

“The wound is still open”: the Nakba experience among internally displaced Palestinians in Israel

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Abstract

Purpose – While the 1948 Nakba represents the most significant crisis in the history of the Palestinian people, its psychological effects on its survivors in Israel have yet to be explored. The purpose of this paper is to examine the subjective experience and the psychological implications of the Nakba ordeals and the ensuing uprooting among the internally displaced Palestinians living in Israel.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with ten internally displaced Palestinians who experienced the Nakba as youngsters. The interview transcripts were analyzed thematically in line with accepted practice in phenomenological research in psychology.

Findings – Participants had experienced a wide range of traumatic events intertwined with protracted daily struggles and accumulated losses. These experiences resulted in pronounced psychological distress and immense inner pain that was perpetuated throughout their lives, rendering the Nakba an unresolved traumatic experience.

Research limitations/implications – This paper describes the psychological outcome of the Nakba among a small sample of elderly survivors. Further urgent research is needed to collect valuable untapped information from this aging and dwindling community.

Originality/value – Although more than six decades have elapsed since the tragic events, the current research paper constitutes a pioneering effort to document the subjective experience of the Nakba. The current research findings counterbalance 60 years of public and academic disregard of this tragic period.

Keywords Palestine, 1948, Elderly informants, Internally displaced persons, Nakba, Psychological trauma

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Since the Second World War, researchers have been investigating the impact of war on the psychological well-being of individuals (Porter and Haslam, 2005). While it can be argued that the effects of war on civilians are universal, the psychological consequences of the formative 1948 war on internally displaced Palestinians have not been documented (Dwairy, 2010). For the Palestinian people, the Israeli War of Independence resulted in what is referred to as the “Nakba,” a catastrophe of tremendous dimensions that altered their life course and history. The youngsters who survived the war are currently octogenarians, making documentation of their experiences a time-sensitive challenge.

The Nakba: a “present-absentee” experience

Meanwhile the gunfire was continuing, clearly intended to get people moving [...] Sobbing loudly, they passed in front of the Nakhle houses [...] they were setting off on a “trail of tears” towards

Received 16 July 2015
Revised 14 December 2015
Accepted 4 January 2016

The authors acknowledge all the participants who opened their hearts and shared their private experiences about a very painful episode in their lives. The authors also extend their thanks to the Association for the Defence of the Rights of the Internally Displaced in Israel (ADRID).

the Lebanese border. The most heart rending sight was the cats and dogs, barking and carrying on, trying to follow their masters, I heard a man shout to his dog: "Go back! At least you can stay!" (Srouji, 2004, p. 77).

Srouji (2004) sorrowfully describes the expulsion from my hometown village. Many times during my childhood I heard the story of my family's expulsion from the village and their return a few weeks later. For the past six decades stories like this were recounted in Palestinian families and passed down from one generation to another, but they usually stayed in the privacy and secrecy of their homes (Abu-Lughod and Sa'di, 2007; Kassem, 2011).

The term Nakba conveys the dreadful consequences of the 1948 war on the Palestinians: 400-500 villages were destroyed and 750,000 people were uprooted and became refugees in bordering Arab countries (Abu-Sitta, 2004). Around 160,000 Palestinians remained in the territory that became the State of Israel. Fifty percent of those who did not flee across the borders became internally displaced persons (IDPs), who were prevented from returning to their properties and were assigned the awkward classification of "present-absentees" (Kabha and Barzilai, 1996).

Within a few months, Palestinians who became Israeli citizens found themselves under the governance of their enemy and for two decades were subject to martial law. This population suffered from personal and socio-cultural upheavals while attempting to rebuild their lives as a discriminated against minority (Abu-Baker and Rabinowitz, 2004). Moreover, for the IDPs the Nakba resulted in massive and cumulative losses that led to poverty, personal insecurity, social instability and psychological distress (Al-Haj, 1986; Kabha and Barzilai, 1996).

