



Erosion of mattering and agency among displaced Gazans under ongoing genocide: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Prolonged exposure to genocide and structural violence profoundly reshapes how individuals perceive their value, agency, and social significance. While research on trauma in Gaza has documented high levels of psychological distress, less is known about how genocide reorganizes everyday relational life, progressively narrowing recognition, participation, and voice.

Objective: This study explores how displaced Gazan women and men experience erosion of mattering and agency under conditions of ongoing genocide, and how they negotiate meaning and survival within fractured social environments.

Methods: Thirty displaced adults (17 women, 13 men) residing in internally displaced persons' camps in Rafah participated in semi-structured interviews conducted in Arabic. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns in lived experiences related to self-worth, agency, relational dynamics, and meaning-making.

Results: Four interrelated domains emerged. First, participants described fragmented social relations marked by mistrust, emotional withdrawal, and the re-prioritization of survival over connection. Second, genocide intensified experiences of marginalization and relational non-recognition, eroding participants' sense of personal significance within families and communities. Third, compulsory living conditions and exclusion from decision-making processes undermined agency and reinforced feelings of imposed powerlessness. Fourth, despite pervasive narrowing of external validation, participants actively engaged in adaptive meaning-making, drawing on familial roles, spirituality, and moral responsibility to sustain a sense of worth.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that genocide restructures psychological experience not only through trauma exposure but through systematic destabilization of recognition across socio-ecological levels. Mental health responses in Gaza must therefore move beyond symptom-focused frameworks to address relational, structural, and existential dimensions of harm, centering recognition, dignity, and agency as foundational components of psychosocial intervention.

1. Introduction

The ongoing genocide in Gaza must be understood within a broader history of colonization, occupation, blockade, and repeated military assaults that have structured Palestinian life for decades (Kaldor, 2013; Nijim, 2023). Structural violence in this context extends beyond direct physical destruction to include the systematic dismantling of social institutions, economic infrastructures, and relational networks that sustain everyday life (Muldoon et al., 2021; Rami et al., 2023). Such conditions do not only produce psychological distress; they reshape how

individuals experience their value, visibility, and significance within their families and communities. Research across conflict settings demonstrates that prolonged exposure to political violence erodes social roles, recognition, and participation, contributing to diminished self-worth and relational disintegration (Aldoughli, 2024; Hamamra et al., 2024). In Gaza, where violence is continuous and infrastructural collapse pervasive, the psychological consequences of genocide include not only trauma-related symptoms but also the erosion of mattering—the sense of being valued, recognized, and significant in the eyes of others and oneself (Tytarenko et al., 2024; Schwarzer, 2024). These

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processes are deeply embedded in disrupted familial relations, forced displacement, and imposed dependency, which collectively undermine personal and social identity (Muldoon et al., 2021; Rami et al., 2023).

Mattering refers to the subjective experience of being important to others and of having significance within one's relational and social environment. It is closely linked to self-worth, understood as the evaluation of one's value as a person, and to agency, defined as the perceived capacity to act, decide, and influence one's circumstances. In contexts of structural violence, these constructs are not merely individual psychological attributes but relational and socio-political experiences shaped by power and exclusion (Muldoon et al., 2021). When individuals are excluded from decision-making processes, silenced within families, or rendered invisible within broader political structures, their sense of agency and mattering may deteriorate. Studies conducted in war-affected settings indicate that exposure to political violence disrupts identity formation, undermines perceived control, and alters relational dynamics, thereby weakening both self-worth and social recognition (Aldoughli, 2024; Hamamra et al., 2024; Huynh and Li, 2024). In Gaza, systematic marginalization and repeated assaults on civilian life intensify these dynamics, embedding experiences of diminished significance within everyday interactions (Ajour, 2025; Smith et al., 2025; Diab et al., 2023).

Although a substantial body of literature has documented high rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress in conflict-affected populations, much of this research remains symptom-focused and grounded in psychiatric or diagnostic frameworks (Basu, 2024; Brewin et al., 2025). While such approaches are important, they often overlook how structural violence reshapes lived experiences of value, recognition, and participation. Qualitative scholarship in conflict contexts has begun to explore relational displacement and fragmentation (Muldoon et al., 2021; Tytarenko et al., 2024), yet there remains limited qualitative research centered specifically on how genocide reorganizes experiences of mattering and agency in Gaza. Furthermore, Palestinian-centered accounts that foreground local voices and lived meanings remain underrepresented in mainstream psychological literature (Ajour, 2025; Diab et al., 2023). Addressing this gap is critical for developing mental health frameworks that move beyond symptom enumeration to engage with the socio-ecological and relational dimensions of harm.

