



Impact of war, religiosity and ideology on PTSD and psychiatric disorders in adolescents from Gaza Strip and South Lebanon

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 20 March 2012

Keywords:

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
Adolescents
War traumas
Economic pressure
Religiosity
Ideology
Lebanon
Palestinian territories

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the extent to which differences in the types of war trauma, economic pressure, religiosity and ideology accounted for variation in PTSD and psychiatric disorders among adolescents from Gaza Strip and South Lebanon. Participants were 600 adolescents aged 12–16 years. They were selected from the public school system in the highly war exposed areas. Questionnaires were administered in an interview format with adolescents at school by two trained psychologists. Results indicated that the various types of trauma had differential effects on the psychological status of adolescents in both countries. Economic pressure was more predictive of PTSD and psychological distress in adolescents from Gaza. Differences in religiosity and ideology did not account for similar variation in stress response among adolescents from Gaza and South Lebanon. While higher levels of religiosity evidenced the greatest levels of depression and anxiety in adolescents from Gaza, religiosity had an attenuated effect on adolescents from South Lebanon. Ideology was negatively associated with depression and anxiety in Gaza strip adolescents, whereas it did not play a role for adolescents from South Lebanon. The clinical and research implications of these conclusions are discussed.

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Introduction

A large percentage of adolescents have been growing up in chronically political violent environments. Past evidence indicates that exposure, either direct or indirect, to war has a profound psychological impact on adolescents (Amine et al., 2008; Khamis, 2005, 2008; Thabet, Abed, & Vostanis, 2004). Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have been subjected to political violence (Khamis, 2000, 2005, 2008). The 2008–2009 war on Gaza added an array of stressors, ranging from restraints imposed on the occupants of Gaza to the pervasive traumatic experiences of injuries, loss of life and /or property (Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, 2010). In a similar vein, Lebanon has undergone a series of wars, resulting in areas of permanent conflict in South Lebanon. The 2006 war also caused similar traumatic experiences, which left their mark on adolescents who were involved in them (Amine et al., 2008). Although trauma exposure is the major risk factor for depression and PTSD in war-affected populations (Steel et al., 2009), other variables in both populations may prove important in addressing the psychological sequelae of war on adolescents such as economic pressure, refugee status, and child labor (e.g.,

Davidson, 1994; Khamis, 2005). Economic pressure has an impact on adolescents' mental health both directly as a source of stress and indirectly through reducing resources that may buffer the impact of traumatic events (Khamis, 2005).

The posttrauma environment brought with it a great upsurge of interest, particularly among psychologists and psychiatrists, in studying the impact of war trauma on Palestinian and Lebanese adolescents. The majority of these studies have indicated that exposure to war trauma constitutes a risk factor for chronic mental health problems, mainly posttraumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety (Amine et al., 2008; Khamis, 2005, 2008; Thabet et al., 2004).

Adolescents' attempts to cope with war traumas have been viewed as a complex set of processes directed toward moderating the impact of such events on their mental health and developmental outcomes (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006). Studies have investigated what factors discriminate successful from unsuccessful adaptation following political violence. The bulk of this research has dealt with social and parental support (Khamis, 2005, 2008; Loughry et al., 2006), and a few studies have focused on coping and fatalism (Khamis, 2008), paying limited attention to the effect of the adolescents' internal strengths and beliefs, such as religiosity and ideology. Khamis (2000) has indicated that outcome variability in terms of coping with trauma among Palestinians may be explained by various factors, such as sociodemographics, social

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support, ideology, religiosity, and sociopolitical satisfaction. With the current dominance of Hamas in Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in South Lebanon, people's understanding and experience of political traumas has been colored by their religious and political beliefs and practices (Alagha, 2006; Khamis, 2000). Accounts of the lives of affected Palestinians provide support for the role of ideology in sustaining life under the most devastating of circumstances. For example, 'martyrdom' is acknowledged as legitimate "suffering" among the majority of Palestinians. Khamis (2000) anticipates that this religious ideology might have an impact on a person's assimilation of/and accommodation to the political traumas caused by the killing of a family member. This is apparent in the funeral of a young "martyr", which is usually celebrated as his wedding. The mother is often asked to ululate and dance for the "martyrdom" of her son. As Bakan (1968) indicates, suffering for a reason is easier to endure than suffering without cause, benefit, or meaning. It seems that people are strengthened and sustained by their political beliefs and their religious principles that call for *jihad*, holy war, and *shahadah*, martyrdom. This ideology must be introduced to explain phenomena in the Arab World and in particular the Lebanese and Palestinian societies that cannot be explained by a simple stress-strain model.