The Nakba, therefore, represents the deepest crisis and the most pivotal turning point in Palestinian history. For years, however, the experiences of the war and its influences were silenced and absent from public and academic discourse in Israel. Sociologists and historians explain this lacuna by socio-political processes and regional power dynamics (e.g. the ongoing military occupation and the absence of a just resolution), as well as by deficits in Palestinian documentation and research traditions (Kabha, 2006; Ram, 2009). For the Palestinians living in Israel, organized reflection about their past is restricted by the political incorrectness associated with their position as a defeated and discriminated one against minority. While Palestinian refugees in camps of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria were expected to "remember" their experiences of the Nakba, their villages and lives back in Palestine (Feldman, 2008; Khalili, 2004; Richter-Devroe, 2013), Palestinians living in Israel are expected to "forget" their origins:

Palestinian citizens living in the State of Israel have seen their own history and memory transformed into a security threat. Therefore, this history and memory is not only forbidden, but subject to systematic destruction, distortion and erasure (Kassem, 2011, p. 7).

Officially, Israel has yet to acknowledge the Palestinian suffering as a result of the 1948 war. The destruction of Palestinian society was overshadowed and hidden by the ethos of Israel's independence. The memory of the Nakba was "obliterated [...] from Israeli collective conscience for decades to come" (Ram, 2009, p. 370).

Self-silencing of personal accounts of the Nakba may also reflect an avoidant psychological defense against a hurtful past (Liem, 2007). Addressing the desire to document his Nakba memory Nakhleh (2009, p. 4) wrote:

I have been reluctant and fearful to embark on it for all the pain that oozes from it, and for the deep reflection and introspection that I have to undertake about the colossal evil that was done to us.

In recent years, more efforts have been dedicated to the documentation and study of the Nakba (Kabha, 2006; Ram, 2009) and the experiences of Palestinian refugees in Arab countries (Chatty, 2010; Feldman, 2008; Salih, 2013). The sparse research on IDPs in Israel was conducted from socio-historical perspectives and mostly investigated the integration of the IDPs in their new host villages (Al-Haj, 1986; Kabha and Barzilai, 1996; Kassem, 2011). The present research is in all probability the first to use phenomenological qualitative inquiry to explore the subjective experiences and psychological effects of the Nakba and the uprooting among the IDP population of Israel.

Methodology

The present qualitative research conforms to the phenomenological tradition of inquiry in psychology. In phenomenology, the researcher is interested in understanding the shared meaning of an experience among those who experienced it in an attempt to capture its essence. The use of phenomenology is recommended when there is a need to understand a subject that was ignored or forgotten or when the study population was not properly investigated (Creswell, 1998, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). These conditions characterize the state of knowledge concerning the Nakba and the IDPs.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, using open-ended questions that defined the topics under investigation, while maintaining the possibility to further discuss and elaborate on each topic when needed. The personal interview provided participants with the opportunity to talk openly and recall vivid details regarding their experiences and helped to assess their subjective reactions. The questions were designed to fully explore the participants' experiences: their actual war experiences; their thoughts, feelings and emotional reactions; their means of coping, the course of events that led to their resettlement and the personal meanings they assigned to these experiences.

Participants

In phenomenological research, sampling can be purposeful and aimed at a deliberate search for participants who are experienced and are able to elaborate upon the investigated phenomena. Given the length and vividness of each interview, scholars recommend choosing a limited number of participants who can provide diverse accounts of the phenomena under consideration (Creswell, 1998; Morse, 2000). Accordingly, ten participants were included in this study, five women and five men originally from ten different uprooted villages and now IDPs living in northern Israel (see Table I for demographic data).

All the interviews took place in the participants' homes and were conducted by the first author in vernacular Arabic. The interviews were transcribed into Arabic and translated into Hebrew to allow mutual deliberations and analysis. The accuracy of the translation was subjected to external inspection by a professional translator, confirming the full accuracy of the Hebrew version.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically according to the accepted methods in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). The material was reduced into meaningful segments, classified and then integrated into main themes in accordance with the steps suggested by Creswell (1998, 2009) as follows:

1. reflexivity: a general description of the researcher's experience of the phenomena in an attempt to achieve self-awareness and thus openness to the participants' views;

Table I Demographic data of the participants

Name ^a	Gender	Age (during war)	Age (during interview)	Marital status (during war)	Marital status (during interview)	Religion
Affa	Female	20	80	M+3	W	Christian
Hoda	Female	25	84	M+3	W	Muslim
Zahra	Female	18	77	M+2	W	Muslim
Salwa	Female	~20	~79	M+1	M	Muslim
Nada	Female	20	79	M+1	W	Christian
Gasan	Male	15	74	S	M	Christian
Nabel	Male	15	74	S	M	Christian
Kamal	Male	15	73	S	W	Muslim
Hasan	Male	18	77	S	W	Muslim
Sami	Male	30	89	M+2	W	Muslim

Notes: ^aAll names have been changed. S, single; M, married; W, widower

2. horizontalization: developing a list of meaningful statements for each interview describing how the individual experienced the phenomena;
3. clustering these statements into wider units of meaning or themes;
4. writing a description of what events had the participants experienced;
5. writing a description of how the participants experienced these events; and
6. composing a comprehensive description of the experiences.