2. Contextual background: Gaza after October 7, 2023

The genocide in Gaza following October 7, 2023 must be situated within a longer history of settler colonialism, occupation, blockade, and recurrent military assaults that have structured Palestinian life for decades (Nijim, 2023; Sussman, 2024; Zhumatay and Yskak, 2024). However, the period following October 7 represents an unprecedented intensification of destruction, displacement, and civilian targeting. International medical and human rights scholars have described the scale and pattern of violence as consistent with genocidal conditions, marked by widespread civilian casualties, destruction of essential infrastructure, and systematic dismantling of the means of social reproduction (Bresheeth-Zabner, 2024; Faddoul et al., 2024; Repo, 2024).

Peer-reviewed epidemiological analyses estimate extremely high mortality rates attributable to direct military violence during the first months of the genocide. Capture-recapture analysis has documented substantial traumatic injury mortality between October 7, 2023 and mid-2024 (Jamaluddine et al., 2025). Reports published in major medical journals describe widespread bombardment of densely populated civilian areas, destruction of hospitals and primary care facilities, and severe disruption of emergency medical response systems (Farhat et al., 2023; Mahmoud and Abuzerr, 2023; Salmiya, 2023). The collapse of healthcare infrastructure has significantly reduced access to surgery, chronic disease management, maternal care, and mental health services (Gostin and Goodwin, 2024).

Beyond mortality, the genocide has devastated Gaza's built environment and essential services. Entire neighborhoods have been

destroyed, schools and universities damaged or rendered inoperable, and water, sanitation, and electricity systems critically impaired (Dader et al., 2024; Hassoun, 2025). Large-scale forced displacement has resulted in overcrowded shelters, deteriorating hygiene conditions, food insecurity, and increased vulnerability to communicable disease (Faddoul et al., 2024; Mahmoud and Abuzerr, 2023). These conditions constitute not only humanitarian collapse but a structural assault on social continuity and collective survival (Repo, 2024).

The mental health consequences of the genocide are profound. Palestinian and international researchers have documented alarmingly high levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and post-traumatic symptoms among adults and young people during and after periods of intensified military assault (Kienzler et al., 2024; Javanbakhht, 2024). A recent BMJ Global Health analysis described "unbearable suffering" and escalating psychological distress linked to displacement, bereavement, and exposure to bombardment (Kienzler et al., 2024). Reviews of mental health conditions in Gaza similarly report pervasive trauma, complex grief, and erosion of social support networks under siege conditions (Farajallah, 2024; Taha et al., 2024).

Palestinian scholars emphasize that these psychological consequences cannot be reduced to individual pathology. Rather, they are embedded in cumulative historical trauma, repeated displacement, and sustained political violence that shape identity, belonging, and inter-generational transmission of suffering (Barron and Abdullah, 2012; Barron and Abdallah, 2015; Veronese et al., 2023). The genocide therefore intensifies already existing socio-ecological vulnerabilities while simultaneously dismantling protective structures such as family cohesion, employment, and community institutions (Diab et al., 2023; Kienzler et al., 2024).

Understanding the present study requires situating participants' narratives within this context of large-scale destruction, forced dependency, and institutional collapse. The genocide in Gaza is not solely an accumulation of traumatic events but a structural reorganization of everyday life, social relations, and possibilities for participation. It is within this environment of systemic violence and relational disruption that experiences of mattering, agency, and self-worth must be examined.

3. Theoretical framework

This study is situated within a socio-ecological understanding of trauma that conceptualizes psychological harm as embedded within layered relational, structural, and political environments rather than as an isolated individual phenomenon (Pedersen, 2002; Theisen-Womersley, 2021). The socio-ecological model emphasizes the interaction between individuals and their broader social, cultural, economic, and institutional contexts, highlighting how violence restructures relational systems, community networks, and opportunities for participation (Biggs et al., 2017; Kurdi et al., 2024). In contexts of genocide, trauma extends beyond exposure to life-threatening events to include the systematic attrition of social recognition, belonging, and agency across ecological levels.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological perspective provides a useful scaffold for understanding how experiences of mattering and agency are shaped across interacting systems—from intimate family relations to community structures and broader political forces (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Within this framework, individual psychological experiences are inseparable from the relational and structural conditions that enable or constrain participation and recognition. When displacement, infrastructural collapse, and imposed dependency disrupt family roles, employment, and communal belonging, individuals may experience not only distress but a diminished sense of personal significance within these systems.

