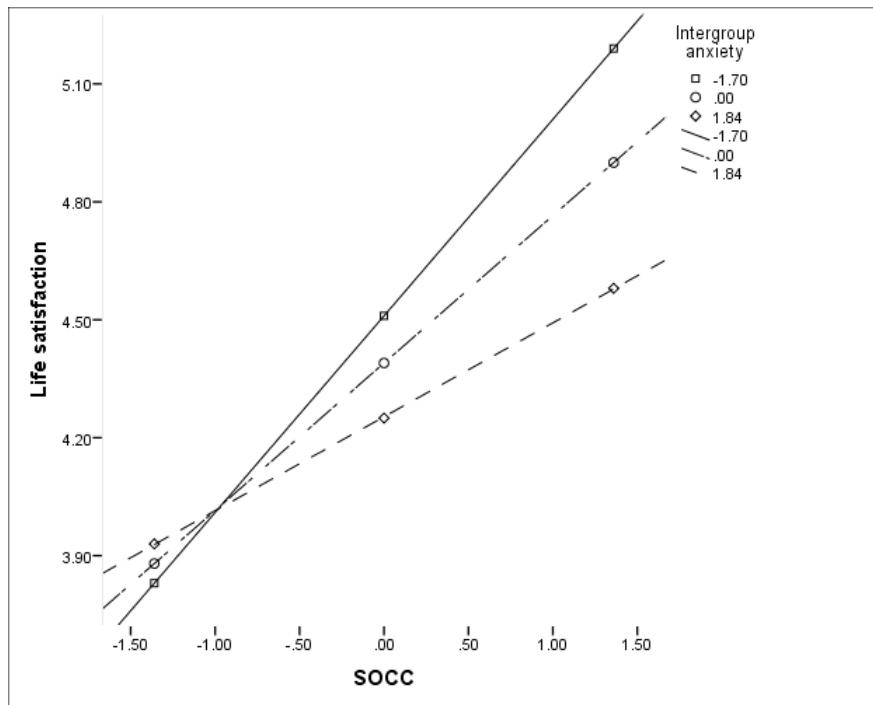


Figure 1. Regression Analysis Examining the Moderation of the SOCC on Life Satisfaction by Intergroup Anxiety

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to explore life satisfaction in relation to sense of community coherence and the moderation role of intergroup anxiety in the context of a divided society. The findings suggest that in divided societies, where intergroup tensions and conflicts are prevalent, individuals' levels of intergroup anxiety play a pivotal role in shaping their internal experiences by reducing the positive influence of sense of community coherence on life satisfaction.

The results of this study align with previous research highlighting the detrimental effects of intergroup conflict and societal divisions on well-being of the members of groups in conflict (Schmid & Muldoon, 2015). Moreover, the moderation role of intergroup anxiety emphasizes the importance of considering psychological factors in understanding the impact of intergroup relations on individual and collective outcomes (Stephan & Stephan, 1985; Author, 2021). Indeed, the study suggests that the impact of societal divisions on individual and communal well-being is contingent upon the levels of anxiety experienced in intergroup settings. High intergroup anxiety may exacerbate the negative effects of societal divisions, reducing both individual life satisfaction and the perceived coherence of the community. Conversely, lower levels of intergroup anxiety might mitigate the detrimental impact of such divisions, indicating a pathway through which communities and individuals might maintain or even enhance well-being in the face of societal challenges.

The model tested holds substantial importance for both theoretical understanding and practical applications, as it underscores the complex interplay between individual well-being,

perceived communal harmony, and the stressors associated with intergroup relations. There are several key aspects which highlight its importance.

In terms of theoretical implications, the findings shed light on the complexity of intergroup relations. They emphasize the complexity of intergroup dynamics and their psychological impact. It suggests that not only do direct interactions matter but so do the underlying emotions, particularly anxieties associated with these interactions. This moderation effect enriches existing psychological models by integrating elements of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954;). It provides a nuanced understanding of how perceived group threats or anxieties can alter the impact of sense of community coherence on personal well-being. The role of intergroup anxiety illustrates that well-being in divided societies cannot be fully understood without considering the socio-political context. It highlights how societal divisions and intergroup tensions penetrate individual psychological states.

