Psychological Symptomatology Among Palestinian Adolescents Living with Political Violence

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Background: The study examined the impact of the level of exposure to political violence on the psychological symptomatology of Palestinian adolescents in the West Bank, an area affected by the ongoing political violence between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Method: A random sample of 1775 participants (54.1% males, 45.9% females) between the ages of 12–18 was administered a self-report questionnaire consisting of three measures: demographic variables, domestic violence, political violence events and psychological symptomatology (BSI). Results: Results indicated that the average psychological symptomatology was higher among those who were exposed to political violence events compared to those who were not; the level of hostility was significantly higher in those who were exposed to each of the political violence events. However, the factors that contributed most to psychological symptomatology were parental violence toward children and violence among siblings.

Keywords: Political violence; domestic violence; psychological symptomatology; Palestinians adolescents

Introduction

As a result of the Second Intifada (Palestinian Uprising 2000–2004), curfews have been a regular occurrence and geographic mobility has been restricted, sometimes preventing access to medical treatment, employment and provisions. Schools and universities are often spontaneously closed and re-opened, homes are unexpectedly searched by the army, shootings and urban stone throwing are frequent sights. According to the Ministry of Health in Gaza (cited in Thabet & Vostanis, 2005), the total number of casualties numbered 36,299, including 1151 deaths in Gaza and 1441 deaths in the West Bank. The Intifada also seriously debilitated the economy; the unemployment rate has increased from 25 to 60% (The Atlantic, 2003; United Nations, Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator, 2002; World Bank, 2003). In addition, Srour (2005) points out that since the beginning of the Second Intifada approximately 2.5 Palestinians have been killed each day, with 23% (827) of them under the age of 18. Moreover, 3409 elementary school age children were injured and more than 500 children arrested during this period for Intifada related activities.

Many young adult Palestinians were involved directly or indirectly in the actual fighting while others witnessed the events. Thabet & Vostanis (2005) reported in a study of 286 Palestinians aged 9–18 years that 67% suffered from posttraumatic stress reactions. Other findings revealed that 73% of the Palestinians felt insecure (Giacaman et al., 2004). This insecurity was reinforced by increased rates of domestic violence; 11.3% of the Palestinians reported that they were victims of household violence, a rate double than that of 1996. In general, 29.5% of the population reported being a target of an aggressive act or assault (Al-Ashhab, 2005). Moreover, a Palestinian researcher found that children exposed to political violence may display symptoms indicative of a sense of a loss of control such as bed-wetting, behavioral problems, mutism, or separation anxiety, including refusal to attend school. In addition, certain emotions such as fear and rage may be transferred, thereby precipitating violence at home or in the school setting. Such reactions may involve indirect aggression to show others ‘how it feels to be frightened’ or, alternatively, may cause increased depression and withdrawal (Srour, 2005).

The current study investigated the psychological well-being of Palestinian adolescents in the West Bank, who live with the ongoing political violence between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The results presented are part of a longitudinal survey conducted by the Treatment and Rehabilitation Center for Victims of Torture (TRC) in the West Bank (2005). More specifically, this study examined the impact of the level of exposure to political violence on the psychological symptomatology in Palestinian adolescents.

There is a general recognition that children are at risk when they are exposed to either direct political violence

Since this study focuses on the impact of exposure to political violence on the psychological well-being of Palestinians adolescents, the implications of the bloodshed on Israeli society will not be discussed in this report.
(such as injury, arrest or torture), or subject to indirect political violence such as loss of a family member or witnessing the humiliation or injury of a family member (Kinzie, Boehnlein, & Sack, 1998; Cairns & Lewis, 1999; Machel et al., 2001; Punamaeki, Quota, & El-Sarraj, 2001; Reilly, 2002). Studies indicate that political trauma causes a variety of effects in three related areas of young people’s lives: everyday aspects of life, social identity, and mental health (Al Krenawi, Graham, & Sehwail, 2004; Muldoon, 2004). The effects of political violence include, but are not limited to, psychological symptoms of distress such as: posttraumatic stress disorder, numbness, depression, anxiety, emotional disorders, regressive behaviours (Jensen & Shaw, 1993), changed attitudes and beliefs (Terr, 1983), and diminished hope for the future (Cairns, 1996).

Children exposed to political violence may present with similar difficulties to those who are direct and indirect victims of domestic violence (Samaroff, 2000). Furthermore, numerous studies indicate that exposure to domestic violence is a nonspecific risk factor that may lead to negative outcomes in the short- and long-term (e.g. Wolfe et al., 2003), over and above other coexisting factors (e.g. Coyne, Barrett, & Duffy, 2000). Therefore, in addition to examining the level of exposure to political violence events, this study investigated the level of exposure to domestic violence in the lives of Palestinian adolescents.

