

Exploring Spatial Perception and Psychological Adaptation in Adolescents Released from Captivity

Shiri Shinan-Altman

The Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel
Email: shiri.altman@biu.ac.il

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Abstract

Background: Children and adolescents are frequently exploited as pawns in scenarios of political violence and armed conflict, with their vulnerability making them prime targets for abduction and hostage-taking. This study focused on the experiences of Israeli adolescents aged 12 to 18 who were released from captivity in Gaza, examining the impacts of such traumatic experiences on their well-being. **Methods:** In this qualitative study, we utilized content analysis to focus on firsthand testimonies from 11 adolescents released from captivity, as reported in the Hebrew-language press. The testimonies provide insight into the captives' experiences, with a focus on the spatial dimensions of their captivity and subsequent adaptation. **Results:** Analysis revealed three primary themes: The dichotomy between internal and external spaces, highlighting the captives' fragmentation; the dynamics of movement within captivity, stressing survival and adaptation strategies; and the transition from captivity to home, underscoring the complexities of reintegration into a safe space. These themes illustrate the profound psychological impacts of captivity, with an emphasis on the role of spatial perception in coping mechanisms. **Conclusions:** This study highlights the role of spatial perception in the experiences and psychological adaptation of adolescents released from captivity. It underscores the importance of tailored support and intervention strategies to facilitate their reintegration, enriching the broader discourse on the psychological resilience and vulnerabilities of adolescents in conflict zones.

Keywords

Adolescents, Captivity, Conflict Zones, Spatial Perception

1. Introduction

Captivity refers to the unlawful and forceful abduction of people, who are then

held in places that are hidden or difficult to access (Schmid, 2020). The primary purpose behind capturing individuals is to engage in coercive negotiations, with the aim of either demanding a ransom or pressuring an external party, typically a government, into taking certain actions or abstaining from them, such as the release of detainees. Fundamentally illegal, these acts often have political motives or implications (Gilbert, 2022; Schmid, 2020).

In 2022, the United Nations reported that 3985 children were abducted in various armed conflicts across the globe. This report encompassed over 20 countries or regions affected by conflict, highlighting that children are disproportionately impacted by these crises (General Assembly Security Council, 2023). From this data, it is evident that child abductions in conflict zones are a widespread issue affecting numerous nations worldwide. An example of abduction of children and adolescents occurred on 7 October 2023, when the Hamas terror organization attacked Israel with more than 230 civilians were kidnapped (Levi-Belz et al., 2024). A brief ceasefire in November 2023 allowed for the liberation of 105 hostages by Hamas, among them 37 children aged 18 and under. Accounts from those who were released, specifically adolescents aged 12 to 18, are now emerging, illuminating their experiences during captivity.

Captivity profoundly impacts children and adolescents, who are notably vulnerable during armed conflicts and political violence due to their physical, social, and structural vulnerabilities, such as smaller stature and less developed social skills (Katz et al., 2024). This susceptibility is compounded by other events they may face, including separation from parents, exposure to sexual violence, torture, and witnessing the murder and humiliation of relatives. These experiences can devastate their physical and mental health, and hinder their social-emotional development. The traumatic effects of captivity erode their perception of the world as a nurturing and supportive environment, profoundly affecting their sense of safety and trust in the world (Levany et al., 2023). The psychological impact is exacerbated when captivity is prolonged and involves betrayal, intensifying the trauma experienced (Alexander & Klein, 2009; Amone P'olak, 2009).

The experiences of adolescents in captivity can be examined through a spatial perspective. The concept of space is split into two categories: experiential, reflecting the subjective experience of being confined, and measurable, which refers to the physical dimensions of their environment (Mosser, 2021). Experiential space encompasses the personal “self-space” perceived in relation to others, whereas measurable space consists of objective units and dimensions. In contrast to the static nature of measurable space, experiential space is subjective and dynamic, continuously reshaped by the individual’s own perceptions (Becker, 1992). De Certeau’s (1984) work reveals how everyday actions transform our understanding of space, merging static “places” with the dynamic “spaces” shaped by human interactions. Similarly, Lefebvre’s (1991) conceptualization of space as a social product emphasizes the integral role of human interaction in shaping spatial meanings and experiences, affecting both individual and collective perceptions. Massey’s

(2005) notion of space as a perpetually evolving construct, defined by interrelations, aligns with this view, shedding light on the dynamic process of space-making and its significance within the context of captivity narratives. This exploration of spatial dimensions and their psychological impacts serves as a bridge to understanding the broader consequences of captivity, extending beyond the physical confines to affect mental health and social interactions.

