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International Trauma: War and Religious Conflict on the West Bank

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Introduction

Dominated by an agricultural economy, the West Bank is about ninety miles long by thirty miles wide (145 x 48 kilometers). Bounded on the east by the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, it is otherwise surrounded by Israel. The West Bank is residence for about two million, with 83% Palestinian Arab, 17% Jewish, and half under fifteen years of age.

A land of refugees, the region has been marked by ethnic, cultural, and religious warfare for centuries; modern conflicts trace to World wars I and II as each group seeks to claim the land (www.everyculture.com, 2011). Trauma abounds, with no end in sight.

In October 2000, fierce violence claimed more than three hundred lives and left thousands wounded. In January 2009, Israel bombed the Gaza Strip seeking to stop Palestinian forces from illegally smuggling artillery. It is estimated that 1,500 Palestinians and 13 Israelis died during three days of bombing. Tragically, those Palestinians that have suffered most along these borders are neither Islamic nor Jewish. Palestinian Christians suffered from the Gaza Bombing and ongoing persecution and prejudice due to being Christian Palestinians.

Kira et al's taxonomy (2008) describes these events as a complex person-made cumulative trauma, Type III. The focus of the present study is on the effects of the January 2009 bombings, to explore how it was experienced.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 24 volunteers from the West Bank. Mean age was 34.9 years (sd = 12.2): 52% were female and 48% were male. Mean education reported was 17.1 years (sd = 2.8). Comparisons were also made with participants from Haiti, Southern Sudan, and India.

Instruments

- **Demographic Questionnaire** assessing the impact of trauma included items about age, gender, and education.
- **Impact of Events Scale-Revised (IES-R)** assesses the types of distress persons have experienced due to traumatic events during their lifetime (Weiss & Marmar, 1997; Weiss, 2008).
- **Cumulative Trauma Scale (CTS)** measured kinds of traumatic experiences, including recurrence over the respondent's lifetime. It is a short form of a longer measure developed by Kira (2001).
- **Dissociative Experience Scale (DES)** screens for dissociative experiences due to trauma (Ruiz et al, 2008). Only the eight DES Taxon items were administered for this study.

Procedure

West Bank Palestinians were compared with international trauma participants from India (physical and sexual abuse and neglect), Sudan (ongoing civil war since 1983; famine), and Haiti (exposed to earthquake in January 12, 2010) to gain insights about the distinctive trauma experiences and their impact in the West Bank.

Results

CTS Results

- Alpha = .82.
- Total CTS scores were highest for Sudanese participants and did not differ among those from the West Bank, Haiti, or India ($F(3,100) = 20.53; p < .001$).
- CTS data revealed significant main effects for 19 of the 20 items; West Bank participants scored higher on the civil war item and lower on the natural disaster item than participants from India and Sudan.
- Two significant main effects for gender differences were found on item 3: *I witnessed another person being physically assaulted*, and item 16: *I was kidnapped*, with men reporting more frequent experience than women.

IES-R Results

- Alpha = .89.
- Factor analysis suggested one factor (see IES-R scree plot)
- When scored as a scale, IES-R results were significantly different for the participant groups [$F(4, 154) = 7.46, p < .001$].
- A Scheffe post hoc test indicated that West Bank participants scored similarly to participants from India and lower than those from Sudan and Haiti.
- There were no differences found for education.

DES Results-Short Version

- Alpha = .88.
- No significant gender differences were found for any of the Taxon items
- Analyses of variances for eight selected DES items (based on the Taxon) showed significant group differences for six of these items
- West Bank participants scored lower than those from India, Sudan, Haiti, and all others for DES-5 (finding new things), DES-8 (not recognize friends/family), DES-12 (feeling things not real), DES-13 (body does not belong), and DES-22 (as if two different people) respectively (see DES figure)

Figure 1: IES-R Scree Plot

Figure 2: DES Responses

Discussion

- Data are subject to all the limitations and biases of self-reports and complicated by the fact that the measures were developed in English for use in Western cultural settings. Translation and communication across cultural lines may affect the results in unknown ways.
- Results indicated that participants reported multiple traumas.
- Significant differences from other international trauma groups indicate that participants were able to describe their primary trauma in ways consistent with recent historical events. Thus the measures appear to have been sufficiently effective despite the challenges of language and cultural differences.
- Compared to those in India, Haiti and the Sudan, Christian residents of the West Bank residents are more likely to report exposure to civil war
- Among West Bank residents, men were more likely to report exposure to assault and kidnappings
- DES results indicate that responses to trauma for West Bank participants are distinctive from those for other international trauma groups, with less of some forms of dissociation.
- High mean education suggests this sample may not well represent West Bank residents and may relate to degree of trauma experienced
- Despite the challenges of language and culture, it appears that the DTS, IES, and DES are sufficiently sensitive to detect expected differences across settings and types of trauma.
- It is likely that many in this group have experienced other traumas as well, such as prior conflicts, famine, sexual abuse, and religious discrimination/persecution.

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