The concept of mattering intersects with this ecological perspective by foregrounding recognition and relational value as central components of psychological well-being. Mattering is not solely an internal belief about self-worth; it is constituted through ongoing social

interaction, validation, and inclusion. Under conditions of structural violence, exclusion from decision-making processes, silencing within intimate spaces, and enforced compliance may undermine perceived agency and relational visibility. Thus, erosion of mattering can be understood as an ecological phenomenon in which violence reorganizes social hierarchies, redistributes power, and constrains opportunities for meaningful participation (Muldoon et al., 2021).

While this study does not center coping as its primary analytical lens, Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress and coping offers conceptual support for understanding how individuals appraise and respond to overwhelming structural conditions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987, 1991). Coping is understood here not as a stable trait but as context-dependent cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage demands that exceed available resources (Biggs et al., 2017). In Gaza, where destruction, displacement, and insecurity are pervasive, coping efforts are constrained by limited structural support and fragile social networks (Afana et al., 2020). However, rather than classifying coping strategies into typologies, this study situates adaptive meaning-making within the broader ecological erosion of mattering and agency.

By integrating a socio-ecological model of trauma with relational understandings of mattering and agency, this framework positions genocide as a multi-level force that reshapes psychological experience through structural, interpersonal, and existential pathways. The focus is therefore not limited to symptom manifestation but extends to how individuals experience visibility, participation, and value within collapsing social environments. This orientation guides the analysis toward understanding how displaced Gazans describe relational fragmentation, imposed powerlessness, and efforts to sustain significance amid systemic violence.

This study explores how displaced Gazans experience erosion of mattering and agency under conditions of genocide, and how they negotiate meaning and survival within collapsing social structures. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do displaced Gazans describe changes in their sense of personal significance and recognition within families and communities during the genocide?
2. In what ways do experiences of exclusion, displacement, and imposed dependency shape perceptions of agency and self-worth?
3. How do individuals interpret and respond to these experiences in their efforts to sustain meaning and relational continuity under conditions of extreme violence?

4. Methods

4.1. Methodological framework and positionality

This study employed a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) to explore the lived experiences of Palestinians displaced during the ongoing genocide in Gaza. The research team includes Palestinian scholars directly affected by the ongoing genocide and one non-Palestinian scholar with longstanding collaborative engagement in Gaza.

The first author is an Italian psychotherapist and academic with over twenty years of professional engagement in Palestine, including fourteen years of sustained work in Gaza as a teacher, clinical supervisor, mentor, trainer, and researcher. His role has primarily been that of ally, working to facilitate Palestinian professional voices in international academic spaces, particularly in the Global North, and to challenge processes of silencing, epistemic marginalization, and gaslighting directed at Palestinians and Palestinian scholarship. As a white European academic holding structural privilege, he has been able to enter and visit Gaza, including during periods of escalating violence, mobility that remains inaccessible to his Palestinian colleagues.

The three co-authors are Palestinian scholars based in the West Bank.

They are directly exposed to annexation policies, military incursions, and ongoing political violence targeting Palestinian communities. Despite geographic proximity, they have been prevented from visiting Gaza due to movement restrictions imposed by the Israeli regime. Their lived realities are shaped by systemic constraints on mobility, academic participation, and family connection across fragmented Palestinian territories.

The research collaboration has developed over more than a decade across Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Italy, and broader European academic contexts. The team's work is grounded in long-term relational engagement, shared scholarly production, and continuous reflexive dialogue regarding power, privilege, access, and representation within colonial conditions.

While full co-production with participants was not feasible under ongoing war conditions, local research assistants were engaged as co-researchers to facilitate participant access, adapt procedures to cultural and logistical realities, and ensure ethical responsiveness. This approach allowed us to prioritize participants' narratives while reflecting critically on our own positionality and potential biases.

