**Open–Closed–Open: How Israeli Families Coped during the Coronavirus Lockdown**

Since China’s official announcement on December 12, 2019 about the eruption of COVID-19 in Wuhan and the World Health Organization declaration, on March 11, 2020, of the disease caused by the virus as a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020), the realities of life of millions of families worldwide have changed. Fear of infection and its pernicious effects on human life, healthcare systems, and the economy prompted governments to declare states of emergency and adopt a series of stringent measures to promote physical distancing, such as sealing international borders, closing schools and nonessential workplaces, and transitioning to study and work at home, among others. In some countries (China, Spain, Italy, the UK, Australia, South Korea) (Chau and Yip, 2020) people were instructed to isolate themselves from others wherever infection or proximity to infected people was suspected, and the additional step of lockdown of neighborhoods, cites, and entire districts was invoked to break the contagion chain.

This state of affairs—typified by uncertainty, genuine concern for the health of individuals and their loved ones, worries about livelihoods, and uninterrupted stays in a shared space with no possible respite—placed families under crushing stress. Even for those not infected with the novel coronavirus, it was undoubtedly one of the most stressful events that humanity has experienced in recent decades.

Exposure to stress is a risk factor for the development of distress. Research evidence from China confirms this. Thus, in the first stage of the COVID-19 outbreak, Wang et al. (2020) found that more than half of respondents (53.8 percent) experienced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress at medium to high intensity. Li et al. (2020) discovered that after the official announcement in China about the eruption of the epidemic, there was an upturn on the Chinese social network Weibo of manifestations of negative emotions such as anxiety and depression and a decrease in expressions of positive ones such as happiness. Concurrently, the findings illuminated protective factors that attenuate stress and anxiety, including living with parents.

In a recent survey on the implications of lockdown, Brooks et al. (2020) reported psychological effects such as acute stress disorder, disengagement from others, anxiety, irritability, insomnia, indecisiveness, concentration difficulties, deteriorating work performance, thoughts of quitting one’s job, and depression and anxiety, some evolving into post-traumatic symptoms.

Whereas many studies looked into the effect of COVID-19 on the individual, few were written with an eye on families (Lebow, 2020; Prime et al., 2020). Among studies of the latter kind, initial findings point to a steady increase in rates of domestic violence (Taub, 2020) and child abuse (UNICEF, 2020). These are challenging times for families worldwide. As a result of escalating economic stress and concerns about future employment, livelihood, and wellbeing, parents are prone to depression and disorders in relations with their children (Riegler et al., 2020). For families in more vulnerable population groups, coping with the lockdown may be especially complex. These families were dealing with challenges and concerns even before the COVID-19 lockdown era. They include families headed by separated or divorced parents who live in separate households (Sorek et al., May 2020); those headed by single parents, mostly women; and those that have children with special needs, *inter alia* (references)

Furthermore, in a major repercussion of the lockdown for families, support declines precisely when multiple forms of stress are experienced. Essential workers such as medical staff were away from home, thus protecting their families from potential infection. Some parents coped with working from home and others confronted financial concerns occasioned by the loss of a job. These coping challenges were augmented by tasks related to at-home childcare due to the closure of schools, providing support for distance learning, and doing household chores. Families are differentiated by the scale of resources that they may call on to cope with an event of this magnitude, associated with their level of education, physical and mental health, income level, living space, and access to technological resources (Fischer et al., 2020).

As social workers who engage in research and caregiving in the family system, we are eager to find out, both by consulting the theoretical and research literature and by interviewing people during the lockdown period, how the family unit, already coping with a highly stressful environment, encounters an extreme stressor akin to a natural disaster. Lavee et al. (1987) emphasize that families’ wellbeing is affected adversely by a pileup of stressful life events, changes in the family life cycle, and intra-family strains. In this article, we expand the family point of view as a whole and seek to understand how families coped with the imposed lockdown by describing the coping of families in Israel.

