Political violence and mental health: Effects of neoliberalism and the role of international social work practice

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Abstract
Healing from political violence is not solely an individual project, but a communal process involving reclaiming collective action, trust, and efficacy. This article uses a case study from two Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank to examine how two trends central to neoliberalism, individualism, and the medicalization of inherently social and political problems, discount larger forces that affect risk and resilience, thereby undermining mental health recovery from political violence. Implications for international social work include utilizing ecosocial frameworks for research and practice, engaging in advocacy, and establishing agendas for mental health practice that emphasize individual and collective self-determination.

Keywords
International social work, mental health, neoliberalism, political violence/war, trauma

Introduction: Political violence, neoliberalism, and mental health
Within the fields of social work, psychology, and public health, increasing attention is being paid to the deleterious effects of political violence on the mental health of civilian populations (Basoglu et al., 2005; De Jong, 2003; Dubow et al., 2010; Giacaman et al., 2007; Hobfoll et al., 2012). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2002) defines political violence as the attempt to achieve political goals through the methodical use of physical force, or manipulation, including the intentional deprivation of basic needs and rights, such as access to food, education, sanitation, healthcare, as well as freedom of speech and association. While some definitions of political violence are quite
diffuse and include events like struggles for independence from colonialism or popular rebellions, political violence is typically conceptualized as a range of acts of violence and repression that occur during wars, armed conflicts, dictatorships, and military occupations (Zwi and Ugalde, 1989). Within this article, we are concerned with two types of political violence: violence and repression perpetrated by states against the populations of their own state and conflicts between states, including ongoing occupations. These types of political violence, in particular, illustrate how political violence is increasingly characterized by a disintegration of barriers between war and everyday civilian life, and the concomitant blurring of lines between combatants and non-combatants, including children and youth (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), 2005).

Political violence simultaneously compromises individual, community, and government functioning (Hobfoll et al., 2007; Lykes et al., 2007; Martín-Baró et al., 1994; Robben, 2005; Sousa, 2013). Accordingly, healing from political violence is not just an individual imperative, but rather a communal process centered on the reestablishment of collective trust and social and political action (Ager et al., 2005; Summerfield, 2002). Indeed, a growing body of empirical research on psychological well-being in the context of political violence suggests that collective-based forms of belonging, action, and meaning-making are essential in recovering from the psychological effects of political violence (Gilligan, 2009; Hobfoll et al., 2007; Mollica, 2002; Schweitzer et al., 2006). Nevertheless, the prevailing mode of practice in humanitarian psychiatry in response to mass civilian trauma events remains focused on individual clinical diagnosis and treatment, the biomedical model (Summerfield, 1999, 2002). This pathologizing of individuals affected by political violence may in fact undermine resiliency, as people begin to view themselves as isolated victims afflicted by mental illness that they must individually overcome, as opposed to survivors confronting a collective experience of violence within a social and political context (Akesson, 2005; Barber, 2008; Edelman et al., 2003; Hobfoll et al., 2007; Lykes et al., 2007; Pham et al., 2010; Robben, 2005).

As we argue in this article, such practices construct those who experience political violence as medicalized individual subjects as opposed to active, socially situated citizens (Summerfield, 1999). In so doing, these practices correspond with global trends toward neoliberalism, a movement that is ostensibly economic in nature, centered on privatization, de-regulation, and trade liberalization (Scholte, 2005), but actually reaches deeply into social and political fabrics as it prioritizes the individual over the collective and singular responsibilities over mutual obligations and rights (Harvey, 2005; Schram, 2006). The past decade has seen an increased awareness of the health and social effects of neoliberalism (Bhavsar and Bhugra, 2008; Manning and Patel, 2008; Navarro, 2007), including critiques from international social work about how rhetoric and practices of neoliberalism have a detrimental effect on social welfare (Dominelli, 1999; Lavalette and Ferguson, 2007; Ramon, 2008a).

International social work can uniquely inform healing and recovery from political violence because it advocates self-determination and social justice, local control and agency, and multiple levels of assessment and intervention (Ramon, 2008b). Yet, despite the global predominance of both political violence and neoliberalism, we have a dearth of literature on the connections between these global issues. International social work scholarship could benefit from efforts to theorize how these problematic trends operate together, that is, how neoliberal ideology operates within political violence to shape discursive understandings and responses to this violence. This article, therefore, explores how neoliberal discourse undergirds humanitarian responses to political violence as it champions individuals rather than collectives and globally mobile technical expertise over vernacular knowledges and locally embedded modes of recovery. Drawing from the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, we argue that trauma relief projects are often informed by and reproduce neoliberal modes of subjectivity and governance wherein ‘unruly’ populations are transformed into
individualized subjects through the depoliticized discourse of humanitarian expertise (Foucault, 2009; Lemke, 2001).

