



Long-term exposure to political violence: The particular injury of persistent humiliation

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the association between exposure to political violence over a 25-year period and adult functioning among a population that has experienced protracted and severe political conflict. Instead of aggregating exposure to political violence across time and type of exposure, as is commonly done, the event history calendar pioneered in this study assessed exposure to five forms of political violence annually from 1987 to 2011 in a representative sample of 1788 adults, aged 37 on average, in the occupied Palestinian territories (West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip). This method allowed for the identification of trajectories of exposure to political violence from childhood to adulthood using latent profile analysis. We then correlated the trajectories of exposure to measures of economic, political, community, family, psychological, and health functioning. As expected, being shot at, having one's home raided, being hit or kicked, being verbally abused, and witnessing someone close being humiliated were all elevated during periods of heightened political conflict (the first intifada (1987–1993) and, less so, the second intifada (2000–2005)). In addition, 12% of women and men reported high and persistent levels of exposure to humiliation (being verbally abused and/or witnessing someone close being humiliated) across the entire 25-year period. These individuals lived predominantly in neighborhoods with a high Israeli military presence. Compared to those who experienced periodic exposure to political violence, persistently humiliated men and women reported significantly lower health, economic, political, and psychological functioning, as well as higher social cohesion and political expression. Relevant literatures are reviewed when concluding that persistent humiliation is a neglected form of political violence that is best represented as a direct (versus structural), acute (versus chronic), macro (versus micro), and high-grade (versus low-grade) stressor whose particular injury is due to the violation of individual and collective identity, rights, justice and dignity.

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“... but our shudders are all for the ‘horrors’ of the minor Terror, the momentary Terror, so to speak; whereas, what is the horror of swift death by the axe, compared with lifelong death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty, and heart-break?”

— Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

1. Introduction

Research on youth and political conflict has become an established field of scholarly work over the past two decades. One area that is particularly undeveloped, however, is the long-term functioning of people who spend their childhood and youth amidst political conflict and its violence (Barber, 2013, 2014; Betancourt et al., 2013; Fernando et al., 2010; Panter-Brick, 2010; Pedersen et al., 2008). This paper addresses that limitation directly by charting exposure to political violence over a 25-year period since childhood and adolescence, and assessing how patterns of exposure to that political violence predict adult functioning.

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We pursued this innovation in a large, representative sample of adults living in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt; West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza Strip). Now in their 30s, they were the storied generation of stone-throwing youth of the first intifada (1987–1993). They are a particularly interesting population among which to study the long-term impact of exposure to political violence given that they came of age with unprecedented involvement in the 6-year long first intifada (Barber, 2001). Moreover, they have experienced continual economic decline and political adversities ever since.

This project has developed in several phases, including intensive interviews (Barber et al., 2014a), item construction and pilot testing (McNeely et al., 2014), as elaborated below. The present paper builds in part on some partial analyses of the variables studied here (Barber et al., 2013, 2014b, 2016; McNeely et al., 2015). In addition to addressing the lack of assessment of long-term functioning after exposure to political conflict, this study addressed two further limitations of extant research. First, we assessed and analyzed multiple types of political violence exposure so as to detect unique effects of discrete types of violence—as opposed to the common method of creating aggregate scores across types of political violence. Second, adult functioning was assessed holistically—including psychological, social, community, family, health, economic, and political domains—in contrast to the preoccupation with psychological trauma and behavioral problems characteristic of the bulk of the studies in this area.

1.1. Long-term exposure to political violence

Although studies of the effects of exposure to political violence are still predominantly cross-sectional, the number of longitudinal studies is increasing, including studies of Palestinians (e.g., Akello et al., 2010; Betancourt et al., 2010; Cummings et al., 2013; Boxer et al., 2013; Dubow et al., 2012; Hobfoll et al., 2011; Panter-Brick et al., 2011).

Findings from these studies of relatively short time lags generally confirm those of the scores of cross-sectional studies: exposure to political violence correlates significantly—mildly to moderately—with mental and behavioral problems. The few longer-term studies confirm the same correlation (Pedersen et al., 2008; Suarez, 2013).