As expected, progress in this process was circular and not linear and included the reciprocal influences of reading, organization and analysis. The two authors held deliberations throughout the process until they reached mutual agreement on the final description of the phenomena.

Reflexivity

Researchers conducting phenomenological research should be aware of their personal stance regarding the subject under investigation, for it could affect their attentiveness to the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2009; Finlay, 2002). Thus we hereby present our personal perspectives on the Nakba, hoping that being aware of and discussing these perspectives allowed us to be more attentive to the participants' subjective accounts.

Sfaa: Becoming acquainted with the participants and exploring their experiences, have constituted an emotionally charged and fulfilling journey for me. Often I felt overwhelmed with feelings of sadness, frustration and anger alongside feelings of admiration and amazement for the journey they went through.

These feelings were obviously affected by my personal connection to the Nakba. As previously noted, during the war my childhood village was besieged and its residents were expelled by the Jewish military troops. As a child I was aware of the expulsion story, but only later in life did I learn about my parents' experiences. I learned about their fear when the troops assembled the people in the central square; about the worried looks of their parents; about the days-long march of expulsion and the empty homes they found when they were allowed to return. Listening to my parents' painful childhood war memories further reinforced my quest to study the personal and psychological aspects of this politically charged event.

Because I live in Israel, these experiences and other legacies of my people must withstand tremendous official efforts to erase and deny our collective identity and history. Hence, the current research also reflects my attempt to give voice to those who were silenced and ignored for decades. In this regard, the openness and empathy of my collaborator and adviser (Eli) to the participants' experiences and the Palestinian narrative was a nurturing opportunity that I cherished.

Eli: As the son of aging Holocaust survivors who fled to Israel as refugees in 1948, I experienced mixed feelings during my collaboration with Sfaa. I had to face the realization that the resurrection of the Jewish people and the birth of my country in 1948 also signified the painful destruction of Palestinian nationhood. I was also aware of the urgency of collecting data from the remaining survivors of the 1948 war. Their testimonies evoked in me reactions of sorrow and discomfort bordering on shame. I felt that through my participation in documenting and analyzing the respondents' testimonies I was acknowledging their plight and the injustice inflicted upon them by my people.

The study of social trauma and vulnerable groups can have emotional repercussions on the participants, researchers and the readers alike (Darling, 2014; Hugman *et al.*, 2011; Refugee Studies Center, 2007), particularly when they belong to conflicting social groups (Chaitin, 2003). In the current research, this effect is further complicated for it addresses the deepest dispute in the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Nonetheless, we are convinced that only by open and sincere confrontation of the painful past can we foster the mutual understanding and empathy that are necessary preconditions for peace.

Results

The respondents spoke in colloquial Arabic that was accompanied by striking facial expressions and bodily gestures. Translated into English, their language may sound rudimentary and may affect the readers' understanding of the meaning of the experience. However, as recommended in cross-cultural qualitative research, the language was not embellished and was presented as close to the original spoken dialect as possible, accompanied by explanations when needed (Van Nes *et al.*, 2010).

The 1948 war was experienced and later remembered as a violent and traumatic life chapter that brutally severed the IDPs' life course. The abandonment of their home villages was experienced as a frightening separation from a stable and secure past, through a dangerous present, toward an unknown frightening future. The events of the 1948 war developed into a life-altering crisis, a Nakba, of both personal and societal dimensions:

Hasan: I, I am a present absentee, they call me (laughs), I swear I don't know if I'm present or absent [...]

Q: What does it mean for you to be a present absentee?

Hasan: It means I don't recognize who I am. I'm present here in the country but absent like those who fled to Syria and Lebanon [...] I'm here, present, and they are there, absent.

By using the awkward Israeli legalistic term present-absentee, Hasan expresses the duality of his existence following the war. The painful disconnection of this peasant from his land, village and community has actually robbed him of the basic ingredients of his identity, perpetuating a split between his pre- and post-1948 identities.