From the ecological perspective, the study's findings emphasize the significant role that environmental factors play in shaping individuals' experiences within their communities and their overall well-being. Research conducted in the context of a divided society, which has undergone interethnic conflict and continues to bear its consequences, highlights the importance of these environmental influences.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1995) emphasizes the importance of individuals' direct interactions with their immediate surroundings. Those who feel a stronger sense of belonging and connection to their community tend to receive more emotional support and report higher life satisfaction (Antonovsky, 1987; Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Putnam, 2000). This sense of connection can foster greater levels of trust, resilience, and stability. Consequently, when individuals perceive their ethnic communities as cohesive and supportive, they are more likely to experience life satisfaction, benefiting from the social networks within their communities.

The relationship between the two ethnic groups plays a crucial role in shaping individual experiences. When these groups harbour hostile attitudes toward one another, individuals often feel insecure in interactions with members of the opposing group, leading to increased intergroup anxiety. This anxiety, as a negative emotion, can significantly lower life satisfaction.

The broader structures of society, including both governmental and non-governmental institutions, are also pivotal in shaping individuals' well-being. In the context of this research, these structures are deeply intertwined with ongoing interethnic conflict. These societal structures can either exacerbate or alleviate intergroup anxiety and influence individuals' sense of cohesion within their ethnic communities. Because these institutions are often linked to the conflict, they may reinforce negative interethnic stereotypes, heightening intergroup anxiety when individuals interact with members of the opposing group.

Historical events have left a lasting impact on individuals' experiences. Many have directly witnessed the trauma of war, while younger generations inherit these experiences through their parents' narratives. Furthermore, societal structures, through various institutions, have perpetuated narratives that fuel interethnic divisions over time. As individuals continue to experience interethnic tensions, these ongoing experiences reinforce negative stereotypes, which in turn are perpetuated by societal institutions.

Regarding the practical implications, the findings of this study hold significant implications for reconciliation processes in divided societies. Reconciliation efforts often aim to rebuild relationships, trust, and a sense of shared community among groups that have experienced

conflict. Our research highlights the critical role that intergroup anxiety plays in influencing individuals' sense of community coherence and life satisfaction, which is a critical factor in reconciliation. Recognizing the moderating effect of intergroup anxiety can guide the development of targeted interventions aimed at reducing intergroup tensions. Programs that reduce intergroup anxiety could enhance the positive relationship between community coherence and life satisfaction, promoting overall well-being (Stephan, 2014). Policymakers can use this insight to foster societal conditions that mitigate intergroup anxieties. For instance, promoting inclusive narratives and intergroup dialogue can address the root causes of anxiety, thereby strengthening sense of coherence at the community and national level, and individual satisfaction. Community leaders and practitioners can focus on creating safe spaces for intergroup interaction that minimize anxiety and fear. Understanding that intergroup anxiety can dampen the effects of community coherence on life satisfaction may lead to more effective community building, diversity promotion, and reconciliation strategies which may result in more resilient communities.

In conclusion, the study reveals that the pathway from sense of community coherence to life satisfaction is not straightforward in divided societies. Instead, it is contingent upon the levels of anxiety and tension between groups. This highlights the detrimental impact of intergroup tensions on individuals' overall quality of life and underscores the urgent need for interventions aimed at addressing these psychological barriers to well-being in divided societies which have undergone armed conflict.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the insights gained from this study, several limitations warrant consideration. The study lacks the exploration of other contextual factors and conflict-related factors which may have a crucial role in life satisfaction. Furthermore, the absence of control variables in this study could have impacted the results, such as: direct exposure to violent conflict, exposure to media narratives, stress levels, etc.

The cross-sectional design of the study might impose limitations in terms of generalization of findings. Specific characteristics of participants may have changed over time or certain events related to conflict may have impacted their perceptions. Therefore, the findings may not be applicable to future generations or different phases of the conflict.

Future research should explore additional moderators and mediators that may influence the relationships observed in this study, such as individual-level factors (e.g., experiences, coping strategies, identity salience) and contextual variables (e.g., level of intergroup contact, political climate, common goals).

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