We use a case study drawn from long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted with community centers in three West Bank Palestinian refugee camps near the city of Nablus, a city hard-hit by the violence of Israeli invasions during the second Palestinian *intifada*, and more recently the target of international humanitarian aid intervention. Given the overwhelming influence of international aid agencies, Palestine provides fruitful ground for interrogating dominant modes of trauma relief. Likewise, the Palestinian experience of repeated traumas and recovery, while sadly not uncommon, may help us to better understand collective-based forms of resilience. Following this Palestinian case study, we turn to a discussion of how values and practices of international social work might help to articulate more effective forms of healing, highlighting the discipline’s mandates to prioritize advocacy, self-determination, and multiple levels of analysis and intervention.

The analyses presented here rely on multiple years of participatory observation and ethnographic research working with Palestinian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community organizations beginning in 2007; this research is ongoing. Most data presented here are part of a specific wider researcher project within trauma relief projects targeting Palestinian refugee children and youth (ages 10–13 years), done by David Jones Marshall, the second author of this article, which was conducted with rigorous examination and approval by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Kentucky Office of Research Integrity. This work included six groups with children (both boys and girls; average size of each group was six children) recruited through local community centers. Data were audio recorded; they were collected in Arabic and translated for analysis. All participants and interviewees in this research gave their informed consent to participate. Names and other identifying information have been changed to protect the privacy of participating individuals and community organizations. For extended details on the methods, participants, and results of the larger project, we refer readers to other works that are in print elsewhere (Marshall, 2013; Marshall, 2014). The purpose of this article is not to analyze the data from the children; rather, the analyses presented here use illustrative examples drawn from these data, along with participatory observation done by both authors with agencies (which included helping to translate, edit, and write project proposals and reports to international donor organizations) to explore larger theoretical and conceptual notions and discourses of trauma and recovery related to political violence.

**Medicalization, individualization, and de-politicization of trauma**

Escobar (1995) contends development discourse is a neo-imperialist tool that disempowers communities in the Global South and wrests control from local communities. Through the exclusive use of technical solutions, rather than critical analysis of political and social problems, globalized elites retain power and control, and the poor become ‘objects of knowledge and management’ (Escobar, 1995: 23). As in development contexts, the wielding of expert humanitarian knowledge in situations of political violence, and the problematization of trauma as a medical rather than a political experience, produces a similarly disempowering effect (see James, 2004). In this way, humanitarian trauma relief conforms to a disempowering political economy of knowledge in which victims of political violence become medicalized objects of suffering rather than agents of resilience and resistance. This medicalization of political violence de-contextualizes and de-historicizes trauma, effectively ignoring how larger structures, such as families, communities, and entire societies are both affected by and actively respond to political violence. Crucially, this process of individual medicalization forecloses the possibility of seeking justice and accountability, political processes that can also play a key role in recovery (Lykes et al., 2007).
While political violence may cause mental health problems that no doubt warrant treatment on the individual level, at its core, political violence is an attack on the collective polity (Ager et al., 2005; Summerfield, 1999), causing not only personal crises, but crises that are social and political in nature (Edelman et al., 2003). Political violence increases isolation, mistrust, and withdrawal, severing peoples’ abilities to come together as a people, thus leading to a deterioration of faith in democratic institutions (Dillenburger et al., 2008; Flores et al., 2009; Ludwin, 2003; Robben, 2005). Political involvement, collective efficacy, and social engagement are key components of health and well-being (CSDH, 2008); within political violence, these practices are vital for individual and collective health (Farwell and Cole, 2001; Quota et al., 1995; Sousa et al., 2013; Srour, 2005). Demands for justice within as a central part of healing from the suffering of political violence has a rich history; over four decades ago, scholars such as the French Algerian psychiatrist Franz Fanon (1965) and Brazilian educator Paolo Friere (1970) elevated the importance of political engagement for well-being of populations living under oppression and violence. It should not come as a surprise, then, that while mainstream humanitarian response to political violence often asserts neutrality regarding political questions about victim and aggressor, stress and coping research suggests questions of responsibility and justice are central to individual and communal recovery (Ludwin, 2003; Lykes et al., 2007; Ursano et al., 1994).