4.1.1. Participants

The study involved thirty displaced Gazans residing in internally displaced camps in Rafah during the October 7 genocide. The group comprised 17 women and 13 men, aged between 22 and 60 years (mean age for males = 34.43 years, SD = 13.14; mean age for females = 33.25 years, SD = 11.10). Participants are referred to throughout as participants to maintain methodological clarity while avoiding extractive terminology. All participants spoke Arabic and were able to engage fully in the interview process.

4.1.2. Instruments and procedures

Qualitative data were gathered through thirty semi-structured interviews, designed collaboratively with research assistants to ensure cultural relevance and minimize emotional distress. All interviewers and participants were native Arabic speakers. Research assistants acted as facilitators and gatekeepers, supporting outreach, identifying safe locations, and adapting the interview format as needed under extreme conditions.

The interview guide addressed topics including difficulties experienced during displacement, challenges to self-worth and agency, social support, and coping strategies. Participants were informed that they could pause or withdraw at any time, and investigators—licensed mental health professionals—were available to provide immediate support. Participants were also provided with contact information for mental health services for follow-up care.

Interviews were conducted in shelter schools in Rafah under conditions of ongoing bombardment, power outages, and forced relocation. Research assistants and participants faced significant logistical and psychological challenges, including risks from airstrikes, limited resources, and trauma-related reluctance to participate, particularly among women. Adaptive strategies included word-of-mouth recruitment, flexible interview scheduling, and adjusting interviews according to participants' emotional states. We acknowledge that full co-production was not possible due to the extreme environment; however, research assistants were actively engaged in the data collection-phase, and participants' perspectives guided adaptations in the procedure.

4.2. Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into Arabic by a native-speaking researcher. Transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) methodology (Parker, 2005) with a bottom-up, data-driven approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to identify main themes. Analysis steps included: (a) open coding to extract main themes from participants' narratives, (b) organizing codes into structured

categories. (c) Themes were developed through iterative reflexive engagement with the data, involving repeated reading, coding, and analytic dialogue among team members to refine interpretative coherence.

4.3. Ethics and data safeguards

The study was approved by [Anonymized for peer review]. All transcripts and recordings were anonymized and securely stored in encrypted files accessible only to the research team. Confidentiality was maintained, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Given the high-risk genocidal context, extra precautions were taken to ensure participants' physical and psychological safety, including flexible interview locations and ongoing access to mental health support for both immediate and delayed distress.

Research assistants received ongoing clinical supervision from senior members of the research team to support reflexive practice and monitor potential secondary trauma exposure. Structured psychological debriefing sessions were conducted regularly to allow research assistants to process emotional reactions arising from interview content and field conditions. Research assistants were informed of their right to pause or withdraw from data collection activities at any time without professional consequence, and workload adjustments were implemented when needed to safeguard well-being.

5. Results

The findings are organized into four interrelated domains: (1) Fragmented Social Relations, (2) Marginalization and Erosion of Mattering, (3) Loss of Agency and Compulsory Living, and (4) Adaptive Meaning-Making and Relational Survival. Rather than isolated categories, these domains reflect interconnected processes through which participants describe relational rupture, imposed powerlessness, and efforts to preserve dignity and meaning.

5.1. Domain 1: fragmented social relations

Participants described a profound fragmentation of social bonds under genocidal conditions. Relationships that previously offered stability and recognition became strained, distant, or emotionally unavailable. Survival pressures reshaped priorities, often displacing care and mutual recognition. One participant described how relationships that once offered support became altered under pressure: "The war has revealed many people's true colors and exposed the sincere from the hypocrites." (Amal). Another participant reflected a similar shift within close family ties: "My uncle used to care about me before the war, but during the war, things changed a lot." (Khaled).

Together, these accounts indicate that relational change was experienced not as isolated incidents, but as a broader reconfiguration of trust and reliability within social networks. Relationships were not entirely severed, but became conditional, unstable, and harder to depend on.

Participants also described a subtler form of fragmentation, emotional invisibility within ongoing interactions. One participant explained: "They talk to me a lot, but they ignore or neglect me while they talk among themselves as if I am not present." (Rania). Another participant further contextualized this dynamic by emphasizing the role of survival urgency: "Everyone is looking to find a solution to their endless problems, so their importance comes first." (Rania)

Taken together, these narratives show that fragmentation operates not only through physical or relational distance, but through diminished attentiveness and recognition in everyday interactions. Social presence does not guarantee emotional inclusion, particularly under conditions where survival demands take precedence.