The data analyzed here allowed us to make another advance in studying the long-term impact of exposure to political violence. When measuring political violence exposure over time, prior work has used a count of the number of traumatic events or violence-related stressors ever experienced (i.e., aggregated exposure); or, they have used the number of years violence or stress was experienced (Pedersen et al., 2008; Suarez, 2013). Given that political conflicts evolve over time, as do the individuals experiencing and interpreting them, it is not immediately clear that aggregating across time is the best way to capture the risk of exposure to political violence. In contrast to these cumulative assessments, we measured the exposure to five discrete forms of political violence in each year of the event history calendar, which allowed us to explore both the *patterning* and the *timing* of political violence exposure across a 25-year period.

This inspection of patterns of exposure across the life course is consistent with lifespan psychology (Baltes et al., 1999) and life course theory (Elder et al., 2003), in which the relative timing and patterning of events shape adult functioning. Such an approach avoids the linear presumption underlying the study of cumulative exposure (i.e., the more exposure the worse the functioning) and allows for the possibility that the type of political violence exposure, its timing and patterning during the life course, and its timing and persistence relative to other types of political violence

exposure might offer unique insight into how histories of exposure to political violence impacts adult wellbeing. (See Pynoos et al., 2014 for alternative analytic approaches from developmental psychopathology and developmental epidemiology orientations.)

This life course approach is particularly apt for regions of the world in which political conflict resurfaces over time, as for current Palestinian adults, whose life course has been punctuated by alternating, well-demarcated, multi-year periods of: (a) frequent and high intensity political violence (the first intifada [1987–1993] and the second intifada [2000–2005]), and (b) periods of substantially less political violence (the interim “Oslo” period between the two intifadas [1994–1999] and after the second intifada [2006–2011]). (The exception to this are Gazans who have experienced internecine political conflict and multiple wars with Israel since 2006).

Except for the self-evident expectation that violence exposure (of any type) would be highest during the two intifadas and among males among this generation of Palestinians, available theory or findings do not justify firm expectations or hypotheses regarding which patterns of exposure to political violence might have unfolded in this population. Other possibilities include either consistently low or high levels of exposure to political violence based on location, whether for geographic or strategic reasons. As to whether adult functioning would vary according to patterns of exposure, there is equally little information to guide expectations, especially when considering the discrete forms of exposure that we have assessed.

1.2. The specificity of political violence exposure

Despite often measuring discrete forms of direct exposure to political violence, researchers have commonly aggregated specific forms of exposure into one or more trauma or violence-exposure indexes, including studies on Palestinians (e.g., Boxer et al., 2013; Khamis, 2012; Pedersen et al., 2008; Slone, 2009; Suarez, 2013). This aggregation of across type of violence exposure is done either because of psychometric reasons or because accumulated stress is theoretically viewed as the better way to capture risk (e.g., the resilience literature; Canavan, 2008; Masten and Reed, 2002). Consistent with some others (e.g., Layne et al., 2010), our position is that political violence exposure in contexts of long-term political conflict is so varied—in terms of proximity, intensity, meaning, etc.—that studying the unique effects of exposure types is warranted.

In this study, we focused on five specific forms of direct exposure: two involved assault on the person's body (hit or kicked, shot at), two related to humiliation (verbally abused, witnessing the humiliation of a close person), and one indexed home raids (which frequently involve both personal assault and humiliation). All five are forms of violence common to many instances of political conflict and have been well-documented in studies of Palestinians (Boxer et al., 2013; Khamis, 2012; Giacaman et al., 2007), and specifically so in the cohort under study here when they were youth during the first intifada (Barber, 2000; Barber and Olsen, 2009).

1.3. The breadth of impact of political violence exposure

Despite recommendations decades ago to move past a focus on psychopathology when searching for the impact of political violence (Cairns and Dawes, 1996), the large majority of studies continue to focus on mental, and to some degree, behavioral problems as outcomes (Barber, 2014; Pedersen et al., 2008). There are numerous problems with this narrow focus, including the importation of Western concepts and measures of mental health,

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