Based on the above and on the findings of a recent study that investigated the mental health of Palestinian adolescents and adults, revealing that both childhood maltreatment and military violence in adults were associated with high levels of mental health symptoms (Punamaki et al, 2005), we hypothesized the following: (a) the level of exposure to political violence would be associated with the severity of psychological symptomatology; and (b) exposure to domestic violence in addition to political violence would exaggerate the severity of adolescent psychological symptomatology.

The West-Bank

The West Bank is an area of land between Israel and Jordan, totalling 5860 square kilometres. With a population of over 3 million, and nearly half of the population under the age of 14, growth rates are high. The West Bank and Gaza together constitute Palestine, which is administered by the Palestinian Authority (PA). Most of the population is Muslim, and common Palestinian values include rootedness to the land, strong family bonds, social identity from family and community, and a holistic outlook on life (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2003). Palestinians refer to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 as a disaster (Al-Nakha), creating a crisis in all aspects of Palestinian life, a crisis that persists to the present time (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2005, Srour, 2005). The 1967 capture of the West Bank and Gaza initiated a period of political occupation that further restricted Palestinians’ political autonomy. As a result of the ongoing conflict with Israel, Palestinians have been under military curfew, and have experienced overwhelming economic loss. The First Intifada or Uprising, which began in 1987 and continued through the early 1990s, had deep consequences for all aspects of Palestinian life. The Second Intifada, beginning in September 2000 and ending in 2004, has been equally intense and destructive. In 2005, more than 60% of Palestinian households lived below the national poverty line, compared to 20% in 1998. World Food Program statistics of 2004 indicate that 37% of the Palestinian population are food-insecure and do not receive adequate food to meet minimum nutritional requirements. With such a young population, it is timely to analyse the social and psychological consequences of the ongoing political violence in the lives of Palestinian youth. Insight into this phenomenon could have significant implications for the region’s future.

Method

Participants

The sample was derived from major cities, refugee camps and villages, randomly selected from a computer database of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics by computer software. The sample consisted of male and female adolescents aged 12–18.5 ($M = 15.56$, $SD = 1.22$) attending school. We assured that all the regions in the West Bank had the same probability of being included in the final sample. The schools were randomly chosen, and from each age group a sample was randomly selected. From the initial set of 2328 respondents, the final sample consisted of 1775 adolescents (54.1% males, 45.9% females), exclusively including participants residing in major cities. Those living in villages and refugee camps were excluded because the most serious violence took place in the larger cities. Most of the teenagers lived with both their parents (88.7%) while 6.6% were orphaned of their fathers and 1.2% of their mothers. The average number of children at home was 6.92 ($SD = 3.11$).

Measures

Specially trained students from West Bank universities administered the questionnaires. Because of cultural norms, these interviewers were both male and female. They were present while the participants completed the questionnaires, in order to answer questions and to clarify questions. The interviewers provided the participants with a detailed explanation about the purposes of the study and assured them that they can choose to terminate their participation at any time.

The self-report questionnaire consisted of the following measures: demographic variables such as the socio-economic status of the adolescent’s family; Domestic Violence Scale; Political Violent Events Scale (the latter two measures were prepared by the research teams based on focus groups adapted to cultural norms and specific situations); and the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) that measures psychiatric symptomatology (Derogatis & Melisavados, 1983; Derogatis & Spencer, 1982).

Domestic Violence Scale, developed by the authors, measures two-dimensional verbal and physical violence within the family: violence between parents and children or between siblings (9 items) and spousal violent relationships (4 items). Respondents were asked to rate the level of occurrence ranging from ‘All the time’ (5) to ‘Never’ (1). Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was found to be .87 (.85, .92 respectively).
Political Violent Events Scale, developed by the authors, measures the level of subjective severity of experiencing different political events activated by Israel. Respondents were asked first to indicate (Yes or No) whether they experienced any of the following events: physical or verbal abuse at a military checkpoint; the arrest of themselves or a family member; being subject to long curfew periods, injury by military personnel, the violence related death of a relative, property damage or loss during military house searching. If the answer was yes, they were asked to rate the level of severity ranged from ‘no impact’ (1) to ‘serious impact’ (5). Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was found to be .92.

The Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) is a shortened version of the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (H-SCL-90). It includes 53 items that elicit perception of symptoms during the last month. The nine dimensions of the BSI are: somatisation, interpersonal sensitivity, obsession-compulsion, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation and psychotic symptoms. In addition, the scale provides a General Severity Index (GSI), a Positive Symptom Index (PSDI), and a Positive Symptoms Total (PST). The scale has been used to assess mental health of Soviet, American and Israeli adolescents in several studies (Canetti, Shalev, Kaplan-De-Nour, 1994; Slonim-Nevo & Sheraga, 1997). The internal consistency of the nine sub-scales is adequate (Cronbach’s alpha = .71-.81) and an adequate level of reliability has been found to exist by test-retest analysis (r = .60–.90). Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient in the current study was found to be 0.94. The BSI was translated into Arabic, and back translated by a professional translator, fluent in both Arabic and English, and then it was independently translated back into English to ensure the accuracy of translation. It should be noted that the BSI has been successfully utilised in previous research amongst Arab youth in the Middle East (Al-Krenawi, Graham, & Slonim-Nevo, 2002).

