

New Aspects to the ‘Blame Game’: Political Attitudes, Attributed Blame, Hope, and Resilience in the Context of the ‘Swords of Iron’ War

By Shiran German-Ben Hayun & Leehu Zysberg[‡]*

Aims: We propose and test a model in which demographics, individual resilience, and attribution of responsibility for a crisis account for community resilience and hope – two indicators of a society's ability to withstand long-term adversity. Methods: Political attitudes, blame attribution, hope, and community resilience as well as demographics were measured using validated questionnaires in the wake of the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel. Data were collected from 406 Israeli participants representing a broad range of attitudes and political identities. Results: Path analysis showed that Education and political attitudes were associated with patterns of blame, which correlated with hope and community resilience. Individual resilience played a role in shaping politically-driven attribution patterns. Participants leaning right exhibited higher levels of hope and perceived community resilience than those leaning left. Conclusion: The findings underscore new dynamics underlying the ability of individuals and communities to cope with prolonged crises.

Keywords: *Blame attribution; community resilience; hope; political attitudes; conflict response; Israel-Hamas war; coping mechanisms*

Introduction

On October 7, 2023, Hamas militants attacked and killed about 1,200 people and kidnapped 250 on Israeli territory. This started the ‘Swords of Iron’ war between Israel, Hamas, and later Hizballah (The Times of Israel, 2023). Beyond the obvious losses and threat to lives and property, the devastation of communities and infrastructure created a large-scale military, socio-political, and economic crisis with no equal in Israel's 77 years of existence. The crisis was accompanied by a deep sense of disillusionment and disappointment in the way institutions such as the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) and the government handled the crisis. People criticised the military's function, and accused political leaders of politically biased decision-making at the highest levels of governance, noting, among other things, the lack of strategic management of the crisis, the biased non-realistic management of the economy, etc. (Freilich & Shavit, 2024).

As the challenges and threats persist, alongside a worsening social divide in Israeli society, the situation may provide an opportunity to study the dynamics associated with the maintenance of resilience despite the above on-going threats. We proposed a model including demographic characteristics often associated

*Doctor of Philosophy, Gordon College of Education, Israel.

[‡]Professor, Tel Hai College, Israel.

with resilience, individual resilience, and attribution of responsibility for the crisis and the ensuing war as predictors of community resilience and hope – two indicators of a society's ability to withstand long-term adversity. We tested this model on a sample of 406 Israeli citizens from diverse backgrounds and political leanings recruited via social networks throughout Israel in late 2024.

Literature Review

Demographic Factors and Coping with Crisis

Demographic characteristics, such as gender, age, education level, and marital status, shape coping patterns, mechanisms, perceptions of stress, and reactions (Chaturvedi & Purushothaman, 2009; Graves et al., 2021; Patterson, 2000).

Gender

Men and women displaying distinct patterns of coping in crisis situations. Women tend to use a broader range of coping strategies than men, often integrating problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches (Tasket & Neal, 2024). There is also evidence that women engage in emotion-focused coping strategies, such as seeking social support, which can provide psychological comfort and relieve emotional distress (Ptacek et al., 1994; Tamres et al., 2002). Men lean towards problem-focused coping, including active efforts to manage the source of stress directly (Ptacek et al., 1994). These differences are influenced by factors such as socialisation and traditional gender roles.

Age

Some research finds that older adults tend to use more problem-focused and proactive coping strategies, while younger individuals rely more on emotion-focused or avoidance strategies, partly due to varying levels of life experience, psychological maturity, and available resources (Chen et al., 2018). On the other hand, some evidence suggests older adults are more vulnerable to stress (Grossman et al., 2021; Schilling & Diehl, 2015). In other words, age may be a proxy of either cumulative experience and coping skills or depleted coping resources and heightened vulnerability.

Education

Higher education is associated with better long-term resilience (Fang et al., 2024; Frankenberg et al., 2013) and more effective coping strategies (Vitulic & Prosen, 2016). Individuals with higher education levels are more likely to use problem-focused coping strategies, while those with lower levels turn to avoidant coping (Odirile et al., 2009; Vitulic & Prosen, 2016). Moreover, individuals with advanced education may have greater access to resources, associated with resilience (Patterson, 2000).