In this study, we aimed to delve into the experiences of Israeli adolescents, aged 12 to 18, who were released from captivity in Gaza, with a particular focus on the spatial aspects as depicted in their initial testimonies published in online Israeli newspapers. Accordingly, we seek to contribute to the broader understanding of how captivity influences not only the physical but also the psychological spaces adolescents navigate.

2. Methods

We compiled publicly available information from testimonies given directly by released captives, adhering to specific inclusion criteria: individuals aged 12 - 18 who were part of the exchange of captives between Israel and Hamas from November 23 to November 30, 2023. Our focus was specifically on abductees who were released from captivity and provided first-hand testimonies through the Hebrew-language press, excluding those shared via social media platforms or provided by captives' family members. In the course of the research, the investigator, alongside two research assistants, simultaneously conducted Google searches for the names of all the released abductees, strictly following the inclusion criteria. The aim of this concurrent method was to reduce potential biases and the risk of missing any relevant information. Information from social media platforms was excluded.

Out of the 109 individuals abducted and released on the specified dates, 37 were minors below the age of 18. Following application of the inclusion criteria, 20 names were identified. Among these, we selected 11 testimonies that met the criteria for study inclusion: seven from boys (63%) and four from girls. The participants in the sample ranged in age from 12 to 18 years (mean = 15.9, standard deviation = 2.21), and the duration of their captivity ranged from 49 to 54 days. Among them, eight cases involved individuals who were abducted together with other family members, such as siblings and parents. In some instances, the abductees witnessed other family members being murdered at the time of their abduction. Additionally, four of these adolescents, at the time of this writing, have a parent who is still being held captive in Gaza.

2.1. Ethical Considerations

The research team utilized textual materials sourced through public Google searches, ensuring no invasion into private domains. The texts selected for analysis were anonymized, with no personal identifiers in either the original sources or in our reporting. In this study we prioritized collective analysis over individual data points, concentrating on identifying group trends and patterns. This approach demonstrates

dedication to ethical research standards, especially in preserving the anonymity and confidentiality of information obtained from the public domain. Because the research relied solely on publicly accessible information that was already in the public domain, and all data was anonymized to protect individuals' privacy, there was no need to apply for ethics committee approval.

2.2. Integrity

The study's integrity was bolstered through multiple rigorous approaches, each contributing to the reliability and credibility of the findings. To achieve a comprehensive understanding, the research team gathered wide-ranging and diverse evidence, which allowed for a deep and authentic exploration of the experiences of those who were abducted and later released. This evidence was carefully analyzed, with significant portions preserved in direct quotations to maintain the original voices of the participants. These quotations were then translated from Hebrew to English with meticulous care, ensuring that the nuances of the original language were retained. The translation process was further strengthened by critical reviews conducted by two native English speakers, one of whom was a professional translator, to ensure both accuracy and fidelity. By combining these thorough methods of evidence gathering, analysis, and translation, the study's integrity was reinforced, ensuring that the conclusions drawn are both credible and reflective of the true experiences of the participants (Anney, 2014).

2.3. Data Analysis

In this study, content analysis was employed to analyze the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), with the aim of identifying and encoding key themes and patterns (Mayring, 2004). During the data analysis process, we employed a systematic coding procedure. This involved initially coding all the transcripts line by line, followed by grouping similar codes into categories. These categories were then analyzed to identify overarching themes that encapsulated the core experiences and perceptions of the participants. Specifically, in the first stage, all interviews were read to identify the main issues arising from the discussions between the investigator and the research assistants, leading to the creation of sub-categories. We utilized a codebook throughout this process to ensure consistency in coding. The codebook detailed each code, providing definitions, examples, and guidelines for use, which helped maintain clarity and rigor during analysis. Subsequently, in the analysis, we sought to establish connections between topics, grouping these sub-categories into broader secondary categories. In the final stage, the primary themes that represented the main points of the study were identified. The themes presented in the study were related to the most common and significant patterns that emerged from the data. We identified these themes based on the frequency of occurrences and their relevance to the research aims. The criterion for presenting a particular theme was its prominence and consistency across the interviews. The analysis covered 90 pages.

