



Dwelling within political violence: Palestinian women's narratives of home, mental health, and resilience



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ABSTRACT

Political violence is increasingly played out within everyday civilian environments, particularly family homes. Yet, within the literature on political violence and mental health, the role of threats to home remains under-explored. Using focus group data from 32 Palestinian women, this paper explores the implications of violations to the home within political violence. Threats to the privacy, control, and constancy of the family home – key dimensions of ontological security (Giddens, 1990) emerged as central themes in women's narratives. Surveillance, home invasions, and actual or threatened destruction of women's home environments provoked fear, anxiety, grief, humiliation, and helplessness, particularly as women struggled to protect their children. Women also described how they mobilized the home for economic, familial and cultural survival. Study findings illuminate the impact of threats to intimate environments on the well-being of women and their families living with chronic political violence, and underscore the importance of attention to violations of place and home in research on civilian experiences of and responses to political violence.

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1. Introduction

Political violence increasingly erodes the boundaries between the “war front” and the “home front” (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), 2005). In ongoing occupations in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine, military incursions routinely involve everyday civilian environments, including workplaces, schools, and sites of worship (Coward, 2004; Graham, 2004; Gregory, 2008). A central target of contemporary political violence is the family home, which is regularly subject to surveillance, invasions, and repeated actual or threatened demolitions (Brickell, 2012; Johnson, 2010; Falah, 2004; Fluri, 2011).

A small body of literature, mainly from data collected among women in Palestine, points to the mental health implications of the home invasions and demolitions that, in part, characterize political violence in this region (Johnson, 2010; Harker, 2009; Giacaman et al., 2007; Qouta et al., 1998; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2006, 2009). Findings from these studies are consistent with scholarship on the negative impacts on well-being of threats to home related to mass disasters (Carroll et al., 2009; Cox and Perry, 2011; Erikson, 1976; Norris et al., 2002; Sims et al., 2009; Tapsell and Tunstall, 2008), urban renewal (Fried, 1963; Fullilove, 1996, 2004), and chronic environmental degradation (Speldewinde et

al., 2009). Yet, while evidence suggests that one-third to one-half of people exposed to political violence will endure some type of mental distress (deJong et al., 2003; World Health Organization (WHO), 2002), there is limited information about how the intrusion of political violence into everyday places, particularly family homes, affects well-being.

This paper uses data from a series of focus groups with Palestinian women to both draw together and deepen the literature on place, political violence, and health. Although the study focused generally on women's experiences of the occupation, threats to homes and their implications emerged as central themes in women's narratives, underscoring the importance of attention to violations of place and home in scholarship considering how well-being is affected by political violence. Informed by theoretical and empirical work on home, ontological security, and well-being (Antonovsky, 1987; Giddens, 1990; Seamon, 1979); by scholarship on the implications of *solastalgia*, or threats to everyday environments while residents are in situ (Albrecht et al., 2007, 2012); and by feminist scholarship on gender and home (Hooks, 1990; Young, 2005), this study illuminates the critical relationships between home and well-being in the context of political violence. In the sections that follow, we describe the theoretical and geographic contexts that inform our interpretations. We then present the study methods and findings. The paper closes with discussion of the implications of the study for further research and policy practice.

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1.1. Home and well-being

Although 'home' is by no means an unproblematic concept (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Fluri, 2011), homes are nonetheless critical sites for safety, meaning, belonging, and refuge; the formation and fortification of individual and collective identity; and the nurturance of families and relationships (Bachelard and Jolas, 1994; Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Mallett, 2004; Proshansky et al., 1983; Tuan, 1977; Young, 2005). Humanistic and phenomenological geographers (Buttimer, 1980; Tuan, 1977; Relph, 1976) have argued that human well-being depends on the experience of "at-homeness": "the taken-for-granted situation of being comfortable and familiar with the world in which one lives his or her day-to-day life" (Seamon, 1979, p. 78). Paralleling medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky's (1987) proposal that well-being amidst adversity depends on a person's *sense of coherence*, or experience of the world as meaningful, manageable, and comprehensible, theories of home and well-being highlight the multiple ways that homes and their material contents support human needs for constancy and predictability (Proshansky et al., 1983; Young, 2005).