Marital Status

Married individuals usually have lower depression rates and better family functioning than unmarried people in crisis situations (Kessler & Essex, 1982; Peng et al., 2022). Perceived social support mediates the relationship between marital status and psychological well-being, with married individuals reporting higher levels of social support, more positive mental health outcomes (Soulsby & Bennett, 2015).

Personal Resilience, Coping, and Stress Outcomes

Resilience represents the extent to which individuals mobilise personal, social, and environmental resources to cope with crises, stress, and threats in general and to return to normal functioning in the aftermath of the crisis (Grygorenko & Naydonova, 2023; Serdiuk et al., 2024). Resilience is more than just a survival pattern: it may allow individuals to experience well-being and growth despite the known negative effects of exposure to stressful life events (Tedeschi et al., 1998; Zysberg & Maskit, 2021). Resilience is considered a leading personal factor in human coping and reactions to emergency and trauma.

Political Perceptions and Attribution of Responsibility in Crisis Situations

While demographic factors and personal resources shape individual responses to crises, perceptions and attitudes may shape how individuals construe them, and therefore how they react. Most theories accounting for responses to stress contain a component of cognitive and emotive construal of the meaning of the event. Was the event purposeful or haphazard? Was malice involved? Such construal allows individuals and groups to attribute social meaning to events and gain a sense of control (Tho Pesch & Dana, 2024). In situations of threat, unexpected crises, or disaster, people seek who is to blame as part of a collective sense-making (Gilbert, 2022; Nkouaga, 2024). Attribution of responsibility is a central pillar of political behaviour and public responses to crises.

Political identity guides information processing and attribution of responsibility. People often exhibit biased reasoning, attributing positive outcomes to ‘their party’ while blaming external factors for negative outcomes, a phenomenon known as partisan reasoning (Tromborg, 2023). Moreover, political identities can lead people to prioritise party loyalty over facts, thereby influencing how they process information and evaluate political events (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). These dynamics fit the ingroup-outgroup framework, whereby the attribution of responsibility to ‘others’ helps people feel vindicated and stay positive in a crisis (Halabi et al., 2015). The severity of a crisis also plays a role, with higher perceived severity leading to increased ‘protective’ blame attribution (Laufer et al., 2005).

While dynamics of attribution of responsibility and blame in crisis have been studied, little is known about their consequences in terms of distress versus well-being during and after crisis. In the model guiding this study, we considered demographics and resilience as personal-level factors and attribution of responsibility and blame as secondary processes – responses to events.

Perceived Community Resilience and Hope

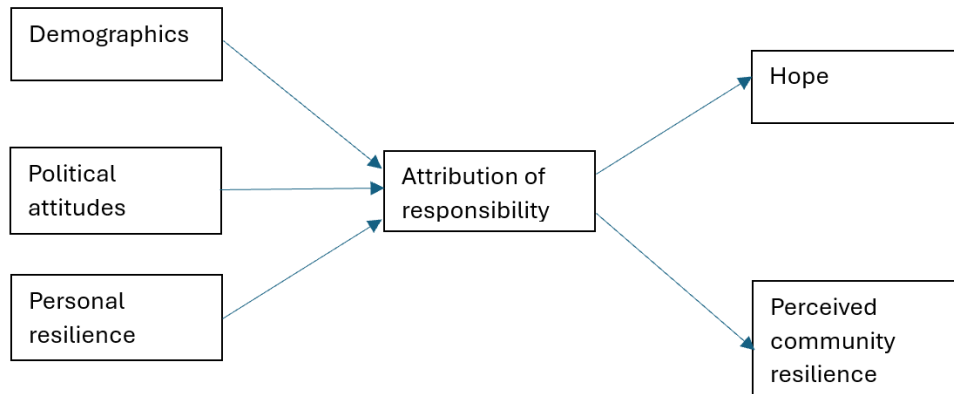
Community resilience is defined as the collective capacity of a community to prepare for, absorb, recover from, and adapt to disruptive events (Suresh et al., 2024; Vázquez et al., 2024). The concept encompasses social, economic, environmental, and infrastructural resilience, all of which are critical for effective disaster response and recovery (Kenney & Müller, 2024). Core components of community resilience, including trust and reliance on community members, leadership, knowledge of emergency procedures, and resource allocation, are shared by most if not all models. Communities with strong social ties exhibit greater resilience, as individuals are more likely to support one another during disasters, thereby enhancing recovery efforts. Individuals' perception of community resilience is often used as a proxy of the concept in research (Beldyga, 2023, 2024).