5.2. Domain 2: marginalization and erosion of mattering

Beyond relational fragility, participants described a deeper experience of marginalization, feeling unseen, unheard, and insignificant within both family and community spaces. This domain captures not only the absence of inclusion, but the active or passive devaluation of one's voice and presence. One participant highlighted exclusion from important decisions affecting his life: "When big decisions are made without anyone asking me or consulting me, even though that decision has a significant impact on me and my life." (Samer).

Another participant further described the internal impact of this repeated exclusion: "No one takes my opinion or cares, and I feel neglected by those around me to the extent that I feel worthless and useless." (Samer).

Together, these accounts demonstrate that marginalization operates across both social and psychological levels. Exclusion from participation is not experienced as neutral, but accumulates into a diminished sense of self-worth and personal significance.

For displaced individuals, especially women, marginalization was intensified by shifts in living arrangements and social roles. One participant stated: "I have felt worthless since the beginning of the genocide as I am displaced with my husband's family." (Hanan). Similarly, another participant described emotional dismissal within close family relationships: "Even my mother can no longer stand to hear a word from me and always yells at me." (Yusef).

These accounts illustrate how marginalization is embedded in both structural conditions, such as displacement, and everyday interactions. Over time, repeated experiences of dismissal and exclusion contribute to the internalization of insignificance, reshaping how individuals perceive their own value. This internalization was made explicit by one participant: "I convinced myself that I am insignificant." (Hanan). This statement reflects the cumulative nature of marginalization, where external non-recognition becomes internalized as self-perception, signaling a profound erosion of mattering.

5.3. Domain 3: loss of agency and compulsory living

Distinct from marginalization, participants described a pervasive loss of agency characterized by coercion, imposed roles, and constrained decision-making. Here, the central issue is not only feeling undervalued, but being unable to exercise choice within fundamental aspects of daily life.

One participant captured the overarching sense of compulsion: "Life in Gaza has essentially become compulsory in everything imposed on us." (Laila). Another participant illustrated how this compulsion extends into everyday social interactions: "They force you to host people you don't like, or go to people who, for example, don't like you but you're forced to." (Samer)

Together, these accounts show that coercion operates both at the level of general life conditions and within routine social practices, making compulsion a pervasive feature of daily life rather than an exceptional experience. One participant further emphasized how forced displacement intensified this loss of control: "We are forced to evacuate to his land." (Laila) This account highlights how agency is constrained not only socially but structurally, where even decisions about movement and place are externally determined. Another participant described how exclusion from decision-making led to withdrawal from expressing opinions: "Sometimes I went through a period where I felt that my opinion did not make a significant difference, so I stopped expressing agreement or objection." (Rania) This narrative shows that constrained agency is not only imposed externally but also reproduced internally through adaptive silence, as individuals disengage after repeated experiences of exclusion.

Here, silence functioned not as passivity but as adaptation to repeated exclusion. Participants remained active in survival tasks, yet described diminished influence over choices affecting their lives. Across participants, these accounts indicate that agency is not entirely removed

but significantly narrowed, operating within boundaries defined by coercion and limited influence. Agency was not erased entirely; it was narrowed, constrained, and subordinated to imposed conditions. This domain is analytically distinct, as it centers on coercion, imposed roles, and exclusion from decision-making rather than merely relational hurt. It thus reflects a shift from being undervalued to being structurally restricted in agency and action.

5.4. Domain 4: adaptive meaning-making and relational survival

Despite fragmentation, marginalization, and coercion, participants described deliberate efforts to sustain meaning and preserve dignity. These efforts reflect active attempts to maintain identity and a sense of self under conditions that undermine both recognition and agency.

One participant described finding a sense of mattering within close family relationships: “I only feel my importance to my husband and family.” (Laila). Another participant emphasized this through her role as a mother: “I feel my importance in my existence in my children’s lives.” (Laila)

Together, these accounts suggest that mattering becomes concentrated within intimate relational spaces, where recognition remains possible despite broader social instability.

