

The Political Economy of Children's Trauma: A Case Study of House Demolition in Palestine

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SITUATING CHILDREN WITHIN STUDIES OF WAR AND ITS EFFECTS

A growing body of psychological research has examined the effects of armed and political conflict on children, including, for example, work in Lebanon (Macksoud, et al., 1996), Palestine (Baker, 1990, 1993; Elbedour et al., 1997; El Sarraj and Qouta, 2005; Punamaki et al., 2001), South Africa (Dawes, 1990), Mozambique (Cliff and Noormahomed, 1993), Iraq (Dyregrov, 1993), Cambodia (Garbarino, 1993), Bosnia (Weine et al., 1995), Angola (McIntyre and Ventura, 1995), Guatemala (Miller, 1996), and Latin America (Allodi, 1989). This article explores children's experiences of war within a global political economy of silence. The goal of this work is to capture children's complex understandings of, and responses to, the trauma of ongoing militarization and political occupation as reflected in their perceptions of the loss of their homes.

By utilizing the voices of children facing attacks against their home/safe space, this article argues that understanding trauma in conflict zones requires looking closely at children's descriptions of their ever-shifting relationships to different spaces as sites of trauma, resilience and agency. Further, listening to how children reconstruct their individual and collective histories opens up possibilities for theorizing social trauma through a feminist and liberationist framework. By using contextually aware critical theories of feminist and liberation psychology we draw attention to the intimate connections between history, economic activities, globalization and globalized social relations (see Burman, 1998; Tickner, 1991; Wilkinson, 1997).

LISTENING TO CHILDREN: HEARING THEIR VOICES, WRITING THEIR LIVES

This study relies on what might be called an 'ideology of the voice' (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2001, 2003), arguing that there is no way one can study war traumas and ongoing structural violence without listening closely to the voices of those who live through such troubles. This method of inquiry, that is, listening to, and systematically reporting on, often unheard voices, is sensitive to, and reflective of, the individual as one who embodies and performs politico-economic and cultural conflicts (Narayan, 1997). This article constitutes the participants' stories, reflecting the political and global contexts in which they are embedded.

The stories analysed here were collected through focus groups with children in their everyday environments including, for example, their neighbourhoods, schools and homes in the Gaza Strip. Six focus groups with 91 children aged 10–18 (48 female and 43 male) were conducted from June through September 2006. The focus groups were conducted in Arabic by three local social workers (two women and one man). The three of them were known to the community, and were able to recruit and work with the children while soliciting parental and/or school approval. The quotes shared are verbatim extracts from the transcripts, with themes identified through interpretive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Such focus groups allow children to share their suffering and tell their stories in their own environment while learning about each other's ordeals, acknowledging their pains and hardships, sharing their own techniques of coping with loss, and even planning future supportive actions.

By using children's voices we sought to: (1) document the impact of the loss of the home; (2) capture the variation, complexity, multiplicity and vibrancy of their reactions to such a loss; and (3) introduce Palestinian children – mainly the girls – into the core of youth studies without othering them.

VOICES OF PARTICIPANTS: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Salwa, at 16 years of age, discussed her constant suffering while living under the steady Israeli shelling of Rafah. She stated:

Every day I wake up, I realize once again that we are still enslaved by cruel powers – the land occupation is more enslaving than slavery itself. I realize that my father is still at home, can't find a job; my mother is still working to help us all with the little she has; my brother is not home, imprisoned in the Zionist prisons; and my brothers and sisters and I are still unable to even dream of a better future ... All I ask for is freedom from slavery ...

Young women were very observant – aware of the international political economy and how it functions in their daily lives. Ahlam describes how 'they' are 'denying Palestinians a chance to live safely'. Girls and boys expressed their frustrations as they posed questions such as: 'Aren't we human beings?'; 'Don't we deserve

to live in peace like all the children of the world?'; 'Why are Jewish children's feelings and losses considered and ours forgotten?'; 'Why don't we have a future?'; 'Why does the entire world refuse to acknowledge our right to life?'; and: 'We are not animals'. Their feelings of ostracism, global exclusion and marginalization were apparent throughout the discussions.

