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“We must cooperate with one another against the Enemy”: Agency and activism in school-aged children as protective factors against ongoing war trauma and political violence in the Gaza Strip



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ABSTRACT

This exploratory qualitative study investigated self-perceived risk and protection factors that may reinforce the ability of children living in refugee camps on the Gaza Strip to adjust to a traumatic and risky life context characterized by loss and dispossession. The sample comprised 200 Palestinian children recruited at primary schools in four refugee camps in the Gaza Strip following the Israeli military operation “Pillar of Defence” in 2012. Thematic content analysis was applied to written materials and narratives produced by the children. Environment, friends, emotions, family, play, self, sociality, health, school, and spirituality were the dimensions that emerged from the narrative texts. Palestinian children’s psychological adaptability and ability to reposition themselves along the continuum between ease and disease is underpinned by constant political agency and activism – a dimension that guides sense-making activities in a traumatizing environment marked by continuous uncertainty, loss and bereavement. We therefore recommend a politically-informed focus, both when assessing children and when designing intervention for them in contexts of chronic political violence and war.

1. Introduction

Recent decades in Palestine have seen continuous bouts of violence ensuing on 70 years of military occupation and territorial dispossession (Harker, 2011; Marshall, 2015).

In the Gaza Strip in particular, children have been identified as those most affected by ongoing warfare and military violence (Khamis, 2015; Qouta et al., 2016; Thabet, Thabet, & Vostanis, 2016a). In relation to the most recent war on Gaza in 2014, Unicef reported that over 400,000 children needed immediate psychosocial and child protection support following the Israeli attack (OCHA, 2014). Indeed, many Gazan children have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), psychiatric disorders (e.g., depression and anxiety), and other forms of psychological distress (Cozza et al., 2010; Khamis, 2005, 2012; Laor, Wolmer, & Cohen, 2001; Thabet, Abed, & Vostanis, 2002; Thabet, Thabet, & Vostanis, 2016b).

Most psychological studies carried out in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) have linked exposure to military violence, bombardments, imprisonment and house demolitions with psychiatric sequelae and trauma-related syndromes (Canetti et al., 2016; Punamäki, Palosaari, Diab, Peltonen, & Qouta, 2015; Qouta, Punamäki, Montgomery, & ElSarraj, 2007; Qouta, Punamäki, & Serraj,

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2003; Thabet, Abed et al., 2002). Thabet and Vostanis (1999a, 1999b) found that a significant proportion of Palestinian children reported moderate to severe post-traumatic stress reactions (41%) as well as high rates of anxiety and behavioural problems (27%). Again, due to the chronic violence, children were also commonly affected by psychological impairments such as fear of leaving home (28%), fear of soldiers (47%) and nightmares (Baker, 1990). Qouta and Odeh (2005) found a very high rate of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the children of Gaza, with up to 55% suffering from acute PTSD in areas exposed to heavy violence. Khamis (2005) found that 54.7% of children had experienced at least one traumatic event in their life, and that 34.1%, mostly male refugees, displayed PTSD symptoms.