The analysis uncovered several layers of this dialectical reality among the IDPs. Contradictions between hope and despair, capability and disability, accompanied their daily struggles and thus provided a broader meaning to the term present-absentee.

The results of the thematic analysis are presented along two main themes:

1. stressors that the IDPs encountered, including the war events, the resettlement and adjustment; and
2. psychological consequences of these factors, both immediate and long term.

Stressors

IDPs were exposed to a wide range of hardships. During the fighting many were subjected to extreme violence and serious threats to their lives. The uprooting from their home villages exposed them to additional tribulations, including heavy loss of personal resources, severance of family and community ties, and long-term economic and social distress associated with the necessity to rebuild their lives from scratch.

"The harvesters woke up and saw the tanks" – from peaceful routine to mortal threat

Respondents carried on with their daily routines, seemingly oblivious to or maybe even uninformed about the threats of the battles being fought in the region. Terrifying abruptness characterized the participants' first encounter with the war events. The transition from their tranquil rural way of life to the horrifying experiences of war required immediate response without adequate preparation:

No no no no we didn't expect this, people at that time lived in a world of their own, like nothing is going on outside, like nothing is happening around them (Gasán).

The harvesters suddenly saw 9 tanks moving, something weird, they said the tanks are going to attack the village. The harvesters came back and told others. People started to load, those poor wretches, load mattresses and things like that on their animals, or women carried belongings on their heads (Hasan).

Within a few hours these defenseless peasants found themselves facing attacks from infantry, armored and airborne troops. Their villages were placed under siege and then under the threat of direct fire as they were expelled into exile:

As I remember the airplane bombed three times at the northern area, near our house [...] 14 persons were killed. Suddenly the troops started advancing towards the village [...] and started to shell the olive groves, and people were between the trees and started fleeing to the north (Affa).

14 people were executed near the well, they lined them up in one row and shot them, blindfolded them and shot them [...] Everyone was afraid his turn will come, women and children embraced and said: "now they will enter and shoot us, now they will shoot us". There is nothing harder than surrendering to the enemy, there is nothing harder, because you are subjected to his mercy to his grace (Hasan).

I was alone at home, waiting for my husband to come back and get some clothes, but they didn't allow him to come [...] then the soldier came: "get up!" and he grasped my daughter and put her in my lap and said: "this is yours (the daughter) but this house isn't. Get out!" (Nada).

“هجيج – Hajej” – mass flight and expulsion

The Arabic term *Hajej* best captures the experiences of the IDPs after their forced departure from their villages. The abandonment of their homes marked the beginning of an exhausting and harsh journey leading to their resettlement. Families struggled daily to ensure their survival, having to cope with thirst and hunger during a prolonged period of wandering:

The children were hungry, we left all our things at home. We passed by this woman who was baking bread [...] but were ashamed to ask, we wanted to feed the children, finally we bought some dates with the shilling we had (Zahra).

We left the houses unlocked, the cows, hens and our food, everything was left there. People ran away immediately [...] When the army came and started shooting, people ran away, lots of people escaped [...] children running barefoot and women crying and running into the fields (Kamal).

The *Hajej* defined the time and space of the painful severance of the IDPs from their previous lives. These lengthy days of flight and long distances traveled were engraved in their memories as an inhumane and humiliating trial. The expressions used to describe their experiences reflect a sense of dehumanization and objectification by the military and the circumstances: "throw us," "loading people and throwing," "left like beggars," "stripped":

We started rebuilding our lives from below zero, they throw us here without anything [...] we started from below zero (Gasam).

“[...] We left like beggars” – loss of personal resources

The IDPs lost all their assets and possessions, including their homes with all their belongings, their livestock, agricultural fields and olive groves. The abrupt loss of income resources led to a rapid decline in their socio-economic status and to a spiraling process of cumulative damages. These peasants derived their sense of identity from their communities and the lands they owned. From the status of farmers and landowners they deteriorated into "scattered," "beggars" and "survivors":

I have 200 dunams (1,000 m²) that were expropriated. The olive oil crop was about 200-300 cans. Your income source - they stole it, I have worked hard, suffered and planted with my own hands these olive trees. Today I pass by the land and I find it is uprooted, what can I do, what can a person do besides keeping the pain inside its over (Sami).

I swear to you we used to bake delicious bread from our wheat, and now we are buying it. It hurts. Everything [...] we had plenty [...] vegetables cucumber eggplant sesame. Now you'll say that I'm exaggerating, but as much I try, I can't truly describe how much we had (Hoda).