Collective responses to political violence, however, conflict with the prevailing mode of humanitarian trauma relief, which relies on an individual, biomedical framework inscribing individuals with responsibility for their own suffering and recovery as they obscure larger arrangements of power and violence. Such techniques are in keeping with a wider trend in neoliberal governance of promoting individual responsibility, sometimes couched in terms of empowerment or personal growth, above collective social accountability (Cruikshank, 1999; Harvey, 2005; Rose, 1996). A myopic focus on suffering victims allows those who architect and execute political violence to remain unnamed and unscathed, while entire societies bear the physical and psychological burdens of history and politics (Klein, 2007). As such, biomedical responses to political violence may reproduce the same social atomism that the use of political violence sought to achieve.

We now turn to our Palestinian case study to ground our analysis. The first part of this case study presents an analysis of trauma relief projects targeting Palestinian children and youth in West Bank refugee camps. Our intent here is to demonstrate not only the depoliticizing effect of trauma discourse, but also how the biomedical model discursively produces the individual as the primary terrain of intervention and action. To complicate this view, however, we turn to the second part of our Palestine case study: ethnographic work with local Palestinian community organizations as well as Palestinian refugee children and youth themselves (drawn from the study population described earlier). Here, we seek to illustrate how young people and youth workers in Palestine understand and respond to political violence within the context of their social, political, and religious frames of reference. Community solidarity, strong familial bonds, political struggle, and a faith in divine forms of justice all serve as important cultural and political resources that Palestinian refugee children and youth draw upon as sources of strength and resilience.

**Target(ed) groups – Healing the Palestinian child**

An analysis of the discourse of programming for children within political violence must consider the rules of what can and cannot be said, and what problems can and cannot be addressed. Like RD Laing (1967)’s three rules of living in an abusive household, the first rule is of humanitarian trauma relief projects in Palestine is simply ‘Don’t’. Do not acknowledge the source of violence, in this case, the occupation. For example, in a funding appeal to a European donor by a local Palestinian community center in Balata Camp near Nablus, the organization stated that it provides programs that aim at ‘alleviating the psychological pressure that children continue to suffer in Balata camp as a result of past
and ongoing violence’. The agent and nature of violence – the repeated incursions by the Israeli army – is left intentionally vague. Another project proposal from a Nablus-based organization working with refugee youth states that ‘nearly all of the current generation of youth and young adults has seen or been involved in violent clashes’. Here, occupation and resistance are reduced to a series of seemingly symmetrical clashes between two violent groups, with the onus on the involvement of Palestinian youth and no mention of the massively superior US-backed Israeli military.

Indeed, in most project proposals, not only is there no mention of the occupation, it is the potential violence of Palestinian youths themselves that is singled out for intervention. For example, another project proposal merely states the ‘targeted group’ (referring to the children and youth targeted by the intervention, in the unfortunate parlance of humanitarian aid proposals) suffers from ‘political and social abuse’ which has led to ‘educational, social and behavioral problems’. Nevertheless, as rendered in this trauma relief project, the factors within the context of occupation that have been implicated in the symptoms exhibited by Palestinian children (such as lack of resources, overcrowding, unemployment, along with humiliation and violence from the occupying force (Barber, 2001; Garbarino and Kostelny, 1996; Giacaman, 2007)) are not only not specified, but are hidden away in language that conceals any of the well-documented details of life under occupation. Children and youth are mere subjects of some vague abuse in need of psychological intervention led by external experts.

As to what forms such intervention should take, there is close conformity with the biomedical model of trauma relief, including a focus on individual healing through individualized self-expression. For example, in a proposal for an arts-based trauma relief project in Nablus, the implementing organization states that it seeks to ‘provide psychological relief and a productive means of self-expression to children and youth who have suffered trauma and other effects of violence and conflict’. Here, the psychological stress caused by an unnamed source of violence and ‘conflict’ is channeled into safe, ‘productive’ forms of self-expression, rather than activities that would be deemed counter-productive. In a different funding proposal for a media-based trauma relief project, it is stated that the main goal of the project is to overcome ‘physical barriers through communication’ as well as to ‘transcend personal barriers, such as trauma and lack of self-confidence, through self-exploration and personal development’. Here, there is a subtle reference to the restrictions on mobility caused by the physical barriers of the occupation, such as checkpoints and the West Bank separation wall. However, the systematic violence and oppression of occupation is conflated with personal deficits (lack of self-confidence becomes the problem, rather than inability to access water, relatives, or sacred land). Rather than advocacy for a removal of the barriers to freedom of movement, as advocated for by the United Nations (UN) (United Nations – Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA), 2012), the solution is reduced to a project of personal improvement through self-expression. Without a critical understanding of the systematic oppression of occupation and the history of the Palestinian struggle, such forms of personal empowerment are rendered meaningless. In fact, as Hobfoll et al. (2007) point out, projects promoting empowerment might actually be ‘counter-productive and demoralizing’ if resources needed to actualize this empowerment are not there or have been severed (p. 294).

