

Resilience of a Palestinian University Instructor Surviving War: A Grounded Theory Study

صلاة مدرّس جامعي فلسطيني نجا من الحرب: دراسة وفق نظرية التجذير

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Abstract

This qualitative study addressed the devastating impacts of war on civilians by giving voice to a Palestinian university instructor who had a life-threatening experience during the Israeli aggressive war on the Gaza Strip in 2014. The data for the study were gathered from two different sources: (i) a narrative written by the instructor shortly after his recovery and (ii) a semi-structured interview conducted with him three years after this harrowing event. In order to explore and theorize the salient themes in the data, we adopted a three-phase grounded theory methodology. The initial coding phase yielded 30 important codes, which were compared and appraised in the focused coding phase, and three core categories could be identified: *adversities*, *adaptive factors*, and *positive outcomes*. Finally, the theoretical coding phase revealed *resilience* as the best fitting theoretical perspective to interpret the instructor's lived experiences before, during, and after his miraculous survival. We concluded the study with a discussion of its limitations, significance, and implications.

Keywords: War Survivor, University Instructor, Resilience, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Grounded Theory

ملخص

تناولت هذه الدراسة النوعية الآثار المدمرة للحرب على المدنيين من خلال إسماع صوت مدرّس جامعي فلسطيني كان قد عايش تجربة هددت حياته أثناء العدوان الإسرائيلي على قطاع غزة في عام 2014. تم جمع بيانات الدراسة من مصدرين مختلفين: قصة كتبها المدرّس الجامعي بعد فترة وجيزة من شفائه ومقابلة شبه منظمة أجريت معه بعد ثلاث سنوات من هذا الحدث المرّوع. ولاستكشاف وتفسير الموضوعات البارزة في بيانات الدراسة نظرياً، اعتمد الباحثان منهجية نظرية التجذير على ثلاث مراحل. أسفرت مرحلة الترميز الأولي عن 30 رمزاً مهماً؛ وبمقارنتها وتقييمها في مرحلة الترميز المرّكز، تم تحديد ثلاث فئات أساسية: محن وعوامل تكيف ونتائج إيجابية. وأخيراً، أظهرت مرحلة الترميز النظري أن *الصلادة* هي أفضل نظرية تناسب وصف التجارب التي عاشها المدرّس الجامعي قبل وأثناء وبعد نجاته بإعجوبة. واختتم الباحثان الدراسة بمناقشة محدّداتها وأهميتها ونتائجها الضمنية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ناجي من الحرب، مدرّس جامعي، صلادة، الأراضي الفلسطينية المحتلة، نظرية التجذير

Introduction

In conflict and war zones, civilians are exposed to acute traumatic experiences which result in negative impacts on their well-being; they suffer from mental, behavioral, and emotional problems (Batniji, van Ommeren & Saraceno, 2006; Cardozo et al., 2004; Giacaman et al., 2004; Khamis, 2014; Li, 2006; Shehadeh, 2015; Thabet & Thabet, 2015; Tol et al., 2013). On the other hand, research has also revealed resilience and coping strategies among those who faced adverse conditions in armed conflicts (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Atallah, 2017; Buckner et al., 2003; Darychuk & Jackson, 2015; Durden et al., 2007; Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; El-Islam, 2015; Koenig, 2009; Loizos, 2008; Marie et al., 2017; Masten, 2001; Nuwayhid et al., 2011; Perez, 2008; Punamäki et al., 2006; Ryan, 2015; Thabet et al., 2013; 2015; Tol et al., 2013; Vesely et al., 2017).

This qualitative study is intended to address the devastating impacts of war on civilians by giving voice to a Palestinian university instructor (henceforth informant) who experienced a horrifying event during the Israeli aggressive war on the Gaza Strip in 2014. He was severely injured when his house was destroyed by an Israeli military aircraft while he was

inside. Fortunately, one of his children rescued him while he was choking to death. A three-phase grounded theory methodology (initial, focused, and theoretical coding) is adopted in the study, taking into account the contextual relevance of the war survivor's complex experiences and the themes and lessons emerging from them.

Historical Palestine had an area of roughly 10,500 square miles (27,000 square kms). It was bordered by the Mediterranean Sea in the west, by Syria and Jordan in the east, by Lebanon in the north, and by Egypt and the Red Sea in the south.