While research in the Middle East has pointed up the key role of politics in Palestinian life (Migdal, 2014; Sayigh, 2015), mental health researchers have traditionally been reticent to adopt a comprehensive perspective that considers the political factors affecting subjective well-being (Barber et al., 2014). The construct of psychological or subjective wellbeing (SWB) has been defined as the subjective experience of one's own emotional stability, balance between negative and positive affect, and general life satisfaction (Ryff, 2014). More recently however, scholars have found that ideological and political commitment on the part of children and young people helps them to adjust to violence and trauma (Barber, 2014, 2013; Spelling, Barber, & Olsen, 2012; Veronese & Castiglioni, 2015). Barber (2013) has emphasized the role of political ideology in helping youths to process war experiences and adapt to them (Nguyen-Gillham, Giacaman, Naser, & Boyce, 2008; Punamäki, 1999a, 1999b; Punamäki, Qouta, & El-Sarraj, 2001; Slone, 2009), proposing a conceptual model of how life in the oPt is driven by *political* conditions (Barber et al., 2014). In fact, living under occupation explicitly means to be politically controlled (Giacaman, Abu-Rmeileh et al., 2007; Giacaman, Mataria et al., 2007; Mataria, Giacaman et al., 2009; Mataria, Khatib et al., 2009). Barber et al. (2014) argue that each of these dimensions may be viewed as sub domains of the *political* domain and as influencing other fundamental areas of wellbeing such as the psychological, personal, spiritual, family, and economic domains. (Williams & Robinson 2006; Veronese, 2013; Veronese & Pepe, 2014). Environmental and political conditions impact on how children attribute sense and coherence to events, adapt to conflict and develop their identities (Barber, 2009; Barber & Youniss, 2012; Gibson, 1989; Hammack, 2010; Jones, 2002). Hence, in contexts of war and violence, children's subjective and psychological wellbeing is associated with agency and political commitment (Hammack, 2011) and affected by the interplay between conditions of oppression and access to means of obtaining liberation from oppression and the fulfilment of basic rights such as the right to play, education, a healthy environment, etc. (Prilleltensky, 2003). Since the beginning of the second *intifada* (uprising) in 2000, Palestinian children have been daily coping with historic existential insecurity and a continuous sense of danger due to the Israeli military occupation of land, sky and underground (Weizman, 2007). Religious, territorial, and political agency and activism are constructs that contribute to maintaining children and youths' psychological functioning and, as well as their ability to adjust to continuous traumatic experiences as part of collective Palestinian *sumud* (steadfastness) (Spyrou & Christou, 2015; Akesson, 2014; Spelling et al., 2012; Habashi, 2011).

1.1. Agency and activism as protective factors in war-affected children

Both the scientific community and common-sense observers tend to frame children as weak, vulnerable, and incapable of acting autonomously, viewing them as lacking in political subjecthood (Beier, 2015). Thus, the dominant discourse on childhood trauma emphasizes psychological and psychobiological interventions above other forms of non-interventionist social support (Gilligan, 2009, 2006).

In a critical analysis of trauma intervention with war-affected children, Gilligan (2006, 2009) questioned the notion that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a consequence of past events which cause symptoms in the present. In this view, this assumption underestimated the fact that “people are active in giving meaning to their experiences of political violence” (Gilligan, 2006, p.339) and do so from their socially and culturally embedded perspectives in the present – and in case of children – from their current developmental perspective (Gilligan, 2009). Hence, the psychological suffering reported by war-affected children has been conventionally viewed as an outcome of trauma and the children themselves have been seen as passive victims of traumatic events. This has tied in with a broader trend, from the 1990s onwards, for European and US mental health systems to use counselling intervention to treat trauma in children as a psychiatric disorder (Nader, 1997). On the one hand, this focus on trauma and its impact may serve to draw the attention of the general public and policy makers to the intangible consequences of war for children's lives. However, on the other hand, and this applies to the Palestinian case amongst others, focusing on the psychology of the individual shifts the emphasis from the background of occupation, thereby depoliticising the context in which the violence is taking place (Argenti-Pellin, 2003; Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). What is ignored or not recognized is a larger complex interaction of many “comorbid” mental outcomes linked to coping resources and pro-active behaviors.

Gilligan (2009) suggests conceptualizing children living in war-like environments as active agents who attribute meaning to their own experiences. Research from the oPt suggests that in extreme traumatic contexts of ongoing political violence, threat to life is a factual reality that children are forced to cope with daily. Therefore, children in oPt take up an active position in the historical Palestinian master narrative of collective resistance and the struggle for national liberation (Hammack, 2011). This positioning is intertwined with trauma due to continued loss, dispossession, and injustice and the related collective struggle for existence (Said, 1979, 1994).

In sum, it has been repeatedly argued that reducing Palestinian social suffering to a PTSD framework can contribute to passivizing subjects, situating children in particular as powerless victims (Bistoën, Vanheule, & Craps, 2014). Clinical interventions focused solely on symptom reduction and the treatment of traumatic syndromes are technologies of the mental health system that reproduce colonial power and risk expropriating Palestinian children from coping resources and adjustment strategies for dealing with continuous trauma (Clark, 2016).

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