These families experienced the outbreak of COVID-19 as a new and unfamiliar stressor on top of other stressful challenges that they face. Some are outcomes of global processes such as poverty, migration, and changes in family structure. Others are specific to Israeli society, e.g., the Jewish–Arab conflict; polarization between religious and nonreligious members of society; ethnic tension; the effects of the Holocaust on the first, second, and third generations; and life-threatening events such as wars, security threats, and terror (Katz, 2003; Younes and Lavee, 2007). The cumulative findings of research in Israel suggest that stressful events can deliver a dire blow to family wellbeing and trigger distress, at least in the short term (Bensimon, Horesh, and Solomon, 2013; Solomon 2013; Neria, Nandi, and Galea, 2008; Saka and Cohen-Louck, 2014) The various studies also, however, point to a lengthy string of variables that may influence the extent to which individuals and their families are aware of the patterns that they use to cope with the stress and, ultimately, on the scope and duration of the assault on their wellbeing.

A conceptual framework that may explain how families perceive the demands of reality, their abilities to cope with these demands, and what can be done to keep them in balance is the ABC-X model. This model, originally formulated by Hill (1949) and subsequently expanded into the double ABC-X model by Patterson and McCubbin (1983), relates to factors that shape families’ various responses to stressful situations. It describes a dynamic process in which a stressful event (A), in interaction with the resources on which the family may call (B), in interaction with the family’s perception of the stressful event (C) will affect the family’s response to the stress (X). Thus, a family that confronts additional stresses and can draw on new resources may perceive the stressor positively, while one experiencing degradation of its available resources may construe it negatively.

When families cope with disaster situations, their routine way of life is radically disrupted and the sound functioning of their family system may be impaired. In such situations, the rules, roles, and division of responsibilities within the family change even if the sources of authority remain intact. Conversely, when family members endure the event together, sharing the experience, a soothing effect is obtained (Figley, 1983).

Israel was one of the first countries that declared a total nationwide lockdown in order to slow the spread of COVID-19. On March 19, 2020, members of households were ordered to stay together at home on a time-unlimited basis and were allowed to go outside for essential activities only (Ministry of Health, 2020). The lockdown soon hardened into a curfew during three days of the Passover festival. In ordinary times, many Israeli Jews see this as a time to gather extended family and friends around the festival table for shared recitation of the story of the Exodus. The performance of such rituals has immense cultural importance and is highly valuable in reinforcing family solidarity (Adar-Bunis, 2007). This year, the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to cope with it created a “different” Passover, in which distance, of all things, became emblematic of family solidarity. The Ministry of Health guidelines were clear: Passover celebrations would take place only among persons who shared one dwelling; leaving the house would be allowed only to a hundred-meter radius; leaving cities and local communities would be forbidden; and masks covering mouths and noses were compulsory in the public sphere. The elderly, the unmarried, and population groups at high risk of infection observed the festival alone for the first time, in order to safeguard their health.

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In a survey by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, conducted at the end of the lockdown period, it was found that about one-fourth of the adult population sustained a decline in psychological state, about one-third had feelings of stress and anxiety, and one-fifth reported sensations of loneliness, depression, and stress among household members (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

In our own survey, performed in the middle of the lockdown—by which time families had been together at home for more than a month—via a digital questionnaire given to a snowball sample of 862 adult representatives of families of various types, nearly one respondent in five (18 percent) reported high or very high levels of stress. These findings indicate that while some citizens perceive the COVID-19 event as a stressful situation that worsened their mental state, most of the population did not report a change for the worse in this regard.

How can one explain that, even though the COVID-19 event was defined as “a new kind of mass trauma” (Brown and Horesh, 2020, 332), much of the population did not manifest extreme stress responses? One explanation, in all likelihood, is that only some of the story is told when the event is observed through the lens of trauma. This invites us to contemplate the event through the prism of resilience, in which emphasis is given to the family’s strengths and its ability to be flexible, to adapt, and to change in the face of stresses and strains and to emerge from states of distress strengthened and more resourceful (Lavee, 2013).

This lens also emphasizes family cohesion as a source of resilience. Indeed, the family institution in Israel has a uniqueness that distinguishes it from its counterparts in other Western countries. This specificity is reflected in that even though Israel has post-industrial characteristics that do not fall short of those of other developed countries in many respects, its society retains its family orientation, or familism—i.e., the centrality of the normative family in personal and public life—as one of its hallmarks, as many researchers have pointed out (Peres and Katz, 1980; Fogel-Bizawi 2005, Lavee and Katz, 2005)..

Fogel-Bizawi (2009) draw a line that distinguishes between two perceptions: new Western ones that see the family institution as a democratic entity based on individualistic principles and on a spousal-family connection predicated on a contract between two people. Thus viewed, the family is dissolvable at any given moment, like any other arrangement that focuses on the individual and her or his needs and desires. The conservative outlook, in contrast, views the family as an organic whole predicated on belonging, intimacy, and personal, identity-forming support.