Ideologies held during a traumatic event can greatly influence an adolescent's long-term adjustment, severity of symptoms, and coping reactions. Researchers have found that ideology may provide adolescents with meaning and a sense of purpose that may serve a protective function, increasing their level of personal resources, which in turn protects against severe symptom development (Laor et al., 2006; Oren & Possick, 2010). For many theorists, ideology refers to all shared political, moral, and religious belief systems. Erikson (1968) defined ideology as "a system of ideas that provides a convincing world image," and he suggested that adolescents require exposure to such ideological structures to organize their experiences and growing understanding of the world (p. 31). Sources of such ideologies include "religion and politics, the arts and sciences, the stage and fiction" (Erikson, 1965, p. 24). Ideology is conceptualized here as a set of attitudes characterized by the expression of politico-religious beliefs and values relevant to self and identity. Ideology represents long-standing commitment to politico-religious principles and choices, commitment to religion as faith and practice, and attitudes about the political party (Khamis, 2000). Although ideology is an important component of a group's social capital, particularly in groups who experience continuous existential threat, there is a paucity of empirical data on the relationship between ideology and the effects of traumatic exposure (Laor et al., 2006) and in particular religious-political ideology (Bonanno & Jost, 2006; Khamis, 2000). Research on the protective and coping function of ideology has been inconsistent. While some studies have indicated that ideological commitment to a cause is a protective factor that increases the ability to cope effectively in highly stressful situations (Punamäki, 1996; Punamäki et al., 2008; Shamai, 2002), other studies have found that ideology is a risk factor (Jones, 2002; Kanagaratnam, Raundalen, & Asbjornsen, 2005).

A substantial number of studies have examined the association between religious resources and general indexes of adaptation. Recent work in psychology has focused on the use of religion as a coping mechanism (e.g., Pargament, 2007; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998). Yet religiosity does not always bring comfort. While some studies have revealed an inverse relationship between religiosity and depressive symptoms in individuals facing stressful events (Smith et al., 2003), other studies have indicated that religion and spirituality are not invariably linked with better adjustment to stressful experiences (e.g., Park, 2005; Roff, Durkin, Sun, & Klemmack, 2007; Tix & Frazier, 2005) and may even

prompt feelings of anger and disappointment, such as when one experiences events that violate one's views of a loving God (Exline & Rose, 2005; Nelson, Rosenfeld, Breitbart, & Galiotta, 2002). Despite the fact that previous research has found a significant association between religion and functioning among particular groups of adolescents (including at-risk adolescents), these findings are not necessarily generalizable to Palestinian and Lebanese adolescents living in war zones. Because the importance of religion is likely to influence adolescents' ideologies through mechanisms other than religious service attendance or worship, the importance of religion might have a relationship with adolescents' ideologies that is independent of the relationship between religious service attendance and ideologies.

Evident differences exist in political orientations among specific groups of adolescents. Although young adolescents' cognitive capabilities with regard to institutions and sociopolitical relationship should not be overestimated, research has indicated that adolescence and childhood are crucial phases for the development of political orientations. Furthermore, the perception of the political environment, political orientations, and patterns of behavior are also generated during early childhood. Many researchers have proposed that socioeconomic and sociodemographic factors are important antecedents of religious political ideology (van Deth, Abendschön, & Vollmar, 2011). Adolescents' experiences in Gaza and South Lebanon may provide a unique opportunity for the study of religiosity and ideology and their relation to psychological sequelae of war exposure. Adolescents from Gaza are Sunni Moslems, of whom the majority live in refugee camps. The prolonged armed conflict and closure of Gaza has created miserable conditions that have deprived these adolescents of basic needs such as medical resources and food. In South Lebanon, Muslim adolescents are Shiites who live in their own villages. All Shiites are followers of Hezbollah whereas Palestinians in Gaza are divided between the two main Palestinian factions: Fateh and Hamas. Research on the impact of war, religiosity and ideology in young adolescents comprises a major gap in knowledge (Peltonen & Punamäki, 2010), which underscores the need for such studies. Moreover, an examination of the impact of war traumas, economic pressure, religiosity and ideology in adolescence could illuminate how risk and protective factors contribute to mental health outcomes in challenging or threatening circumstances during this vulnerable period.

Psychologists and mental health professionals need to identify the psychosocial problems of adolescents who have experienced war traumas, and the factors that may discriminate successful from unsuccessful adaptation in an attempt to set the standards for culturally sensitive models of assessment, prevention, and intervention. Specific considerations in research should be given to socio-cultural norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs of adolescents including religiosity and ideology.

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of war, religiosity and ideology on PTSD and psychiatric disorders in adolescents from Gaza Strip and South Lebanon. It was hypothesized that a combination of risk variables (i.e., type of trauma and economic pressure), and protective variables (i.e., variations across adolescents in religiosity and ideology) would be predictive of adolescents' PTSD, anxiety and depression.

Method

Participants

A total of 600 adolescents participated in this study. The sample consisted of 300 adolescents from each of two countries: Gaza Strip and South Lebanon. All these adolescents were from the public school system in the middle school intermediate grade levels (i.e.,

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