Another participant highlighted the importance of role-based contribution:

“I am the main source of income, so it is natural for me to be valued by everyone.” (Khaled). This account indicates that mattering can be anchored in functional roles, where value is derived from responsibility and contribution rather than relational affirmation alone. One participant turned to spiritual grounding as a source of meaning: “What matters most to me is how my end will be with God and whether I will be among the blessed or not.” (Amal)

Another participant similarly framed their sense of mattering through faith: “I have importance and a good impact by God’s grace among those close to me.” (Rania). Together, these narratives show that spiritual frameworks provide an alternative basis for mattering, allowing individuals to locate their value beyond immediate social conditions. Another participant described cognitive reframing as a way to cope with negative interactions: “I try to understand the reasons and who the problem is with; it’s not on me but on the other party.” (Yusef). This reflects an effort to resist internalizing blame, suggesting that individuals actively reinterpret their experiences to preserve a sense of self-worth.

Endurance here was neither denial nor optimism; it was an active negotiation of identity under conditions of imposed diminishment. Across participants, these strategies demonstrate that meaning-making is an ongoing adaptive process through which individuals sustain dignity, coherence, and a sense of mattering despite relational and structural disruption. Meaning-making did not eliminate suffering but provided continuity in the face of relational collapse.

Taken together, the four domains illustrate how genocide restructures experiences of mattering through intertwined processes of relational fragmentation, marginalization, constrained agency, and adaptive meaning-making. Participants’ narratives demonstrate that the erosion of recognition and autonomy is not incidental but embedded within disrupted family roles, exclusion from decision-making, and survival-driven reordering of social priorities. At the same time, individuals actively negotiate these conditions by anchoring identity in intimate relationships, moral responsibility, and spiritual commitment. Mattering in Gaza therefore does not disappear; rather, it becomes unstable, contested, and continuously renegotiated within collapsing and reconfigured social structures.

6. Discussion

The results provide a detailed account of the psychological, emotional, and social consequences of ongoing systematic violence in

Gaza, demonstrating how everyday recognition and participation are progressively destabilized (Faddoul et al., 2024; Farajallah, 2024). Rather than interpreting these consequences solely through a trauma-symptom lens, the findings show how genocide reorganizes relational life across family, community, and political domains. This violence is not random or isolated; rather, it forms part of an overarching strategy aimed at erasing Gaza’s population, with broader implications of ethnic cleansing (Bresheeth-Zabner, 2024). Interviewees consistently highlighted the destructive impact of this violence on personal and collective identity, confirming that its psychological toll extends beyond immediate trauma into existential dimensions of value and continuity (Kienzler et al., 2024).

The first domain—fragmented social relations—illustrates how genocide destabilizes relational infrastructures that historically sustained recognition and belonging. While some aspects of the suffering in Gaza reflect the gradual erosion of social and psychological structures, the experiences reported also demonstrate direct, swift, and extreme acts of violence, consistent with the concept of necropolitics, in which power determines who may live and who must die (Mbembe, 2003). Palestinian scholars emphasize that this violence is not only physical but also social, political, and cultural, targeting the collective existence and identity of Gaza’s population (Hamdi, 2022; Abed Alah, 2024). Participants’ accounts of relational withdrawal, mistrust, and survival-driven reprioritization resonate with Giacaman et al. (2007), who describe how prolonged exposure to war-like conditions corrodes social cohesion and everyday mutual recognition. These experiences of marginalization, both locally and internationally, echo findings that the denial of visibility contributes to a deep sense of non-mattering and identity erosion (Giacaman et al., 2007; Kiadan, 2024). Importantly, relational fragmentation was not framed by participants as personal failure but as structurally induced strain, aligning with socio-ecological models that situate psychological harm within collapsing systems rather than isolated individuals.

The second domain—marginalization and erosion of mattering—extends this relational disruption into the realm of internalized self-worth. The forced complicity imposed by the occupation was described by participants as rendering survival a state of passive existence, rather than an act of agency (Diab et al., 2023). Consistent with Muldoon et al. (2021), the findings suggest that political violence operates through the redistribution of power and recognition, positioning certain populations as disposable or peripheral. This anticipation of destruction exemplifies learned helplessness, where individuals perceive their actions as powerless to alter circumstances (Khashan, 2003). The repetitive cycles of violence therefore perpetuate not only physical harm but also the psychological erosion of self-agency (Veronese et al., 2022). What emerges here is not merely distress, but a progressive internalization of non-recognition, whereby repeated exclusion from decision-making and validation reshapes self-perception itself.