“I recognize our house from all the ruins” – the demolition of their homes

The deported IDPs expected to return home after the war. Yet the demolition of their homes reified the magnitude of the irreversible tragedy ahead.

A home is normally a safe place, a shelter that embodies one's sense of belonging. A home usually represents the family's lifestyle, its memories and hopes. But for the IDPs their homes were transformed into a source of vulnerability and trauma:

We [...] we stood on the hill and saw them, our village was at the opposite side, we saw them destroying the village, all of it, they left only the church. May god be with us, this is his will (Nada).

There is a hill near the village [...] people stood there and saw how the airplanes threw bombs on the village on their homes (moans) an explosion then smoke, people saying "this is our home" [...] another one "now this is our home". This was a dark day we experienced, so painful [...] sadness bitterness suffering (Gassan).

Some participants revealed they had taken their house keys with them and were still keeping them. The key symbolizes the protection of the home, the exclusive right to it and the hope of returning to it. For the respondents these possibilities no longer exist. For them the key has become a concrete symbol of an erased entity that has been transformed from reality to a mental representation.

"We were scattered all around" – disconnection from the local community

A profound sense of loss was associated with the destruction of the village community fabric. The dispersed Palestinian communities usually settled in several different regional host villages, with some members seeking refuge outside the country.

Many IDPs adjusted well to their host villages and developed new connections. Nevertheless, their experience was shadowed by the grief over their lost communities. Throughout the interviews, participants shared a nostalgic yearning for their lost homesteads and a longing for a life intimately shared with relatives, friends and neighbors:

There is no compensation, there is no replacement for our village, for its people. Here I have relations with my neighbors, but it's impossible for me (weeps) to feel the same as I felt in the village [...] I don't know, there is no easy day for me (Afeza).

I have no family members here, all my family is in Lebanon. In 1982 I traveled there and could see my mother, my father was already dead [...] we used to go to sleep while embracing one another (Salwa).

The communities of origin still seem to constitute the IDPs' group of reference despite the fact that they ceased to exist more than 60 years before the interviews were conducted. The participants continued to see themselves as members of their villages of origin and their respective communities.

The host communities were usually described as welcoming and supportive, mainly when the IDPs had acquaintances there and connections with them prior to the war:

They treated us with most mercifulness and sensitivity [...] they deserve our appreciation [...] we were like brothers, like a family, we knew them before (Hassan).

Yet, some participants described an attitude of alienation among the host community, sometimes accompanied by hostile and demeaning attitudes that exacerbated their emotional pain and interfered with their adaptation:

They used to call us refugees [...] we felt sad to hear that. Once I heard my neighbor saying "of course! we are stuck with the refugees". We felt humiliated [...] we were the basis of the village and now they are calling us refugees (Hoda).

Of course we felt like strangers [...] still even after six decades you still find some distance, there is no adaptation (Gassan).

"We started rebuilding our lives from below zero" – coping and struggling for survival

The first challenges after their deportation were associated with finding a new place to resettle and a new source of income. It took years to accomplish these tasks, particularly within the poverty-stricken Palestinian population struggling in a post-war Israeli economy of austerity.

For many weeks the respondents and their families lived in tents erected in the fields surrounding the absorbing villages. Some found refuge at homes of benevolent acquaintances. With the growing understanding that their uprooting was not temporary as they had initially hoped, some

IDPs rented rooms from locals while others moved into makeshift wood or tin shacks. These temporary solutions became quite permanent for many IDPs who were forced to cope with overcrowded dwellings devoid of essential infrastructure:

We gathered pieces of tin and metal scrap and tires and built the shed here [...] we stayed there seven to eight years [...] these were years of need, poverty and humiliation [...] we worked very hard, we became very tired of our lives (Zahra).

When the owner needed his place back, we left and rented another, and so on and so on [...] 14 times we moved with the children from one place to another (Nada).

To extricate themselves from total scarcity and privation, IDPs discovered new strengths and abilities that gradually helped them improve their living conditions and reacquire basic resources. Former housewives joined the labor market and former landowners resorted to working as hired laborers. Diligence and hard work were the only available options:

I told J. (quoting a popular proverb) "if a youngster doesn't work hardly and diligently, he is forbidden to eat the bread of men-حرام عليه خبز الرجال" (Affa).

We overcame through our determination and willpower, whoever had weak will collapsed and died, collapsed and died, couldn't stand in the face of the coming storm (Kamal).