Results

Correlation analysis (Pearson) between the study variables showed negative correlations between family socio-economic status and domestic violence (r = -.14, p < .01), spousal violence (r = -.13, p < .01), and political violence (r = -.06, p < .01), and the BSI mean score (r = -.15, p < .01). Positive correlations were found between the BSI mean score and domestic violence (r = .46, p < .01), spousal violence (r = .29, p < .01), and political violence (r = .14, p < .01).

Frequency analysis of experiencing each of the political violence events indicated the following: 50% of the participants reported that either themselves or one of their family members had been arrested by Israeli military forces, 80.1% experienced living under frequent curfews, 35.7% experienced degradation or abuse at military checkpoints, 12.1% were injured as a result of shooting, 39.8% experienced the death of a close family member, 26.2% experienced property damage, and 41.3% experienced military house searching.

Multivariate analyses (MANOVA) were conducted using exposure to psychological symptomatology (BSI) as the dependent variable and the participant’s subjective evaluation of severity of the events as the independent variable. Means, SD, and univariate F scores for the psychological symptomatology of those who were exposed to political violence events, compared to those who were not, are shown in Table 1. The findings revealed significant differences between the two groups in all political events except two, having been shot at, and the death of a relative. In relation to the symptoms themselves, results show that exposure to all the events contributed significantly to the level of hostility (arrest F = 16.33, p < .001; abused in a checkpoint F = 17.34, p < .001; shot F = 13.58, p < .001; death of a relative F = 15.48, p < .001; curfew F = 12.52, p < .001; property damage F = 16.18, p < .001; house searching F = 28.98, p < .001). Other symptoms were affected differently by different types of events.

Regression analysis indicates that 21.3% of the variance of psychological symptomatology can be explained by the following orderly presented variables: domestic violence ($\beta = .42, p < .001$), exposure to political violence events ($\beta = .10, p < .001$), and the family socio-economic status ($\beta = .07, p < .01$).

Discussion

The study sought to examine the impact of exposure to political violence on the mental health of Palestinian adolescents. Findings revealed that although domestic violence (particularly violence between parents and children and between siblings) was found to contribute the most to psychological symptomatology, the exposure to political violence events also contributed to heightened psychiatric symptomatology. The findings indicated that hostility was a common symptom that was instigated by exposure to each of the political violence events. This symptom, or rather the anger that might be manifested by it, is often overlooked within the posttraumatic response frame. The anger of youth that witness or are directly involved in political violence might add to the Palestinian intercommunity tension because of their actual inferiority against the Israeli army, thereby having implication on reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. It can be presumed that the longer the occupation continues, the higher will be the level of hostility. Since the adolescents of today are ‘tomorrow’s players’, then a heightened level of hostility among Palestinian adolescents today will lower their emotional ability to establish trust toward Israelis in the future, thereby inhibiting true reconciliation and peace building.

However, it should be noted that despite the high level of exposure to traumatic events, the symptomatology associated with political violence is relatively low. This finding could be a manifestation of collective resilience or what Warner, Baro and Eigenberg (2004) described as normal behaviour in an abnormal situation. Palestinian children/adolescents who were born and lived under the political violence do not know life free of war. These children/adolescents were born during the First Intifada and are coming of age during the Second Intifada. This finding seems to be in line with that of Rudenberg, Jansen and Fridjhon (2001), who analysed the drawings of children aged 8–12 years as a method of understanding the effects of living and coping with ongoing civic unrest in Belfast. They found that boys from Belfast had higher levels of anger and
aggression, yet employed more use of coping mechanisms such as denial and social support and therefore had greater resilience.

The fact that exposure to gunfire was not found to significantly contribute to the level of distress was surprising. Yet, we hypothesize that Palestinian society’s acknowledgement of those killed as a result of the fight to ‘free the land’ as martyrs, and the resultant providing of emotional and instrumental support for the affected families, somehow balances the impact of these adverse events.

It is not surprising that domestic violence, especially violence between parents and children and between siblings, was found to reduce children’s mental health. This finding is consistent with numerous studies indicating that maltreated children suffer from more behavioural and emotional difficulties than children of supportive parents (Edmond et al., 2002; Downs & Rindels, 2004).

To conclude, we hope that the findings delineated here will heighten the awareness of school teachers, mental health practitioners, and policy makers about the negative effects of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian political violence on the psychological well-being of Palestinian children and adolescents.

References