Older youth stressed the world's denial of their right to live peacefully – 'to live a normal life' – while also discussing the world's 'criminalization' of them as Palestinians. Fatmeh stated:

I will keep on resisting, but what bothers me the most is that despite the daily loss, despite the constant fear, despite the daily traumas – for we do not know whether we will live one more day, who will be killed tomorrow, whose funeral is next, when a car will be bombed by Israeli missiles, we do not know whether we will have a house or it will be demolished by occupation powers, whether we will have parents, a school, friends, neighbours, hospitals ... but we know very well that the Zionists call us terrorists, and the world perceives us as criminals. So, now ... we are the criminals. Those who call for peace and democracy call us criminals ... You tell me how in such conditions can I demand justice? How could a criminal demand justice? How could a Palestinian woman demand justice?

Fatmeh's ability to negotiate intense notions of despair and empowerment reflects this 17 year old's *hyphenated* identity (Fine and Sirin, 2007). She lives her life navigating between her identity as a victim and her identity as a front liner and survivor who refuses to surrender. Her feelings of hopelessness and helplessness are countered and compounded by her choice to never lose hope. Her hyphenation was reflected in her ability to hold two dichotomous perceptions of self at a specific point of time: self as a victim and self as a frontliner. Fatmeh's experiences in the midst of a violent conflict offer us a lens into the challenges confronting children who live hyphenated feelings/spaces of agency and powerlessness on the fault lines of local violent and global conflict.

Agency, in the face of utter helplessness, was also apparent in Hidaya, aged 11, who said:

How can the world live in peace when we suffer every single minute? I am sure they pay a high price. See, every time they hear about our resistance, they feel weak. I believe that I, Hidaya, the very simple woman, is much stronger than all of them, otherwise why would they send a tank, big computerized planes and machines to kill me. They fear the Palestinian child, and therefore we must stay strong, love each other, help and support the needy, and be educated. They fear educated people that can speak English and tell the world about their crimes.

Life in the hyphen, as children explained, is resisting while also being fearful of the Israeli attacks, bombardment, tanks, missiles and of Israel coming to destroy their houses. It is also dreaming and hoping for an end to all of this. Children stressed that Palestinians were being continually forced from their lands and homes, and reported that these repeated displacements made them very

anxious, sad and angry. Samar, a 13-year-old girl, commented: 'I felt the "qaher" [subjugation] and fear and was sad for our house'. Their stories reveal that the demolitions of the family homes have been widespread and many families have found themselves on the streets with their children. They explained that the only safe place that provided shelter for a large number of displaced persons was school. Haneen, a 13-year-old girl, explained that they live in a school '[b]ecause we don't have houses ... the Jews demolished our houses, kharabo [ruined] our houses'. Twelve-year-old Sliman was very upset to have to live in the school, and said that '[w]e want our schools to be for learning only, not for living in, just for education'.

When children were asked about the most painful incident that had happened to them, they all talked about losing their homes and becoming refugees in their own neighbourhood. For them this internal displacement was perceived as a 'double suffering'. Suffering from the effect of military occupation and its aggression that caused the loss of the home, and the social consequences of such loss that turned them into vulnerable individuals in their own societies. This was accompanied by feelings of subjugation, desperation and oppression. Sliman, a 14 year old, explains:

I dream a lot about Jews – that they attack us and want to break us down and want to take us away from our land. I want them to go away to occupy another land. Our land has been occupied since 1948 through until 2006; it is a sin what they do to us.

Female children perceived the loss of home as harder on women and girls. Nawal, aged 13, stated that 'we girls suffer more ... girls without a home, is like being naked in public'. In the same group, Asma, aged 14, responded:

Yes ... when they demolished our house, I felt naked, but stronger than my brothers. I was going crazy like them, but was talking with so much power. I became a refugee on the rubbles of my home ... but we all lost our homes from shelling ...

Younger children who had lost their homes reacted to their losses by trying to normalize their day-to-day activities. They stressed the importance of play, of enjoying their time, of being with their peers and of focusing their energies on normalizing the abnormal (Martín-Baró, 1996). Many of them stated that directing their energies toward playing and helping others was a refuge and helped them to cope with their losses.