3. Results

Three main themes emerged from the research findings. The classification of the main categories and subcategories is illustrated in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Classification of main categories and subcategories.

Main categories	Subcategories
Theme 1: Split spaces: The dual realities of internal and external fragmentation in captivity	<p><i>Internal Space Fragmentation: Heart vs. Head</i>—Captives face a profound internal split between their emotional coping and the necessity to maintain mental resilience.</p> <p><i>External Space Fragmentation: Captivity vs. Longing for Home</i>—Despite geographical closeness, captives feel a vast perceptual distance from the safety and familiarity of home.</p>
Theme 2: Transitions between spaces: The dynamics of movement in captivity	<p><i>Navigating Hostility: Survival and Adaptation in Unfamiliar Spaces</i>—Captives adapt and survive within unfamiliar spaces, showcasing resilience.</p> <p><i>Psychological Territory: The Impact of Forced Mobility on Mental Spaces</i>—Forced transitions profoundly affect captives' mental health, challenging their emotional stability.</p>
Theme 3: Returning to a safe space: The journey from captivity to home	<p><i>Navigating the Emotional Space: Between Relief and Uncertainty</i>—Captives oscillate between relief and uncertainty upon release.</p> <p><i>Reconstructing the Home Space Amid the Shadow of Loss</i>—Returning adolescents grapple with loss and the altered reality of home.</p>

3.1. Theme 1: Split Spaces: The Dual Realities of Internal and External Fragmentation in Captivity

3.1.1. Internal Space Fragmentation: Heart vs. Head

The adolescents described that during their stay in captivity they experienced splits in two central spaces: A split within the inner space, between the heart and the head, and a split in the outer space, between their captivity in Gaza and their longing to return home, to their safe and stable place of residence. The internal fragmentation was reflected in the separation between the complex feelings of being in captivity, including worry, helplessness and fear. However, there was an understanding that despite the mental difficulty, they had to survive and function.

“They told us that nobody wanted us in Israel... and that even in another year we wouldn't be back. I broke down once and cried. In the last week I no longer had mental strength, I felt like I had collapsed within, but I knew I shouldn't break down: I had to function without showing what I felt.” (Interviewee 3)

The internal dynamics among the captives were characterized by a profound split, oscillating between the anticipation of death, and a resilient, mutual bolstering of hope, as they endeavored to reassure one another that one day they would be released.

“I calmed down a little because I thought a deal would take a few days. And then it went on and on. At first you think, “Well, next week,” and then

another week and another... all the time we tried to encourage each other [the captives among themselves], reassuring ourselves that things would turn out well... although we didn't really know what they were going to do with us." (Interviewee 2)

The physical space in captivity itself was described as isolated, suffocating, and frightening. Some of the adolescents were kept in isolation on their own and were not permitted to move around except to go to the toilet. This experience was described by them as frightening and threatening. The only space to escape to was the radio: namely, listening to the radio in Hebrew, which allowed a kind of mental movement and a split from the physical space.

"I was kept alone. I sat in bed the whole time; that's the only thing I did. My captors did not let me move, only to go to the toilet and return to the small room. They let me listen to the radio a bit. I don't like the radio and I've never listened before, but it was nice to hear things in Hebrew." (Interviewee 10)

3.1.2. External Space Fragmentation: Captivity vs. Longing for Home

Another split in the outer space was reflected in the adolescents' reference to the physical distance between Gaza and Israel. In reality, the distance between Gaza and the places from which the adolescents were kidnapped was very close. However, they talked about perceptual distance; that is, they reported a feeling and experience of distance and disconnection from the familiar and known space despite the physical proximity.