As the preceding discourse analysis has shown, trauma relief projects targeting Palestinian refugee youth often ignore the extent to which refugee youth are embedded within a wider political and historical context as well as wider social assemblages ranging from the family and camp to the nation and even the Islamic ummah. In this way, such projects present an individualized and depoliticized framing of violence – centering on youth as the pathologized objects (the ‘targeted group’) of a medical gaze, rather than on political violence itself. In doing so, these projects couch themselves in a neoliberal discourse of international humanitarian aid by stressing the need for external expertise and individual expression while downplaying local, communally held forms of agency, such as community organizing, solidarity, and resistance, which strengthen the camp’s resilience.
The passages cited above are examples of projects that strategically conform to and reproduce a particular Western, neoliberal understanding of trauma and trauma relief. However, in actually implementing these projects, local Palestinian NGOs are often able to subvert the dominant trauma discourse that regulates the political economy of humanitarian aid funding and carry out activities more in line with community priorities. For example, in an interview with a psycho-social support counselor, the volunteer described her work as ‘creating a strong nation that can resist occupation’. In this view, healing and recovery is a collective task, inseparable from a politics of resistance. Indeed, this relationship between resilience and resistance was even hinted at in some project proposals. Notably, the media project cited earlier admits that ‘healing trauma’ is ‘impossible in the current circumstances’ because the ‘conditions causing it are ongoing’. Instead, the project seeks to ‘embolden the resiliency’ of Palestinian youth and strengthen their ability to ‘imagine alternatives’. This subversion of trauma discourse need not be cynically seen as duplicity on the part of Palestinian community organizations. Rather, such tactics demonstrate the political agency of Palestinian NGOs in negotiating relationships with international donors. These tactics also illustrate how notions of community solidarity, resistance, patience, and faith contribute to collective as well as individual healing and resilience for Palestinian refugee children and youth, as we will see in the following section.

**Collective forms of resilience and healing**

Just as volunteers at community centers in Balata camp see their work in the context of collective solidarity and resistance to occupation, so too do children enact forms of collective resilience through various activities and projects often organized under the heading of ‘trauma relief’. For example, in a photo and video narrative project run in partnership between an international NGO and a community center in Balata camp, many children produced narratives that subverted their subject position as traumatized victims in need of external support. In one group of girls, the participants, although very young during the Second Intifada, could recall witnessing and experiencing the violence of occupation first hand. Many had close family members, friends, and neighbors who had been killed, injured, or imprisoned during the fighting, and most had experienced Israeli incursions and home invasions directly. Likewise, many of the girls came from families struggling with unemployment, financial hardship, and health issues. These issues came up during our photo and video narrative writing workshops. However, rather than emphasizing overcoming individual suffering, most stories situated experiences of violence and hardship within a collective struggle of family, the camp, and the nation. For example, Diana, age 12, wrote,

> I want to talk about my home Balata. I live here and I like this place because my school is here. I live in a good way. But I don’t like when the army invades the camp and scares people. When I was in my school, the army came and I was very scared. I wasn’t thinking about me, but I was thinking for my mother and my brother and sister. But I should be thinking about my country. My country. I love my country and I love my family. I am so proud to be from Balata. I love the children and my friends so much. I love the people. I must help them and think about them in a good way. I must talk to them in a good way. Finally, I salute the martyrs1 and the prisoners. We love you and remember you. I love you, oh Balata.

Here, Diana makes direct reference to the violence of occupation in reference to camp invasions. However, hers is not a narrative of personal suffering or trauma. Instead, she constantly evokes her love of the camp, and her duty toward family and country, which help her to overcome fear. Moreover, rather than singling out children and youth as objects of suffering, they are mentioned as one group among other political groupings in Palestine. Along with the martyrs and the
prisoners, ‘the children’ are among the people of the camp with whom there is a strong bond of love and respect.