Hope plays a crucial role in crisis situations, serving as a psychological and social resource that can foster resilience and recovery (Ong et al., 2023). Hope, measured as both trait and state factors, represents personal perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of improvement and positive outcomes in the future, despite current hardships (Snyder et al., 2005). Hope has consistently been associated with positive outcomes in psychological and social aspects of coping (e.g: Marciano et al., 2022).

Hope can serve as a collective identity consolidator and a spiritual resource, enabling activists to envision positive change and resist feelings of resignation (Halperin, 2023). Furthermore, hope is intricately linked to beliefs about the probability of resolving conflicts; therefore, promoting possible resolution (Cohen-Chen et al., 2014). However, fear often overrides hope in Israeli society, creating a psychological barrier to peace efforts (Bar-Tal, 2001). Research shows hope serves as a critical predictor of resilience, particularly among vulnerable populations facing economic and psychosocial challenges (Myers et al., 2019). Overall, the interplay between hope and resilience is essential for fostering adaptive responses to distress within communities. We therefore used both as outcome indicators.

Study Model

Based on the literature, we hypothesised the attribution of responsibility and blame would mediate associations between demographic factors, political attitudes, and personal resilience and hope and perceptions of community resilience. The model is graphically summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Theoretical Model*

Materials and Methods

The data were collected about a year into the ‘Swords of Iron’ war between Israel, Hamas, and Hizballah. The ongoing conflict on the one hand, and growing dissention on how the conflict should be managed, priorities set, and resources allocated on the other, leave Israeli society divided and conflicted.

Sample

A total of 406 adults (ages 18–91; $M = 46.00$, $SD = 13.40$), recruited via online and bulletins, participated in the study. Of valid responses, 88% were women; 95% were Jewish, and the rest Druze, Muslim and Christians. Religiosity was reported as 65% secular, 26% traditional, 7% observant, and 2% ultraorthodox. Income distribution was slightly biased, with 45% at or below the Israeli average. Educationally, the sample was skewed: 73% held academic degrees, compared to 50% nationally (CBS, 2024). Politically, 33% identified as far left/left, 26% as centrist, and 41% as right/far right, reflecting current Israeli trends.

Measures

We used self-report measures to collect data.

Demographics

We gathered non-identifying demographic data, including age, gender, education level. We included a simplified measure of political attitudes that is common in similar studies (Krosnick, et al., 2005).

Exposure to Events of October 7 and ‘Swords of Iron’

We used a method common in war and pandemic studies (e.g.: Zysberg & Zisberg, 2022) to assess personal exposure to the October 7 events and the war. Participants reported whether they experienced any of seven exposure types:

personal injury, loss or kidnapping of close ones, eviction, military service, job/income loss, family injury, or property damage. Responses were summed into a cumulative exposure score.

Attribution of Responsibility

Respondents were asked to rank from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) the extent to which they thought each of 11 social and political entities was responsible for the crisis: military and security forces, the government, the prime minister, the security cabinet, people living in towns and kibbutzim around the Gaza strip, right-wing activists, left-wing activists, supporters and opponents of the legal reform initiated by the government prior to October 7th, the ultra-orthodox community, and the secular population.

Hope

We administered a short questionnaire assessing hope (Snyder et al., 1996). Six items assess respondents' perceptions of ways to cope with hardships and goal-oriented thinking. The reported reliability for this version in similar target populations ranges from .86 to .90 (Elyagon et al., 2020).

Situational Hope

Four items were added to the hope questionnaire relating to the specifics of the war and individuals' belief in the likelihood that individuals and communities would prevail: 'I truly believe things will get better'; 'I am afraid that if we will not change the way we act things will deteriorate even further'; 'I feel like the country and the people are in real immediate existential danger'; 'We have faced worse before, I know for sure we will get out of this crisis stronger than ever'. The items are an extension of the components of the short form hope scale by Snyder et al., (1996).