"You are close but far. Actually, Gaza is only a few minutes from Israel but when you are there you don't feel it. You feel disconnected and can't believe that a place so close can be so different." (Interviewee 8)

3.2. Theme 2: Transitions between Spaces: The Dynamics of Movement in Captivity

3.2.1. Navigating Hostility: Survival and Adaptation in Unfamiliar Spaces

The interviewees recounted the significant amount of movement that took place during their captivity, detailing a series of relocations, escapes, and pursuits. Words such as "moving," "escaping," "running," and "walking" were frequently used to encapsulate their experiences of constant movement. The interviewees identified their abduction and the harsh shift from Israel to Gaza as their most challenging experience.

"We ran and tried to escape but it did not help us... They took us into a building in Gaza. The three of us sat there and they took pictures of us... I kept thinking to myself: What, I won't make it to my 18th birthday? At least let me live until I'm 18." (Interviewee 4)

After arriving in Gaza and settling in Gazan houses, some of the adolescents had to be moved, mainly in order not to attract the attention of the people in these areas. In order not to arouse suspicion when walking between locations, the

adolescents had to disguise themselves. The movement between houses was accompanied by concerns that they might arouse suspicion, and/or that they might be harmed in transit.

“We were told that we would have to move house... a doctor came [to see us] several times and people started to get suspicious, and it was not good for them [the captors] that people would suspect that there were captives here... the doctor came into our room, brought two Muslim women’s dresses... at ten thirty at night, when he saw that there were no people near the entrance, we left. While walking you see Gazans passing by and you’re disguised. Two Muslim men with bright eyes, and we were wearing flip-flops, hairy legs, and you just hoped they would not ask you anything.” (Interviewee 11)

The transitions between the houses were described as challenging moments. The adolescents did not know where the abductors were taking them, or who the new people guarding them would be. The adolescents felt exposed in these spaces even though they were sometimes transported in the dark. Anxiety levels were heightened as they experienced both the fear of being exposed and also of being harmed (from Israeli bombings) in the open spaces.

“And then they [the abductors] took us; we did not know to where, or who would guard us...what the conditions would be in the new place ..I think that the most difficult moments were when they took us through the heart of the city, twice. We were completely exposed in total darkness, with non-stop explosions all around us.” (Interviewee 1)

3.2.2. Psychological Territory: The Impact of Forced Mobility on Mental Spaces

The transitions between hiding places were also described by the adolescents as unusual/special days. These transitions symbolized movement and change compared to the passive and static days during which they stayed in a small and unchanging space. Some of the adolescents mentioned that they marked these days as special events.

“I documented the days, especially the special days. If I was suddenly taken to another place, it was a special day, a day of change, of anticipation. After many days of sitting in one place, any such change becomes something big and significant.” (Interviewee 5)

Moving from one confined space to another, the captives found themselves in yet another unfamiliar apartment, under the watchful eye of new abductors. This shift not only represented a change in their physical environment but also a psychological maneuver during which they had to navigate their fraught circumstances. By attempting to engage in laughter with their captor, they sought to mitigate their fear and forge a semblance of normalcy within the confines of their captivity.

“After a few minutes of walking, we arrived at the house, and we were in another new apartment...there was another person with us who watched

over us there. We were in a closed locked room and he [the captor] was outside the room. We tried to laugh with him as much as possible; for us, this helped to lessen the fear.” (Interviewee 9)

3.3. Theme 3: Returning to a Safe Space: The Journey from Captivity to Home

3.3.1. Navigating the Emotional Space: Between Relief and Uncertainty

The release of the adolescents from captivity unfolded as an ongoing journey, beginning with their transfer from the hands of their captors to the hands of the Red Cross. Throughout this process, they experienced a mix of uncertainty and fear, always concerned that the release might not really happen. Some of them had to say goodbye to their parents who remained in captivity, creating feelings of worry and fear for the fate of their parents. Simultaneously, they began to embrace the initial sensations of enormous relief, marking the onset of their return to a safe space.