While Diana’s narrative points to the collective strength of the camp in overcoming violence, other children took strength in analyzing that violence within a broader political and historical framework. In a mixed research group of boys and girls, participants decided to use digital photography and video not to express their own personal fears or experiences with violence, but instead to explore the histories of political violence embedded in the very fabric of the camp. As Omar, one of the boys working on the project, explained, ‘In this video, we want to show the effects of the occupation and the difficulties it causes, by showing the destroyed houses and the traces of the occupation, like bullet holes and martyr posters’. The video also included an interview with a man whose brother was killed and whose house had been destroyed during the intifada. Omar used the process of photographing and filming the traces of violence of the camp and interviewing survivors of violence, in order to deepen his own understanding and analysis of the occupation. Furthermore, he intended the video to be a ‘gift’ to the camp, as part of a process of memorializing past violence and struggle. In this way, rather than being used as a medium for cathartic self-expression to release personal stress and emotion or to tell a personal survival narrative, photos and videos instead are used to illustrate the political and historical context of violence, while also serving as an interpersonal affective performance of solidarity, commemoration, and healing.

Not all narratives produced by the children in this research directly addressed the occupation or resistance. Others dealt with more personal matters and ambitions of great concern to Palestinian refugee children, including academic success. For example, Aisha, age 13 years, wrote that her story was one of dreams for success:

My story is about success. In school, I hope to have at least a 90% average. I want to earn the love of God and the prophets, and to make my mom happy, and continue my education, to travel and be an architect, engineer or doctor. A life without dreams and love is torture. I love my mother so much because she is everything to me. She raised me on her own. She is the perfect mother. I want to make my mother’s dreams come true and make her happy in her life. I don’t want to make her sad or annoy her.

Like many Palestinian girls her age, Aisha is ambitious and confident, in spite of personal and familial hardship. However, her personal ambitions are almost indistinguishable from an external drive to honor her mother and please God. In further conversation, it became clear that these personal ambitions rooted in religious and familial duty were also inseparable from the politics of resistance to occupation. When asked what her mother’s dream for her was, Aisha replied ‘For me to live a life of freedom and safety’. As to how she could achieve that dream, Aisha did not hesitate to answer: ‘We need to stop the occupation […] my dream is to have a free life like other countries, but how can I have that in this camp, with this occupation?’ In Aisha’s opinion, ending the occupation requires power, specifically ‘The power of the people, the camp and the country, we can achieve this together if God wills it’. Again we see strong references to community solidarity, resistance to occupation, and deep religious faith, all values absent in trauma relief discourse, yet mobilized here as forms of resilience in the context of systematic political violence.

Confirming Habashi’s (2011) observation about the importance of Islam to Palestinian children’s sense of political agency, many children in this research framed their understanding of justice and right within an Islamic worldview, and likewise moored everyday considerations about the treatment of others in an Islamic ethics. In a discussion with a girls and boys research group in Balata, the conversation turned from a litany of complaints about problems in the camp to a dialogue about its strengths. The girls and boys listed various positive aspects of life in the camp, such as respect between people, cooperation, trustworthiness, and closeness. As Ibrahim, one of the boys, put it, ‘For example, if
someone is sick in the hospital here, or someone gets out of jail, everyone goes to see them. His friends, his whole family, everyone’. His friend Mahmoud added ‘That’s Islam’. Likewise, in the discussion with the group of girls mentioned earlier, the conversation turned to the way mothers raise their children in the camp, with one girl, Iman, explaining, ‘They raise them in the Islamic religion, giving them instructions about how to treat other people, to take care of them, this is important in the camp’.

While everyday solidarity is expressed in the language of Islamic ethics, a religious imaginary also informs broader questions of justice and rights. For example, in a mental mapping exercise in a mixed girls and boys research group in which children were asked to draw spaces of importance to them in their everyday lives, one girl decided to draw an abstract map of good and evil (see Marshall, 2013). In the map, she explains,

The ugly colors represent corruption, the people who are strong and wealthy and have power so they violate the rights of the weak and poor. It’s like the Israelis do to us, but also other countries, even the Arabs.

The bright, beautiful colors, however, represent ‘the good people, the weak and poor who are deprived of everything in this world [ad-dunya – the material world]’. Good people are to be found in places like the community center where we conducted this research, ‘where people take care of each other without asking anything in return […] where they take care of kids and disabled people, and when people help their neighbors’.