Personal Resilience

We used the Protective Factors for Resilience Scale (PFRS) to assess the perceived tendency to overcome hardships and personal and social resources for resilience (Harms et al., 2017). The 15-item version has shown good validity and reliability, ranging from .78 to .82.

Community Resilience

We used the Conjoint Community Resilience Assessment Measure (CCRAM), a 21-item questionnaire ranking various community functions and the level individuals put their trust in them and their function in times of crisis (Cohen et al., 2017). The questionnaire has shown good validity and adequate reliability: .80-.90.

Procedure

After gaining IRB approval from the authors institutional committee, public community bulletins and phone-based groups (through the WhatsApp application) in communities in Northern and Central Israel were used to distribute the questionnaires. The research was presented as 'a study of people's reactions and feeling one year into

the Swords of Iron war'. Participants were assured no identifying data would be collected, and they could withdraw from participation at any stage. Submitting the full questionnaire constituted providing informed consent to participate. We stopped data collection at $n=406$ valid responses; statistical power analyses suggested 386 was the optimal sample size to provide adequate power for our analyses given the proposed model.

Statistical Analyses

After computing descriptive statistics and preliminary bivariate associations between the main variables, we tested the model using SEM analyses in AMOS 29.0 (IBM, 2023).

Results

Preparatory Analyses

We calculated scale scores per original guidelines. For attribution of responsibility items, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) before scoring. Based on socio-political patterns in Israel (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014), EFA revealed three attribution factors: one aligned with right-wing views, another with central/left-wing views, and a third focused on the military. Accordingly, we computed three attribution subscales. Table 1 presents the factor structure.

Table 1. *EFA for attribution of Responsibility Items ($n=406$)*

Factor Loadings			
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Left-wing activists	0.798		
Opponents of the legal reform	0.788		
Prime minister		0.609	
Government		0.593	
Secular population	0.571		
People living around Gaza	0.538		
Security cabinet ministers		0.512	
Ultra-orthodox		0.724	
Right-wing activists		0.692	
Supporters of the legal reform		0.611	
Military/security forces			.891

The descriptive statistics of the focal variables are summarised in Table 2. The table indicates proper distributions in most measures and acceptable reliability.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables (n=406)

	Reliability	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min.	Max.
Political viewpoint	--	3.395	1.230	1.000	5.000
Exposure	--	0.594	0.816	0.000	6.000
Pers_resilience	.890	4.183	0.560	2.063	5.000
Comm_resilience	.935	3.527	0.759	1.238	5.000
Situational_hope	.785	2.996	0.880	1.000	5.000
Hope	.914	3.926	0.749	1.000	5.000
Blame_military	--	4.197	0.893	1.000	5.000
Blame from left	.760	3.359	0.849	1.000	5.000
Blame from right	.800	2.142	1.111	1.000	5.000

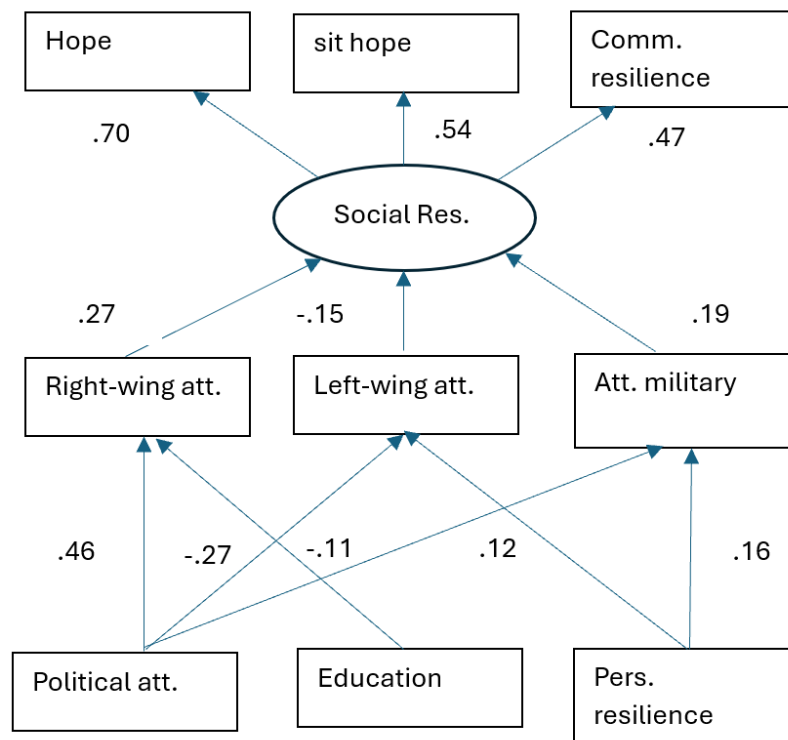
We next calculated zero-order Pearson's correlations among the main variables and added age, education, and religiosity as they often show associations with our main variables (see Table 3).