Psychological consequences

Participants in this study reported being exposed to multiple stressors as well as to peri- and post-traumatic distress (i.e. distress experienced during and following exposure to trauma), some of which were still present at the time of the interview. While many IDPs have succeeded in rebuilding their physical existence, psychologically their lives seem to have stopped at the point of their deportation. Analyzed accounts were replete with evidence that respondents were still processing traumatic experiences more than six decades after the war.

"[...] the soul gets tired" – immediate emotional distress

The horrors of war evoked intense fear among the attacked civilians. The ensuing uprooting brought about additional experiences of helplessness, disgrace and despair:

I almost went crazy the year we left, I was affected greatly. I used to take my child and stayed in the woods. I didn't want to encounter people, I used to cry a lot. May God not cast this situation upon anyone (Afefe).

Everything that happened caused us distress. We felt weak, we felt humiliation, we felt shame, what else?! and still feel, every time we remember it we feel the disgust and feel the weakness, people got fed up with everything (Hoda).

The intense emotions experienced by the respondents were usually kept private. Socio-cultural norms of emotional suppression combined with the urgent need to function and survive contributed to a general withholding of emotional expression. A similar effect resulted from their faith. Seeing their reality as "fate" or "God's will" restricted the participants' options for complaining or expressing negative emotions. Nonetheless, their faith granted some justification to their suffering, hence allowing a certain degree of acceptance and relief:

I looked with my eyes and felt the pain in my heart, what is in the heart stays in the heart [...] we need to be patient facing God's fate (Sami).

A person can't forget [...] we can't forget. Anyhow thanks God this is what God intended for us (Hoda).

The Nakba – an accumulation of unresolved experiences

The trauma of war, deportation and loss evolved into ongoing traumatic stress. Institutional neglect and lack of psycho-social treatments left the Nakba unresolved not only geopolitically but also psychologically. More than 60 years after their traumatic deportation, post-traumatic emotional distress continued to affect the participants of this study. Their genuine distress was manifested both verbally and non-verbally. Respondents wept, moaned and displayed body gestures that conveyed the emotional intensity that still characterized their Nakba experience.

For the interviewees the word “Nakba” has a personalized significance comprising a complex and uniquely experienced suffering. For them the term Nakba represents the catastrophe of their demolished homes, the calamity of their expropriated lands, the tragedy of their dispersed community, the disaster of their lost lifestyle and the tribulations of the continued strain to rebuild their lives:

This is the greatest Nakba of my life (cries and continues taking in a suffocated voice), the greatest Nakba of my life, and the further it gets, the harder and more painful it becomes in our hearts (Afefe).

My heart is torn apart [...] when I go and stand where my house was it hurts so much, when I see our land and the neglected olive trees that my father had planted, it's a pity [...] why did I lose it, I lost it quickly without noticing (Hasan).

What it means for me (moans), I sit and cry alone, cry inside myself, where are my brothers? Where is my family? Where is my sister? No one [...] I am alone (Salwa).

“I still feel myself there” – longing and yearning for the past

The elderly participants showed their connection with the past in various ways: they presented themselves as residents of the original localities (e.g. “I am a New Yorker”); they described with pride and appreciation their lost worlds; they talked about their recurring visits to the ruins of their villages; they described their refusal to give up on their lands and their unrelenting desire to resettle in their original villages.

While their view of their post-uprooting lives was colored by the difficulties they endured, their views of their pre-uprooting lives were characterized by an idealized perspective: romantic and pastoral descriptions of quiet and fulfilling lives marked by close social bonds and tension-free relations:

It's true that we had fewer resources than today but life was more beautiful, because the mind was at ease, peaceful, and people loved each other, today this doesn't exist (Zahra).

What a location! what a location! I wish one day you would stand there to see the view, the view we had from the village, it's imprinted in my heart (Hasan).

The IDPs' yearning for their pasts was evident in their unrelenting desire to return to the lands of their lost home villages, where only a few ruins remained. For the participants in this study, the demolished home village and its community live and thrive in their minds as a desirable reality that exists parallel to their real world. Most interviewees vividly remember the familial fields, the village quarters and even the paths they walked:

Our house was on that hill, I swear to you, I know its location out of all the ruins. Each time I pass by the place, I continue to look till I don't see it anymore. Can anyone forget her land, her village?! (Salwa).