Discussion

Our case study illustrates that recovery from the effects of political violence cannot be a process that happens in isolation. It happens in the daily process of living in relationship with others within the structures of society. Indeed, there is evidence that people show more favorable outcomes when tragedies are framed as community events rather than individual misfortunes (Steinglass and Gerrity, 1990). Findings regarding healing from political violence across multiple locations illustrate the need for holistic interventions that prioritize communal sources of coping among community groups, religious and political organizations, and government institutions (Edelman et al., 2003; Guribye et al., 2011; Laplante and Holguin, 2006; McIvor and Turner, 1995). Social work practice, with its emphasis on ecosocial context, is especially suited for creating and implementing multilevel interventions that move beyond individual pathology to address the effects of political violence on community and governmental levels.

This contextual approach also brings to the fore questions about accountability and agency (Krieger, 2001). When looking at how political violence in particular affects health, critical evaluations related to the perpetration of violence must be applied to understanding objective facts regarding what actions are taken by whom – rather than constructing political violence as a depoliticized, actor-less condition. Political problems necessitate political solutions (Almedom and Summerfield, 2004); scholar-practitioners have an ethical duty to approach political violence with this in mind (Punamäki, 1990). This research supports other scholarship that has found that a political understanding and interpretation of violence is often a resiliency factor among youth (Barber, 2013; Gilligan, 2009; Sousa et al., 2013). Our case study strengthens the notion that understanding and acting on the political context of suffering may actually foster resilience within political violence, as it builds individual and collective identity, agency, and purpose (Barber, 2008; Berk, 1998; Farwell and Cole, 2001; Quota et al., 1995).

The importance of the political dimension within political violence brings to light another important implication for international social work resulting from this case study: the unique role our profession may play in the promotion of recovery through human rights activism and advocacy.
(Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006). Given the widespread challenges both political violence and neoliberalism pose to democratic governance and social welfare, there is an emergent need for social work to reassert itself ‘as a moral and political practice’ (Chu et al., 2009; Healy, 2008). Our advocacy must not shy away from issues of social justice, or from analyzing the root causes of conflict, even when international agencies may be directly implicated in their perpetuation (Alayarian, 2008; Kleinman, 1999; Pham et al., 2010). In addition to advocacy efforts in the aftermath of political violence that name and hold accountable those parties that commit mass violence, the movement for social work to mobilize for the prevention of war and conflict is central. Examples of this sort of advocacy include the signing up of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2005, 2012) to the Joint Statement on the War in Iraq, and the leadership of the IFSW in the creation of a policy on peace and social justice. Furthermore, the education of funding agencies in the importance of ecosocial frameworks and interventions that both cross sectors and prioritize community ownership demonstrates the importance of a different, but decidedly important, form of advocacy (see, for instance, Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 2007).

Finally, the analyses presented here highlight the importance of prioritizing the regular, consistent forms of individual and collective resilience demonstrated in the face of continual oppression (Barber, 2013). As 12-year-old Wafa demanded to know before the official focus group began,

So, do you want to just know about the bad things in Balata, or the good too? Because it’s important for you to see the bad things about the occupation, about how people suffer, but also how we live together and help each other.

Here, Wafa acknowledges the suffering of Palestinian refugees, often the subject of humanitarian and social science investigation, but is quick to underscore the active processes of survival and care that Palestinian refugees carry out each day.

The case study discussed here illustrates the imperative for an international social work agenda that counters neoliberalism within the field of political violence recovery by moving beyond the depoliticized, individual medical model to emphasize the social and political environments of both trauma and resilience. Analyses presented here are limited due to its focus on one specific geographic site and one specific area of international social work practice; findings point to the importance of continued efforts to analyze the paradigmatic contexts in which international social work operates. As a profession, we are well positioned to counter neoliberalism within post-conflict recovery not only by training, but also by moral and ethical covenant. Furthermore, we are bound to service provision and advocacy that recognize historic and political contexts, are fundamentally transformative, prioritize dignity and self-determination (both individual and collective), and confront policies and practices that perpetuate the disempowerment of communities. The confluence of political violence, international trauma relief, and neoliberalism brings to the fore the importance of employing these traditions within international social work.

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Notes
1. With regard to the use of the term ‘martyr’, we refer readers to Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2003), who explains that the term holds particular meaning in the Palestinian context, where it refers to any and every person who falls, dies or is being killed by the ‘enemy’ in this case, Israel. This person could be a girl killed while playing in her house, a baby in his mother’s lap, a child on his way to school, a stone thrower, a suicide bomber, a woman who died during delivery due to the Israeli occupation’s prohibition to allow her to reach a hospital … (p. 394)

2. For an expanded discussion and examples on how social workers can employ advocacy as part of interventions related to political violence, see the edited volume by Ramon (2008b).

References


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