In 1948, the state of Israel was established on about 78% of historical Palestine. The systematic Zionist settler-colonial process accompanying this event entailed violent, ethnic cleansing operations; two-thirds of the indigenous Palestinian people were forced to flee their homes, turning into refugees in the remaining Palestinian territories (namely, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem) and in different places in the world (Pappe, 2006).

In 1967, Israel continued its colonial project by invading and occupying the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem (referred to as occupied Palestinian territories, oPt), along with parts of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan (Mattar, 2005). The Israeli military occupation of the oPt over the past 50 years has involved humiliating control over different aspects of Palestinians' life, such as access to resources, land, and movement of people. These territories have poor infrastructure, and many Palestinians live in poverty within overpopulated camps (Amnesty International UK et al., 2010).

The Gaza Strip, the site of this study, is one of the most densely populated places in the world. Its area is roughly 365 square kms with 1.8 million inhabitants, the vast majority of whom are refugees from other parts of Palestine (Shehadeh, 2015).

In 2006, Israel imposed an illegal blockade on the Gaza Strip, which has resulted in severer socioeconomic conditions (e.g., food insecurity, high unemployment rates, long intermittent power outage). Palestinians there are denied the right to travel for education, medication, and work,

that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data” (p. 43).

Data Collection and Analysis

Analysis based on grounded theory is not a linear, but a recursive process. As Fraenkel & Wallen (2012) state, “Data are collected and analyzed; a theory is suggested; more data are collected; the theory is revised; then more data are collected; the theory is further developed, clarified, revised; and the process continues” (p. 434). The data for this study were gathered from two different sources in two stages: (i) a narrative written by the instructor shortly after his recovery and (ii) a semi-structured interview conducted with him three years after this harrowing event. These are effective qualitative tools to elicit important aspects of personal lived experiences.

Data Collection Stage One: Narrative

Reborn from the womb of my destroyed house is a narrative written by the informant, also a co-author of this study, as a first-hand account of his experience during Israel’s 2014 aggression on the Gaza Strip. The informant was very close to death when his house was destroyed by an Israeli military aircraft while he was inside. The narrative was published online (El-Nabih, 2014) by Mondoweiss, which is “an independent website devoted to informing readers about developments in Israel/Palestine and related US foreign policy” (Mondoweiss, n.d.).

Narration is a fundamental technique people use for communication. Fisher (1984) defines narrative as “a theory of symbolic actions, words and/or deeds, that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, and interpret them” (p. 2). Narrating a story is not just reporting what happened; it involves recounting an experience that has significance for the narrator. Therefore, in a narrative, the concern is not with semantics (constant meaning), but with pragmatics (contextual meanings).

Data Analysis Stage One

Adopting the guidelines of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), we individually read the narrative several times in order to gain a sense of the

The purpose of the in-depth semi-structured interview was to probe into the informant's personal experiences after his miraculous survival and have a deeper understanding of how he managed to navigate the adverse conditions resulting from the destruction of his house. The ideas gained from the narrative analysis helped us formulate four main open-ended questions to ask in the interview: What main problems have you faced since your house was destroyed in 2014? How have you coped with these problems? What types of support have you received over the past three years? What special achievements have you had since 2014? These questions functioned as prompts to encourage the informant to narrate his experiences and views. Other questions arose spontaneously during the free-flowing conversation.

The informant's research partner conducted the interview, which lasted for about ninety minutes. It was digitally recorded, and later, it was transcribed by both researchers. We went through the transcript and matched it with the digital interview recording. We also looked for proper grammar, punctuation, and spelling. The transcribed, written account obtained from the interview was then coded and analyzed.

It should be highlighted that the informant filled two different roles: one of the researchers and the interviewee. Being interviewed, he had particular insights into what he was expressing in the interview; that is, he was focused on the recall of events and his perspectives on them. On the other hand, as a researcher during the data analysis, the informant was focused on the meanings of what he said and was looking for common themes (which was not what he was thinking about during the interview). In addition, having a research partner with whom he discussed and deliberated all data analyses minimized potential for bias in the analyses. We, therefore, believe that the informant-researcher's contributions to the analyses were particularly apt.