Giddens (1990) referred to this sense of the world as a reliable, comprehensible place as *ontological security*: "the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (p. 92). Empirical studies of home and well-being drawing on Giddens' theoretical work affirm the psychological importance of constancy, along with privacy and control (Dupuis and Thorns, 1998; Hawkins and Maurer, 2011; Kearns et al., 2000; Padgett, 2007). Constancy, or a "[c]onfidence in the routine and reliability of persons, places, and things" (Hawkins and Maurer, 2011, p. 144) provides stability and security, essential not only for well-being, but also for personal and collective identity (Kearns et al., 2000). Privacy, including freedom from surveillance, establishes the home as a refuge and endows inhabitants with crucial experiences of freedom and autonomy (Dupuis and Thorns, 1998; Padgett, 2007). Both constancy and privacy, in turn, are inextricably linked to agency, or control over what happens within and to one's domestic environment (Porteous and Smith, 2001). Affirming Seamon's (1979) assertion that "the person who is at home holds a space over which he [sic] is in charge" (p. 80), control thus emerges as a central theme in a range of empirical studies exploring connections between home, ontological security, and health (Dupuis and Thorns, 1998; Hawkins and Maurer, 2011; Kearns et al., 2000; Padgett, 2007).

Theorists of space and place have long emphasized the central importance of attention to issues of control and power; Lefebvre (1991), for example, asserted that to make space, we must have "practical capabilities and sovereign powers" (p. 34) over it (see also Tuan, 1977, esp. p. 52). At the same time, such perspectives surface the complexities inherent in discussions of domestic spaces. The capacity for agency and control within the home and the meaning this holds varies not only in relation to external and internal power relations (related, for instance, to gender and age) but also as a function of family, household, and cultural diversity (Harker, 2012). Much of the humanistic and phenomenological theoretical work summarized above has thus been rightly critiqued for embodying nostalgic, patriarchal, classist, and culture-bound interpretations of home (see e.g., Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Domosh, 1998; Young, 2005). Clearly, domestic environments are by no means universally agentic and positive. Nonetheless, research with groups who traditionally hold less power, including women, children, the formerly homeless, and the elderly, also underscores the fundamental importance of control to people's positive experience of home; indeed, findings from these studies highlight how, for these participants, their home, however defined, is the rare place in which they feel a modicum of control

and thus peace (Akeson, 2014; Dupuis and Thorns, 1998; Harker, 2009; Padgett, 2007). Moreover, the home has specifically been theorized as a site where women derive power, largely through caring for the space and its inhabitants and promoting individual and collective identity, confidence, and wellness (Harker, 2009, 2010; Hooks, 1990; Young, 2005).

Given the tenacious entanglement of power with the experience of home, along with the gendered assumptions 'home' evokes (Bowly et al., 1997), our topic demands careful attention to how women describe their emotional experiences of home. Research about women's experiences of both home and political violence often highlight, for instance, the importance that women ascribe to their role as mothers (Berman et al., 2009; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2006; Ward, 2009), a theme that also emerged in our data. In this context, disruptions to home environments might well be understood as profound assaults on women's agency and control, particularly as they undermine the tasks of care-taking (Akeson, 2014; Sims et al., 2009). Indeed the environments in which mothering takes place (Kemp, 2001) take on increased salience in the context of political violence, where the care and protection of children is both more challenging (Berman et al., 2009; Bradley, 2007), and more urgent (Barber, 1999; Berman et al., 2009; Bradley, 2007; Garbarino and Kostelny, 1996; Freud and Burlingham, 1943).

Further, as our data made clear, in Palestine, women's experiences of 'home' cannot be separated from their geo-political context. Below we briefly describe how the geographic and political context specifically relates to the experience of place and home in Palestine; for a more thorough timeline of the issue and its relationship to health, see Giacaman et al. (2009) and other articles in the associated Lancet series on health in Palestine.

1.2. Palestine: Spacio-cide and solastalgia

By its nature, political violence threatens conventional notions of home as a safe, autonomous refuge. Always porous, in the context of political violence unstable boundaries between public and private space (Massey, 1994) are essentially obliterated: political arrangements interpenetrate domestic environments directly, as in home invasions and demolitions, and indirectly, through the challenges of living within chronic spatial insecurity.

In Palestine, the deliberate destruction of home, which Porteous and Smith (2001) term *domicide*, operates across geographic scales from the personal home to the nation (Blunt and Dowling, 2006). The protracted history of conflict with and occupation by Israel has long involved onerous spatial controls: an 8-m high, 436-mile long separation wall, hundreds of checkpoints, roadblocks, and areas that are either closed to specific populations or require special permits for entry, curfews, and constant invasions into and surveillance of villages and homes (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA)-Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt), 2011b; Weizman, 2007). The seizure or destruction of family homes and their surrounding lands and expulsion of inhabitants have been long-standing strategies of the occupation (Smith, 2011; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA)-Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt), 2011a; UNRWA, 2012). Home destructions facilitate Israeli expropriation of Palestinian land by transferring the Palestinian population (Falah, 2003, 2004; Harker, 2009), a process Hanafi (2009) terms *spacio-cide*. As Hanafi (2009) notes, "In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Israeli target is the *place*" (p. 109), a strategy which threatens Palestine's geographic contiguity and collective 'homeland' and has significant implications for the well-being of Palestinians.

Although many Palestinians have been displaced from their homes and homeland, more remain in situ, contending on a daily

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