Thus, the participants' hope of return reflects the desire to reconnect their dual worlds, to restart their lost lives and heal their emotional pain. This wish prevailed against all reason or practical considerations:

I want to return this morning, immediately I'll place a tent, I'll place a tent and stay in it and leave this house. I wish, I wish, I wish! (Zahra).

If they let me return, I'll go and live in a tent and leave this house and leave everything, I'll go and place a tent and live in it for the few years I have left. I feel that if I die, that I died with my pride with my existence, died in my village (Kamal).

Often these wishes are confronted by the Israeli reality, exposing yet again their helplessness and the split mental dynamics of the IDPs. Most of our respondents could not see any reasonable probability for their dream to be fulfilled:

They have already planted trees there, how could it be changed back? God knows, if only, if only [...] If that was possible it would have happened long time ago (Zahra).

What justice what justice is this? I'm two kilometers away from my land and I'm forbidden to enter it (Hassan).

The Nakba divided the IDPs' lives into two polar periods characterized by the wholesomeness of then and the awfulness of thereafter. The contradictions and polarities between abundance and shortage, close ties and separation and sense of belonging and alienation also led to splits in the

IDPs' self-perception, characterized by the healthy self of the pre-war era and the scathed refugee self that survived. Thus, the participants' longings for their previous lives also represent yearnings for a coherent self with an integrative course of history, an antithesis to their paradoxical identity as present-absentees.

Discussion

Through a phenomenological inquiry, the present study aimed to investigate the experience of the Nakba and the ensuing uprooting among the internally displaced Palestinians in Israel.

The analysis of the interviews demonstrated the centrality of these phenomena in the mental and emotional lives of the participants. The emotional reactions and information they shared expressed the long-lasting and pervasive painful consequences of the Nakba. Despite the years that have passed and the many other experienced life events, these experiences are still very much alive and detailed in their memories. These characteristics of well-preserved, vivid and intense memories have been identified among other survivors of old trauma, indicating that highly emotional life events can characterize autobiographical memories that are highly resistant to the passage of time (Burnell *et al.*, 2010; Morris-King, 2009).

The Nakba was a sudden traumatic occurrence that severed the peaceful lives of the participants. It was marked by a wide range of war-related stressors, comparable to those identified among other threatened and displaced populations (Porter and Haslam, 2005; Sawada *et al.*, 2004). The IDPs were exposed to mortal threats by direct and cross-fire that left many overwhelmed by fear and helplessness. Their subsequent uprooting resulted in a loss of personal resources, severance of the family and community fabric, and consequent long-term scarcity and social distress. The rapid progression of painful experiences and accumulated losses worsened the Nakba's psychological outcomes and intensified its traumatic potential (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2011).

Participants implemented various coping strategies to deal with the Nakba's consequences. To restore their lives they resorted to immediate resourceful action. This "problem focused" approach (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) was not only instrumental in their economic recovery, but also restored a sense of efficacy. Together with this, the interviewees also tended to suppress their emotional distress. The urgent need to cope with the external challenges and threats allowed limited room for processing internal pain. Additionally, prevailing cultural and social norms discouraged displays of emotion, a type of behavior seen as a sign of weakness (Dwairy, 2002).

Turning to religion and faith seemed a more acceptable way of coping with personal distress (Abdel-Khalek, 2010). Mid-eastern Christian and Muslim traditions assert that life is determined by God's will and in facing a crisis a person is expected to be patient and pray for relief. The construction of their wartime reality as an inevitable fate gave the IDPs perspective and meaning to their suffering (Ai and Peterson, 2005).

The elderly respondents seemed most affected by a sense of humiliation and degradation, which were particularly hurtful in light of cultural values cherishing honor and dignity (Dwairy, 2002; Giacaman *et al.*, 2007). IDPs felt disgraced by their treatment by the army, shamed by their uprooting and socio-economic decline, and dishonored by the local host communities. An injury to sense of dignity can have severe and lasting consequences, and healing the wound of humiliation can best be achieved by restoring justice and fairness (Lindner, 2002). In this regard, the IDPs' 60-year-long yearning to return to their lost villages also constitutes a search for personal justice and reinstatement of their sense of dignity.