The third domain—loss of agency and compulsory living—clarifies that diminished personal significance is structurally enforced rather than merely experienced as emotional distress. Systemic violence permeates all aspects of life, including targeted airstrikes, destruction of healthcare infrastructure, and sieges restricting access to necessities (Qutishat, 2025). The collapse of Gaza’s social fabric—through displacement, separation, and trauma—further exacerbates individual suffering (Ajour, 2025). Within Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological framework (2005), such constraints represent multi-level disruptions in which macro-political forces constrict micro-level autonomy. Agency in this context becomes narrowed rather than extinguished: individuals continue to act, but within increasingly restricted margins of choice. This aligns with socio-ecological understandings of structural violence (Pedersen, 2002), where autonomy is systematically constrained by imposed dependency and exclusion. Participants’ descriptions of compulsory living should therefore be understood not as passivity, but as action within conditions of imposed precarity.

The fourth domain—adaptive meaning-making and relational survival—complicates narratives of total erosion. Beyond individual experiences, the trauma is collective, intergenerational, and historically rooted. Palestinian scholarship emphasizes that colonial violence, dispossession, and repeated cycles of occupation shape both personal and communal identity, transmitting trauma across generations. At the same time, participants' reliance on family roles, faith, and moral responsibility illustrates how mattering is actively renegotiated even within collapsing systems. This lack of recognition reinforces the collective sense of non-mattering. Yet, consistent with [Diab et al. \(2018\)](#), collective survival practices function as forms of everyday resistance, preserving dignity and relational anchoring despite structural erasure.

The occupation and practices of ethnic cleansing are embedded within global geopolitics. International failure to hold Israel accountable, alongside tacit support for its policies, leaves Gaza's residents exposed to systematic violence with little recourse ([Elkhalid et al., 2024](#)). Participants described frustration and a profound sense of abandonment, emphasizing that their lives and deaths appear inconsequential to the world. This global dimension of non-recognition amplifies local experiences of marginalization, extending the destabilization of mattering beyond intimate relationships into international political space.

The psychological consequences of sustained violence extend beyond immediate trauma to long-term societal reconfiguration. Intergenerational transmission of trauma, disruptions to family, education, and community structures, and normalized exposure to insecurity are likely to reshape social cohesion, identity formation, and collective resilience in Gaza for decades ([Dardona et al., 2025](#); [Abed Alah, 2024](#)). Rather than conceptualizing resilience as an individual trait, the findings support a relational and political understanding in which endurance is sustained through collective anchoring and moral commitment under siege ([Diab et al., 2018](#)).

Ultimately, participants' testimonies reveal an environment in which survival itself acquires political meaning. Survival should not be romanticized; it coexists with progressive destabilization of recognition and restricted autonomy. Even as individuals and communities strive to persist, ongoing violence continues to narrow participation and destabilize personal significance, producing enduring psychological and societal consequences. Mental health frameworks that focus exclusively on symptom reduction risk obscuring these relational and structural dimensions of harm. Recognition, justice, and affirmation of humanity are essential for mitigating these harms.

6.1. Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations. The sample, while diverse, is relatively small and may not fully represent the Gaza population. Interviews reflect participants' subjective experiences, potentially introducing bias. Accessing trauma-affected participants was challenging due to the political context. Finally, focusing on immediate psychological impacts may overlook long-term effects, including intergenerational trauma and the reshaping of community structures. Future research should explore these enduring impacts, including perspectives from refugees and displaced populations in exile.

7. Conclusion and implications for practice and policy

The findings of this study underscore the need for nuanced, culturally sensitive approaches to clinical care and intervention in Gaza ([Diab et al., 2020](#)). Rather than focusing exclusively on symptom reduction, mental health responses must address the collapse of mattering and constrained agency identified across relational, familial, and structural domains. Mental health professionals working in conflict zones must go beyond traditional therapeutic approaches that focus on individual pathology and integrate Palestinian scholarship on collective, historical, and intergenerational trauma, recognizing that the violence is both

direct and systemic ([Hamdi, 2022](#); [Abed Alah, 2024](#); [Qzeih and Mokhtarshahi Sani, 2024](#)).

To provide effective support without reinforcing colonial paradigms, interventions should be conceptualized as an integrated framework where individual and family-level care intersects with community empowerment and structural advocacy. Such a framework should explicitly aim to restore recognition, participation, and relational visibility—core components of mattering—alongside addressing psychological distress. At the individual and family level, trauma-informed, culturally adapted therapy must address both direct life-threatening violence (necropolitics) and ongoing structural oppression. Clinical work should therefore create spaces in which individuals can reclaim voice, decision-making capacity, and relational significance within disrupted family systems. Families should be supported to rebuild relationships, shared narratives of survival, and intergenerational resilience, while psychoeducation can enhance coping, self-agency, and hope amid chronic violence.