In the qualitative research that complemented our quantitative research during the lockdown, we interviewed twenty-six adult representatives of families of various types and asked them at length about their families’ experiences during the lockdown: How did family life proceed during those days? What stress did different family members experience during the lockdown? How did the stress change during that period? What factors were helpful in coping with the situation? What was the general atmosphere at home like, and how were relations among family members during this time (from the perspective of their relations in ordinary times and in reference to changes during the period in question)?

In the interviews, three expressions recurred in response to the question “What helps you to cope?”—“our together,” “closeness,” and “familism.” It was found that variance in the perception of the stress and its origins largely mirrored differences among types of families. Families with young children and those composed of single parents, for example, attributed the stress to being together at home without respite; families without children, in contrast, traced the stress to concern about health or experienced no stress at all. Another important finding was that most families, irrespective of type, economic situation, and level of education, perceived relations among members as “close” or “very close” due to the lockdown, experienced this closeness as helpful in coping, and believed that for this reason they coped better with the reality that had been foisted on them. A large proportion of respondents reported a good atmosphere at home and specified relations among family members as the factor that contributed the most to coping.

Several parents aptly described the family experience in words. A married man who had young daughters said that “relations among all of us became much stronger” since the lockdown. A single-parent mother of five reported that what helped her was “to be together in the family … we don’t let things affect us.” Another mother stressed, “…The main thing is the sense of together … one being with the other.” A single mother of two young children explained: “We have good relations, we’re close, we’re loving, we express love, we talk a lot .… In fact, [now] I have even more moments when I can loosen up with them a little.”

These findings suggest that despite the broad range of family templates, income and education disparities, and variance in levels and origins of stress, the Israeli family provided a source of support, a sense of belonging, and closeness during the difficult lockdown, and these, in turn, abetted family resilience. Israeli society is typified by strong family cohesion, cultural loyalty, and diversity of beliefs and customs (Levi-Belz, 2015) and this family cohesion may mitigate and attenuate the sense of distress that besets those harmed by extreme events (Solomon, 1987).

Thus, despite the polarization, the tensions, and the conflicts in Israeli society, the family ethos creates cohesion.

In sum, in this article we wished to glean information about families’ coping mechanisms by telling the story of Israeli families’ coping during the COVID-19 lockdown. Although the article dealt with the family as a system and not with extreme phenomena such as abuse, it should be borne in mind that the novel coronavirus caused havoc that dealt a shock to everything familiar to us. Around the world, tens of thousands of lives have been cut short, people died in hospitals without being able to say goodbye to their loved ones; those who recovered suffered, or continue to suffer, from damage that has implications not yet understood; people lost their livelihoods; unemployment rates climbed to levels not witnessed in decades; families broke up despite the acute situation; family violence escalated; and ways of life changed in extreme ways. Within this construct, a crisis may cause a hard and painful fall. Equally, however, it offers an opportunity for reassessment, marshaling of resources and capabilities, setting new priorities and objectives, and breaking through to something better.

Importantly, our study took place at one point in time, following closely after a unique human experience at the moment of its occurrence—the COVID-19 lockdown. The extreme events forced the family unit to climb into a time capsule of sorts. The unique opportunity that this afforded gave us a clear and sharp view of processes unfolding within the family. A similar opportunity arose (sadly) about thirty years ago, when Israeli families were interviewed in sealed rooms while under Scud attack during the First Gulf War (Lavee and Ben-David, 1993; Ben-David and Lavee, 1992). Had we observed the human experience from the more belated perspective that is usually adopted in research, we might have encountered other issues that correspond to the new and complex routine of post-lockdown life and that, accordingly, relate to the accumulation of additional strains and stresses.

In this article, we sought to acquaint social workers and policymakers with the family, in all of its templates, as a fundament of human society, particularly at this time of modern changes that emphasize the individual. Acknowledging the importance of the family as a source of support in situations of disaster and crisis will encourage resource allocation for bolstering the role of the family and launching programs that will position the family at the central node of intervention.

We conclude in the spirit of Nietzsche: **“He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”** It would seem that amid the “how” of the pandemic disaster, the family is the “why” that enables the suffering to be borne.