Data Analysis Stage Two

For data analysis of the transcribed interview, we followed the same approach highlighted above, i.e., Charmaz's (2006) three-phase coding of grounded theory. A few more significant initial codes were identified,

My mother's heartbreaking words reflect the ongoing suffering of the Palestinian people for about seven decades. She was recalling what happened to her family in 1948 (she was just nine years old). As she told us before, she was living at Kofakha Village, a few miles away from Gaza. Israeli troops attacked the village, destroyed her family's house, along with other houses, and burned their barn. They only just escaped with their lives and fled *barefooted* to Gaza.

The narrative stated that in the 2014 war, Israel was "hitting in the Gaza Strip very brutally, yet unwittingly; Israel seemed to have no real bank of targets." Although the informant devoted himself to academia and was never "affiliated to any militant or even political group," his four-story house was destroyed by an Israeli F-16 aircraft. In this traumatic event, he was badly injured, and fortunately, as he was approaching death, one of his sons miraculously rescued him. The narrative had a photograph of the destroyed house and another one depicting the moment when the informant arrived at the hospital. The two photographs reflected part of Israel's brutality against civilian Palestinians on one hand and the informant's griefs on the other.

Homelessness was extremely distressing for the informant. He bitterly commented, "Isn't it extremely difficult to lose one's home? ... Didn't the destruction of my house mean the death of many of our cherished dreams?" After the destruction of his house, the informant lived with his family at the house of one of his relatives, which was great stress and strain. After he recovered from his injuries, the family moved to a small apartment the informant rented. Displacement was a daunting challenge to such Palestinian war victims, and the future reconstruction of their house, especially under the Israeli siege on the Gaza Strip, seemed to be an extremely demanding task. "How long and how much will it take me to rebuild my house?" the informant bitterly asked in the narrative. When asked in the interview 'What challenges have you faced since your house was destroyed?' the informant referred to the family's 'broken economy' as the most distressing problem. He deeply sighed:

We lost our beautiful house along with our furniture and possessions. I rented a three-bedroom apartment. Imagine how difficult it was for my

university students. In addition, it increases the burdens of managing households, especially those related to my disabled daughter and old mother (interview data).

In addition to the chronic disease of his disabled daughter, the informant referred to certain serious illnesses he and some of his family members suffered in the past three years. He had two medium surgeries, two of his children had car accidents, and his old mother stayed in hospital for a few days after a stroke. Fortunately, they recovered well. Although such illnesses are normal and could happen to any family, they, within the circumstances at hand, placed undue strain on the informant and his family.

A prevailing mood of anger at Israel's cruelty against Palestinians was reflected throughout the informant's first-hand experience account, and particularly in the questions raised towards the end of the narrative:

- Why did the so-called Captain Saleh lie to me? He said they would not target my house, but it was destroyed while I was inside; I miraculously survived.
- Why has Israel administered a relentless cruel siege on the Gaza Strip over the past eight years? Thousands of ill Palestinians died because they were denied the right to cross borders for treatment, and thousands more could not pursue their education abroad for the same reason.
- Isn't the Israeli occupation of Palestine the only occupation in the world in the 21st century?

Pain, both physical and psychological, was present in different parts of the data. Expressions used in the narrative to describe this nasty feeling include:

I horribly experienced death ...

On Day 48 of the war, I myself had a traumatic experience.

Alas, this is happening again now!"

the informant happily talked about his visit to Saudi Arabia with his mother and wife to perform *hajj* (pilgrimage) as one of the five pillars of Islam:

We applied for this spiritual event in 2008. But because such visits are limited, the three of us were scheduled for 2016. We had been saving for this important occasion. Of course, the financial situation was very bad, especially after the destruction of my house. Yet, the trip was well worth every effort and every dollar. It was just perfect! (Interview data).

Education

The data revealed love of learning as another coping mechanism. In the narrative, the informant expressed his genuine affection for education:

I have devoted myself to academia; I have been a teacher for thirty years (school and university levels). I also have been to different countries, including Britain, the USA, and Canada. I won a British Council Summer School fellowship in Durham (1992), a Fulbright scholarship to get an MA in Linguistics from California State University-Fresno (1995-97), and a PFDP (Palestinian Faculty Development Program) scholarship to get a Ph.D. in Language Development from Boston College (2007-10).