Although many of the respondents have successfully rebuilt their lives, feelings of unresolved pain were clearly expressed with respect to the destruction of their homesteads and the loss of their lands. The concepts of "Place Attachment" and "Place Identity" in environmental psychology (Bogâç, 2009) can explain the emotional connection IDPs have maintained to their former properties that had provided them with a sense of security and belonging. The experience of longing to the lost home has indeed been documented as a common central source of distress among refugees and is known to lead to feelings of vulnerability, helplessness and pain (Rosbrook and Schweitzer, 2010), regardless of the years that have passed since the displacement (Bogâç, 2009).

Nostalgia is said to play an adaptive role among refugees. Nostalgia constitutes a “linking phenomenon” between the mental representation of the homeland and the absence of the individual from it, thus facilitating the mourning process (Volkan, 1999). Nostalgia has been described as a bittersweet pleasure, including both the pain associated with separation from the idealized object (e.g. the people, the homeland) and the relief experienced by the returning fantasy. When individuals live primarily in a state of “only if” or “someday” – a state common to cases of forced transitions – the mourning process may last throughout life and may sometimes never be completed (Akhtar, 1999).

Migration can be construed as a developmental individuation process that increases a person’s vulnerability to grief and identity crises. Different factors are said to facilitate the migration adjustment process, among them the extent of choice, the willingness associated with the transition, the reaction of the host community, the ability to continue to promote previous goals and maintain a sense of continuity (Akhtar, 1995, 1999). Many of these elements were experienced as having hindered adjustment among participants who had found themselves homeless and destitute in a country that defined itself as alien to them (i.e. Jewish).

Though the IDPs did integrate into the absorbing villages and managed to rebuild their lives, they demonstrate a psychological state of “ethnocentric withdrawal” marked by non-integrated experiences and split views of past and present lives (Akhtar, 1995; Walsh and Shulman, 2007). The respondents could not overcome the experience of loss that resulted from their uprooting and the demise of their sense of nationhood, and the Nakba persisted as an unprocessed trauma (Akhtar, 1995; Burnell *et al.*, 2010; Morris-King, 2009). This lack of integration was manifested in the split view of their lives: Whereas their life stories following the uprooting were colored by the stressors and challenges they had faced, their pre-war lives were romantically cherished as ideal. A similar split was identified in the interviewees’ self-concepts (present-absentee). Although the participants demonstrated exceptional endurance and strength, these resources were not properly integrated into their self-image. Their identities remained mostly connected to the traumatic experiences they had endured and their outcomes (Dwairy, 2010; Pérez-Sales, 2010).

This research contributes to the small body of research on the effects of the Nakba among Palestinians living in Israel. This pioneering study examined the meaning and long-term psychological consequences of the Nakba on its young survivors. Alongside the historical importance of these results, promoting the psychological understanding of this turning point in the region’s history has practical implications as well, including facilitating the relationships between different Palestinian sectors: older and younger generations, IDP families and host communities. In addition, the findings could contribute to fostering Palestinian-Jewish dialogue in Israel that would facilitate reciprocal empathic acknowledgment of suffering. The results also identify potential mental health needs among Palestinians in Israel. Ongoing feelings of unresolved familial post-traumatic pain ought to be addressed professionally through a multi-generational culture-sensitive approach.

This study has several limitations that need to be addressed. First, although the thematic analysis has reached saturation, the small size of the sample limits the generalizability of the results. Second, the respondents were elderly and their retrospective accounts could have been tainted by cognitive and emotional factors associated with their age, or by the need to validate their current psychological state (King *et al.*, 2000). Nevertheless, in light of the scarcity of research in this context, this was the only possible method to study the dwindling population of Palestinian IDPs. The in-depth inclusive personal interviewing method allowed the exploration of each identified theme repeatedly, somewhat compensating for these inevitable memory biases. Furthermore, as previously discussed, emotional valence of target memories is known to minimize memory flaws of crucial life events (Thomsen and Berntsen, 2009).

Because of the paucity of research in this field, future research options are numerous. It is essential to duplicate this inquiry with other IDPs to further enrich the existing knowledge concerning the Nakba experience. The advanced age of the survivors necessitates immediate collection of data. Future research should also explore the Nakba experience among other Palestinian populations, including cross-generational trauma issues among the younger

generation and the impact of the events among the members of the host communities and also among external refugees. Another recommended field of inquiry should address the Jewish society. The study of Jewish Israeli perceptions of the Nakba can promote knowledge on conditions and obstacles to the recognition of the Palestinian experience. Finally, quantitative research could examine the generalizability of the reported themes and the casual relations implied by the current results.

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