At the community level, participatory programs can restore social cohesion and collective well-being, creating safe spaces for healing and empowerment while emphasizing local leadership and community input. Given the documented fragmentation of social relations, rebuilding trust and communal recognition should be treated as central therapeutic goals rather than secondary outcomes. Special attention to youth programming is essential to foster resilience, education, and civic engagement, preventing the intergenerational perpetuation of trauma.

Interventions must also operate at the structural and human rights level, promoting awareness of rights and advocacy skills to support self-determination, while collaborating with local and international human rights organizations to address systemic oppression and promote accountability. Because loss of agency in this study was closely tied to exclusion from decision-making, policy initiatives should prioritize participatory governance and community-led reconstruction efforts. Policy initiatives, such as improving access to mental health care, rebuilding essential services, and ending isolation, must be implemented in a manner that strengthens Palestinian agency, resists dependency, and challenges systemic injustice.

Effective intervention, therefore, requires a holistic approach where clinical, social, and structural elements are interwoven: trauma-informed care at the individual level is complemented by participatory community programs that rebuild cohesion, and structural advocacy efforts that challenge oppression. At all levels, interventions must be designed collaboratively with local communities, centering Palestinian knowledge and resisting externally imposed colonial paradigms. An integrated approach that foregrounds mattering and agency ensures that support does not inadvertently reinforce narratives of passivity or victimhood, but instead strengthens dignity and relational recognition.

Clinically, it is crucial to implement holistic trauma-informed care that addresses both immediate psychological needs and long-term healing of broken social structures, familial bonds, and community cohesion ([Jabr and Berger, 2023](#); [Rockowitz et al., 2024](#)). Therapeutic approaches must recognize the unique experiences of Palestinians within their historical and political context ([Taha et al., 2024](#)), and interventions should emphasize empowerment and advocacy, providing resources to resist oppression while promoting self-determination ([Taha et al., 2024](#); [Salmiya, 2023](#)). Such approaches should be attentive to how individuals negotiate meaning through faith, family roles, and moral responsibility, as these emerged as critical anchors of survival in the present findings.

Future research should expand understanding of intergenerational and collective trauma, exploring how violence shapes identity, resilience, and social cohesion across generations. Further qualitative work should specifically examine how mattering is reconstructed over time and how constrained agency evolves in post-escalation contexts. Longitudinal studies could clarify the evolution of trauma and the effectiveness of interventions over time. Gendered experiences, particularly among women, and the realities of Palestinian refugees in neighboring

countries should be central to future investigations to fully understand the scope of Palestinian suffering and resilience.

From a policy perspective, urgent international pressure is required to hold the Israeli government accountable, including legal action, sanctions, and diplomatic interventions to end the blockade and occupation. Local policy initiatives should focus on rebuilding infrastructure, strengthening social support systems, and ensuring access to mental health care (Kienzler et al., 2024; Veronese and Kagee, 2024). Reconstruction efforts should also prioritize restoring spaces for social participation and community deliberation, given the centrality of recognition and voice in sustaining psychological well-being. Support for youth empowerment, education, and community-based healing programs is critical to break the cycle of violence and foster resilience for future generations.

Finally, scholarship and research are vital for ensuring accountability and recognition of Palestinian suffering, highlighting the systemic nature of oppression and advocating for justice and human rights (Veronese and Kagee, 2024). By centering Palestinian voices and knowledge, interventions and policies can be developed that promote agency, resilience, and collective healing, offering a pathway toward justice, dignity, and peace for the Palestinian people. Future scholarship should continue to interrogate how global political structures shape experiences of mattering and whose lives are rendered visible or invisible within international discourse.

Informed consent

Not applicable.

Ethical approval (include full name of committee approving the research and if available mention reference number of that approval)

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of An-Najah National University IRB, the American Psychological Association, and with the Helsinki Declaration. Informed consent was obtained from parents all participants. The protocol of our study was received ethical approval from An-Najah National University IRB before data collection was initiated.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Guido Veronese: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft. **Dana Bdier:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. **Bilal Hamamra:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft. **Fayez Mahamid:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. All authors agreed in submitting the manuscript to the journal.

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