“My mother was not released on the day of my release... I told her [mother] that I would be fine. She was very stressed. I worried about her and she worried about me... In addition, we were really scared, because we were walking in the dark; we didn’t know where we were going. We didn’t really know where we were being taken. I had a kind of relief when I imagined my home but it was impossible to believe.” (Interviewee 7)

Some of the interviewees described the relief they experienced upon discovering that their family members had not been kidnapped.

“We were told the night before that we would be released. I was happy but I didn’t believe until the end that it would happen. I didn’t know that my mom was doing things [here in Israel to advocate] for me to come back; I thought she’d also been kidnapped, and only when I got out of the van I was told that she was waiting for me. I was happy and asked how it was that she was here.” (Interviewee 4)

Another adolescent described the meeting with his brother prior to being transported out of Gaza:

“They told me I was returning back home to Israel an hour before. I was sure they [the captors] were lying until they came to pick me up. We were taken to a white van and then I met my brother. I was so happy to see him. I started to cry. Then I said to myself—at least I have him. We drove through the streets of Gaza and were transported to the Red Cross that took us out of the Gaza Strip.” (Interviewee 1)

3.3.2. Reconstructing the Home Space Amid the Shadow of Loss

After arriving back in Israel, the adolescents described an experience of relaxation and relief alongside difficulty in believing that they were no longer in captivity. They were home now, and home was described as an anchor and a safe haven in

which to stay.

“Moving back home is like returning to a safe harbor, re-acquiring everything I didn’t have there. Now that I’m home in a safe place I don’t understand how I existed there. It feels like someone else’s story. I don’t know if I will ever understand.” (Interviewee 2)

One difficult aspect for the adolescents was the realization that they could not return to their actual homes as these homes were situated in an area still under fire. For some, their homes were totally destroyed during the October 7th attack. The discovery that there was no familiar and safe space to return to evoked feelings of concern alongside hope that one day in the future, the areas in which they had once lived (their homes) would no longer be at risk of terrorist acts.

“In the meantime, we cannot return home because our kibbutz is in a dangerous place under fire. I really hope that it will be possible to go back to live at home and that the kibbutz will be restored, but you can't take a risk in the meantime.” (Interviewee 7)

4. Discussion

The aim of the current study was to delve into the experiences of adolescents, aged 12 to 18, who were released from captivity, with a particular focus on the spatial aspects as depicted in their initial testimonies published in online Israeli newspapers. This study enriches the literature by shedding light on the spatial and psychological effects of captivity on adolescents, highlighting the interplay between internal and external fragmentation and their impact on mental health and resilience.

The adolescents described an internal conflict between emotional responses (heart) and rational thought processes (head) in captivity. The loss of autonomy and the uncertainty regarding the duration of captivity significantly amplified their emotional distress. This complex dynamic accentuates the psychological impact of captivity, during which the inability to predict or control one’s circumstances exacerbates feelings of helplessness and fear, deeply affecting the captive’s mental and emotional well-being (Buoncompagni, 2021; Zerach et al., 2017). Conversely, cognitive coping strategies represent the head’s logical attempt to navigate this new reality, focusing on survival and adaptation (van der Kolk, 2014). This spatial dichotomy between emotional suffering and the imperative for mental resilience illustrates the internal fragmentation captives face, torn between their immediate emotional responses and the need to sustain functionality and hope amidst adversity.

Similarly, external fragmentation involves the physical and perceptual disconnection from one’s familiar space. The theory of place attachment (Lewicka, 2011) suggests that individuals develop strong emotional bonds with their physical surroundings, contributing to their sense of identity, well-being, and security. Captivity disrupts these bonds, inducing a sense of alienation and existential

disorientation. The longing for home and the perceptual distance from it highlights a spatial dissonance that exacerbates the psychological impact of captivity (Gossmann et al., 2024).

The captives' engagement with the radio in Hebrew served as a symbolic bridge between internal and external spaces, offering a semblance of connection to their identities and the world beyond their immediate physical confines. One critical aspect of captivity is the complete cutoff from the external world, highlighted by the loss of communication channels and the absence of information about family and friends (Painter et al., 2016). This act of listening, as a form of psychological escape and resilience, highlights the importance of being connected in sustaining displaced individuals' sense of self and hope (Ager & Strang, 2008).