Table 3. Pearson's Correlations among Study Variables (n=406)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. political	—											
2. exposure	0.13 **	—										
3. comm_resil	0.05	0.05	—									
4. pers_resil	0.06	-0.07	0.39 **	—								
5. hope	0.06	-0.09 *	0.31 **	0.73 **	—							
6. sit_hope	0.36 **	0.01	0.30 **	0.37 **	0.35 **	—						
7. blame_military	0.21 **	-0.01	0.07	0.17 **	0.22 **	0.11 *	—					
8. blame from left	-0.27 **	-0.09	-0.01	0.07	0.03	-0.17 **	0.05	—				
9. blame from right	0.47 **	0.11 *	0.12 *	0.07	0.08	0.26 **	0.19 **	0.04	—			
10. age	-0.34 **	-0.16 **	0.07	0.04	-0.05	-0.01	0.05	0.27 **	-0.085	—		
11. education	-0.26 **	-0.05	-0.04	0.02	0.12 *	-0.11 *	-0.05	0.01	-0.196 **	0.05	—	
12. religiosity	0.36 **	0.11 *	0.13 **	0.01	0.01	0.24 **	0.14 **	-0.10 *	0.336 **	-0.07	0.00	—

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

To test our model, we used AMOS 29.0, running SEM, using the outcome variables as subscales representing an underlying factorial grade to allow us to test the outcome measures in one run. The original model was not supported by the data. However, after we removed paths that were not statistically significant and a few of the demographic variables that did not show associations with any of the model's components, a partial model fully supported by the data emerged (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Empirical Model Summary

Note: All paths are statistically significant. Error terms are omitted for simplicity of presentation. Goodness of fit indices: Chi-square=81.72 (df=14) $p < .01$; NFI=.91; CFI=.91; RMSEA=.08

This empirical model partially supported our hypothesis that the associations of political attitudes, personal resilience (alongside other demographics) with hope and community resilience are mediated by the attribution of responsibility (or blame).

Discussion

This study addressed perceived community-level resilience and readiness to cope with hardships as a function of two types of individual-level characteristics: first, demographics and personal resilience; second, attribution patterns associated with political outlook and attitudes, i.e., assigning responsibility for the war. We explored how they were associated with measures of hope and community resilience. The proposed model supported previous findings and yielded new insights into the complexity of social resilience versus vulnerability in an ongoing crisis.

Role of Demographics

Only education level and political attitudes showed an association with the study variables. While not directly associated with resilience and hope, they were associated with typical patterns of attribution of responsibility, which in turn, were associated

with our outcomes. In addition, individual resilience played a significant role in the empirical model showing associations with the politically-driven attribution patterns. Some of these findings are not surprising. Education level and resilience are well-documented correlates of effective coping in crisis, political involvement, and a sense of hope or a community-related sense of resilience (Monsalve et al. 2024). However, few studies have examined associations between the type of political attitude (e.g., right-wing/left-wing) and resilience. Our results suggest political attitudes shape attribution of responsibility, and this, in turn, is associated with levels of hope and resilience. In our sample, those who attributed responsibility in a manner typical of right-wing outlook were associated with higher levels of hope and perceived community resilience. A moderate opposite effect was also evident as those presenting attribution of responsibility typical of left-wing ideology showed lower levels of resilience. To the best of our knowledge, this constitutes the first evidence of this connection in a crisis context. Interestingly, Gender has not played a role as a factor in the resulting model. Traditionally gender associates with both political attitudes and expressions of resilience (e.g.: Campbell & Erzeel, 2018; Lesschaeve et al., 2024). Add to that the gender imbalance in our sample and we may speculate that over-representation of women might have biased the results toward a more progressive, left-wing direction and lower expressions of resilience. That however is not the case as our results show an adequate representation of right- and left-wing attitudes as well as a close to normal distribution of resilience measures.