Older children described the historical continuity of their plight as displaced 'unwanted' creatures living in 'spaces of exile'. Palestinian history was invoked as both a source of power that strengthened participants' resilience and resistance, as well as a vulnerability factor. For many, the loss of the home raised contradictory feelings of despair and agency – motivating participants to speak back while also silencing their own bitter feelings regarding the loss. In one of the focus groups, 14-year-old Manal stated, while tears were welling up in her eyes:

I can't even find words that could express to you how hard is it to lose your home, and see a bunch of stones, rubbles. But, seeing it this way is what motivated me to study, to help and support all friends and families that lost their homes. You know, all the neighbourhood came to help us, my mother said that people are extremely kind when we all are very poor. Some gave me my lost books, some gave us food, some gave me new clothes, and even my teacher helped me. She allowed me to go to her house, and she is teaching me with her own children.

Manal's words reverberated with many of the participants who also expressed feeling depressed, down, angry and hopeless, at times, and, at other times, that they were the only ones that have the power to continue resisting. As Nadia said: 'with the love of people, we can't but keep on going, singing, laughing, writing poetry, short stories ... I personally became a poet after I lost my home. It is as if I rebuilt it with my poetry'.

REFLECTING ON THESE CHILDREN'S VOICES

Our goal in this research was to create a platform to explore the narratives of children who survived the destabilizing effects of the demolition of their homes and faced intense trauma when the social and political ground beneath their feet shifted. The focus group methodology and qualitative and interpretative thematic analysis of stories allowed us to interrogate Palestinian children's lives 'at the hyphen' to discern their innovative, terrified, engaged, fearful, active, withdraw, and contradictory moves at the nexus of contradictory political, social and psychological forces.

While many scholars are concerned with the effects of political conflicts on children and young people, they continue to disagree about how questions, problems and solutions should be framed. Critical theories of feminist and liberation psychology draw attention to the intimate connections between history, economic activities, globalization, globalized social relations and new forms of politics that are operant on spatial scales that stretch beyond the nation state. Martín-Baró (1996: 30) explained:

The hard struggle to satisfy everyday basic needs forces the popular majorities to stay in a here and now without a before and after – in a permanent psychological present. Furthermore, the prevailing discourse puts forth an apparently natural and ahistorical reality, structuring it in such a way as to cause it to be accepted without question.

He argues that recovering historical memory assumes the reconstruction of different models of identification that have the potential to move the marginalized towards liberation and fulfilment. The use of the proposed methodology allowed those children who were silenced by fear and trauma to speak up and share their ordeals, while being encouraged by the voices of the other children that spoke,

wrote and resisted oppression even before any intervention. Palestinian children, in their acts of questioning, sharing their ordeals and creating new modes of coping, such as writing poetry or supporting others, were able to build their own ways of recovering while narrating their history.

The gendered, racial and class meanings of the loss of the home – as discussed in this study – clarified that in the context of economic sanctions, restricted movement, legalization of militarized bureaucracies and active policing of the boundaries, children are further marginalized. Children's stories revealed that those in power set the parameters for structural inequalities, using political and economic tools. In these narratives, the connections between the personal trauma of the individual living in a war zone and the global become ever more explicit, whether or not we choose to acknowledge these connections. As Youngs (1999) notes, political and economic relations do not operate on either side of public and private, but across them.

By drawing on a gendered analysis of trauma and memory (Brown, 1995; Feldman and Laub, 1992; Lykes, 2000), psychologists can critically engage with notions of space, gender and power as they relate to loss and trauma. The gendered analyses of the meanings of the loss of home suggest that we should further analyse the power of living in the hyphen (Fine and Sirin, 2007). When one's home is demolished, one's self, identity and traumatic experience are chaotically mixed with each other creating a new psychological construct, a state of hyphenated existence. Living in the hyphen is being torn between the physical loss of the home and its traumatic effect, and the re-building of the demolished home with the power of collective hope. It is living the totality of death and birth, the reality of constant loss and the history that refuses to accept injustice but rather promotes actions that advance a better future.

The girls' sense of nakedness and power of living in the hyphen sheds light on the complexity of their militarized contexts, powers, fears and vulnerabilities while standing high on the shoulders of their just cause and their history. Such hyphenated lives call for more reflexivity in the method, theory and ethics of analysing a political economy of trauma. They require that we listen more to children's voices to understand how pieces of children's lives and psyche split off, re-attach, romanticize, historicize and transform; how local and global politics penetrate the psyche, rock the soul, fragment it and, yet, how children, together, manage to re-knit body and psyche.

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