One of the narrative photographs captures the informant's excitement upon completing his doctorate, illuminating the significance of such an academic achievement. The informant also instilled the love of education in his children; four of them went to university and majored in different important fields. In the interview, the informant proudly said that the four children already finished their undergraduate programs, and three of them were doggedly pursuing their studies towards a Master's degree. In addition, another son was majoring in Multimedia.

Although the informant, as noted above, did not realize his ambition to get promoted to associate professorship so far, he expressed pride in other academic achievements in the interview:

The Department of English, where I've been working, launched an MA program in Linguistics and Translation in 2015. It's the first MA program in these two fields in the Gaza Strip. The program greatly benefits

I have spared no effort to have my children well brought up and well educated. Four of my children went to university, majoring in IT, Management, Law, and Journalism. In preparation for their marriage, I added two floors to my house last year.

The informant was very much aware of the hard conditions he and his big family had in the apartment he rented after the destruction of his house. However, he was very confident about the future. As he believed, “Sacrificing comfort will be rewarded” (Interview data).

The informant’s sacrifice and responsibility for his children was evident in his support of three of his sons towards their marriage. Through savings and loans from relatives and friends, the dream came true. In 2015, the eldest one got married in another rented apartment, and in 2016, the other two got married in one-bedroom apartments built temporarily in place of the destroyed house. In the interview, the informant happily recounted, “The weddings were really fantastic. More fantastically, my family has recently further extended. I’ve had three cute grandchildren!”

Similarly, the informant’s children had unique love towards him. This was lucidly illustrated as the narrative reached its powerful climax. The informant’s house was destroyed while he was inside; he thought he would surely die. Three of his sons were injured by flying debris in the explosion. However, while bleeding themselves, they bravely rescued their father. Immediately after the house destruction, Talal went in without hesitation despite the serious risk to search for his father, and when he found him, he quickly supported him to move out of the place. The narrative read:

[Talal] cried very excitedly, “Dad’s still alive! Dad’s still alive!” My other two sons and some neighbors hurried to help; I was carried up the street. On the way, I felt my sons kissing me; they were overjoyed that I was rescued.

Mother, Father, and Wife

The data also revealed another emotion-focused coping strategy represented by the genuine relationship between the informant and his mother, wife, and late father. In several parts of the narrative, the informant

Joy

Despite the overall bleak picture painted in the narrative, there were still moments of happiness. Having a sense of joy seemed to be one of the informant's coping mechanisms. Searching the rubble for his father, Talal was thrilled to find out that he was still alive. While quickly supporting him to move out, Talal cried very excitedly, "Dad's still alive! Dad's still alive!" As the three sons were carrying their injured father up the street, they were kissing him; they were overjoyed with his miraculous rescue.

The narrative also brought back the fun the family had during the party held to celebrate the 75th birthday of the informant's mother. In the interview, the informant also recalled the positive emotions his family shared when his wounds and burns healed a few weeks after the house destruction. He recounted:

I still vividly remember what my son Ismail (7 years old at that time) said to me after I recovered. With tearful eyes, he humorously said, 'Dad, you've become more handsome than before the bombing!' Young Ismail's words convey significant meanings of innocence and hope for a better future.

Community Support

After his house was destroyed, the informant received physical, emotional, and financial community support, which significantly contributed to his successful adaptation to the severe impacts of the harrowing event. As soon as the informant was rescued by one of his sons, some of his neighbors hurried to provide help in spite of the serious risk. They, along with the three sons, carried the informant up the street, where another neighbor offered him some water and a jallabia (a piece of clothing). The informant also appreciated the great effort made by the medical team who cared for him before and after his arrival at the hospital. As the narrative read:

An ambulance had already been called for, and within a few minutes it arrived. On the way to hospital, I was given some first aid. I was treated

for my wounds and burns at Shifa Hospital (central hospital in Gaza) and for the injury in my eyes at the Eye Hospital.

When the informant arrived at the hospital, some of his close friends and relatives were immediately on the scene. In the interview, he recounted, “They were making a very big risk. Indeed, their presence at this tragic moment meant a lot to me. I’m grateful to every one of them!”

After the informant was discharged from hospital, he and his family stayed for about two months at his father-in-law’s house before they moved to a rented apartment. The informant treasured this particular memory, “My parents-in-law were very generous, kind, and helpful. I *do* value their warm hospitality at this critical time (Interview data).