After their arrival in Gaza and taking refuge in residential spaces, several adolescents found themselves needing to frequently relocate from one house to another. This strategy was primarily adopted by the captors to avoid drawing the local community's attention.

The abductees did not know where they were being taken, to what hiding place, or who would be guarding them—all of which led to significant feelings of helplessness. This sense of helplessness can be understood through Seligman's theory of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972), which posits that individuals may learn to feel helpless and passive when they perceive having no way to escape harm, leading them to passively accept their fate. Although the adolescents did not speak directly about the conditions in which they were kept, they spoke about fearing what might come next (i.e., in their next hiding place). Conditions of captivity are frequently extremely severe, characterized by harsh temperatures, lack of sanitation, and a scarcity of essentials such as food, water, and medical assistance (Wallace, 2015). Among the most harrowing experiences reported is solitary confinement, in which an individual is isolated in a dark, quiet room, cut off from any interaction with fellow captives (Chinonye & Atafu, 2023). Several of the adolescent hostages were, in fact, kept by themselves in captivity.

Spatial changes during captivity influenced the adolescents' psychological states. Transitioning between hiding places, rather than representing mere physical relocations, represented significant psychological events that disrupted the monotony and passivity of captivity, introducing a sense of change and anticipation. Alongside the complexity, apprehension, and fear involved in these transitions, marking these days as special underscored the adolescents' need for agency and the human tendency to find meaning in movement, even under constrained circumstances (Wright et al., 2019). The participants' accounts reflect a process of trying to make sense of the trauma they were experiencing.

Upon their return, the adolescents needed to navigate the challenging process of reconstructing their sense of home and safety. This process was often complicated by the physical and emotional scars left by their ordeal. The forced performance of happiness in front of the cameras, as described by the adolescents, was a reminder of the psychological manipulation often employed by captors to

maintain control over their narrative (Timchenko et al., 2021). Furthermore, the difficulty in believing that they were no longer in captivity, described by the adolescents as feeling that what happened to them hadn't really happened to them, highlights the dissociative mechanisms that can kick in as a coping strategy (Jukić et al., 2023). This dissonance between past experiences and present reality is a common theme in the literature on trauma and recovery (Lahav et al., 2020), suggesting a disconnection that can hinder the healing process. The adolescents' struggle to reconcile their identity and sense of safety upon returning home reflects the concept of "ambiguous loss" (Pauline & Boss, 2009), in which the physical presence of the home does not equate with the emotional safety it once represented. This loss was further compounded by the destruction of physical spaces and the loss of community members, aligning with research on the impact of environmental destruction on psychological well-being (Kessler et al., 2017).

The current study has several limitations. First, the small sample size, although rich in qualitative detail, may not fully represent the broader experiences of all former adolescent captives. Second, not capturing accounts shared on social media or in other languages might leave gaps in our understanding. Third, the focus on testimonies published in online Israeli newspapers introduces potential biases related to the selection of stories and experiences that are shared with the public, possibly skewing the representation of the broader range of captive experiences. Additionally, using media-published testimonies may introduce biases due to editorial choices and the potential for sensationalism. Fourth, the focus on early post-release testimonies captures initial perspectives but may not reflect the captives' long-term psychological journey. Furthermore, cultural and contextual factors specific to the Israeli setting may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations or contexts. Lastly, some testimonies may be partial, considering the ongoing captivity of others and the anticipation of family members' return.

The findings from this study have several important clinical implications, necessitating specialized therapeutic interventions that address both emotional and cognitive aspects of trauma. Therapy should focus on integrating fragmented experiences, helping individuals reconcile their emotional responses with survival instincts, and bridging the perceptual gap between captivity and home. Family involvement is essential in addressing collective trauma, supporting communication, and rebuilding trust and safety within the family unit. Long-term monitoring and continuous support are crucial to address emerging mental health issues and assist in the ongoing recovery process. Additionally, ethical considerations in clinical practice, such as ensuring confidentiality and obtaining informed consent, are paramount to prioritize the well-being of the adolescents. These comprehensive strategies may support the recovery of adolescents who have experienced the trauma of captivity, aiding them in rebuilding their lives in a safe and supportive environment.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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