Attribution of Responsibility or Blame

One of the most interesting findings was that political attitudes seemed to shape a sense of hope and resilience, at least in part. While there is some evidence of this effect in various political and national settings (Fernández-Albertos et al., 2013), the crisis we tested is both ongoing and complex. It put Israel and Israelis into an unfamiliar situation: a sense of military and political inferiority and doubt in their leadership's ability to cope (JPPI, 2024). Our results suggest that each side blamed those they saw as 'the other side'. Interestingly, these patterns were asymmetrical in their association with hope and resilience.

In our study, a 'right-wing' pattern of attribution was positively associated with a sense of hope and perceived community resilience, while a 'left-wing' pattern was associated negatively with the same outcomes. Does this mean having right-wing opinions is better for people, at least in the areas of hope and resilience? This is one way to read the findings. An alternative explanation is that right-wing thinkers label left-wingers and even centrists as 'collaborators', 'traitors' etc, distancing themselves from those they hold accountable, while left-wing thinkers are more inclusive, viewing everyone as 'in the same boat': therefore, blaming others does not alleviate the burden (Soen, 2015). Existing evidence points to such a possibility in various settings: Studies have found association between left wing attitudes and an inclusive social point of view (Dobernack, 2022). Others have established a consistent association between extreme nationalist or right-wing ideology and a more separatist view of the country and the world we live in (e.g.: Noel et al., 2021). Extremists in general but especially on the right side of the political range often use separation (viewing

others who do not agree as enemies, and detachment from the interests of groups perceived as ‘not ours’) as a means of putting their world in order (Weisehommeier et al., 2012). We can therefore see some potential support for our alternative path of explanation for our results. Future studies may clarify the underlying processes and dynamics.

Direct vs. Indirect Associations

Based on the literature, we expected to find direct associations between political attitudes, basic demographics (gender, education), and hope/resilience. Interestingly we failed to find these paths; associations with the outcome variables were exclusively mediated. Considering the sample and the statistical power it provided, we doubt this is an artefact. We suggest it highlights the importance of the attribution processes described above. It may suggest the existence of an interaction effect that renders the direct effects irrelevant (Freedman, 2010). Simply put: the direct effects of demographics and even personal resilience were insignificant to the attribution patterns. This attests to the dramatic role of these underlying dynamics in how individuals construe and cope with an ongoing crisis.

Community Resilience and Hope

We treated two measures of hope and a measure of community resilience as indicators of a common underlying factor based on evidence of the pivotal role of hope for a better future in fostering resilience and post-traumatic recovery (Ong et al., 2023). Thus, hope can be a correlate or a factor of resilience (Ong et al., 2006; Roland, 2022). Since hope is traditionally measured as an individual predisposition, we also asked about the specific situational aspect of the crisis and the extent to which people expected things to end positively. We found significant positive associations between the three measures. Hence, we interpreted the outcome factor as a theoretical representation of an individual-level perception of the community’s chances of successfully weathering this crisis.

Study Limitations

This study had some limitations that need to be considered when interpreting or weighing continued research. First, the sample, though large enough to provide adequate statistical power, was not necessarily fully representative of the general population. The two most notable deviations from population parameters in our sample were socio-economic status and gender (higher representation of women). These two factors are at times mentioned in the existing literature as correlates of numerous aspects in our model – from political attitudes to resilience. Second, we used self-report measures that may lead to response biases associated with both the methodology and the common methods effect (Tehseen et al., 2017). Third, data were collected about a year into the conflict; some of the initial shock had dissipated, and the military achievements in the war against Hamas and Hizballah had shaped public opinion.

Conclusion

Limitations notwithstanding, we have proposed and partly supported a model accounting for perceived community resilience and hope in the midst of an on-going severe conflict in which both sides have paid dearly. We believe the role of attribution of responsibility and blame is an interesting mediator that may shed new light on the dynamics of intergroup conflict and the way people construe and cope with long-term conflicts.

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