Moreover, the informant referred to other sources of emotional support, including personal visits, calls, emails, and social media communication. He said:

While I was staying at my father-in-law’s place and later in my rented apartment, I received overwhelming support from neighbors, relatives, friends, and acquaintances. They were very concerned about my well-being. Many visited or called me. Others sent email messages. In addition, many tweets and Facebook posts reported the horrible bombing. They expressed anger at what happened to me and excitement at my survival, wishing me a quick recovery (Interview data).

The informant pointed to one special supportive email message he received from one of his American professors. At first, he learned that the informant had been killed, so he decided to write a condolence message to the informant’s children. During the interview, the informant quickly searched his email inbox and started reading part of the message:

As I am sure you know, we eventually received the worst possible news about you. It was with perverse joy that I spread the update far and wide that "he is only seriously injured." But it was joy, because it meant we hadn't lost you.

After receiving the terrible news, I began to compose a letter to your children in my head. I wanted to write to them and tell them of your time

in Boston. Instead, I can tell it to you. The best ways to describe you as a scholar are "intense" and "driven." We saw you right from the start take a serious approach to your studies. It was impressive to see. But you also impressed us as doggedly determined to finish your degree, to support and return to your family and your homeland, and to make contributions that mattered (Message from informant's professor, interview data).

At the financial level, the informant highly valued the support provided through the Palestinian Ministry of Housing. This support significantly contributed to the partial reconstruction of his destroyed house. He and his family recently returned to it. Filled with hope for putting an end to their three-year experience of untold misery, he commented:

The Palestinian Ministry of Housing has been working very hard towards reconstructing the houses that were destroyed in the war. Israel targeted so many houses. My house has recently been partially reconstructed. This is a substantial improvement in our conditions. A few weeks ago, we left the rented apartment and moved back to our own house. *Alhamdulillah!* (Interview data.)

Core Category 3: Positive Outcomes

As noted above, the informant had a variety of resources that contributed to his successful adaptation in the face of adversities. Probing more deeply into his lived experiences, we found remarkable positive outcomes. The financial support through the Palestinian Ministry of Housing contributed to partially reconstructing the informant's destroyed house. Socially, three of his sons got married, making the family more extended. Religiously, the informant accompanied his mother and wife on a pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia. Academically, the informant contributed to the success of the new MA program in his university, and his children successfully maintained their academic performance.

Theoretical Perspective Grounded

Following grounded theory methodology, we collected the data without any preconceived theoretical perspectives about the subject under

the 2014 war on the Gaza Strip, highlighting some inhumane acts that Israel inflicted on civilian Palestinians. As illustrated above, the severe injuries the informant had and the devastating homelessness and displacement experience he and his family went through had very traumatic consequences.

The findings of this study also dovetail with literature on civilians' resilience in war-affected zones; survivors who face collective trauma and oppression may develop adaptive responses that act as a buffer against mental health disorders. Despite adversities, the informant managed to lead a relatively normal life. His most important resilience resources shared with previous studies include *religious faith* (Bonanno et al., 2002; Darychuk & Jackson, 2015; Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; El-Islam, 2015; Koenig, 2009; Marie et al., 2017; Perez, 2008; Thabet et al., 2013; 2015), *family bond and responsibility for children* (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Atallah, 2017; Buckner et al., 2003; Darychuk & Jackson, 2015; Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Loizos, 2008; Punamäki et al., 2006); Vesely et al., 2017), *community support* (Arafat & Boothby 2003; Durden et al., 2007; Haj -Yahia, 2007; Kira et al., 2014; Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008), and *optimism* (Bonanno, 2004; Durakovic-Belko et al., 2003; Gregory & Prana 2013; Riolli et al., 2002).

Most importantly, linked to exiting related research, the findings of the current study revealed that some resilient civilians in armed conflicts appear to have the ability not only to cope with significant adversity but also to flourish (Arafat & Musleh, 2006; Bonanno, 2004; Hundt et al., 2004). As a university instructor, the informant of this study survived severe hardships; in addition, he showed strong motivation to thrive and spared no effort to realize high social, religious, and academic aspirations. As quoted earlier, one of his American professors described him as “doggedly determined to finish [his] degree, to support and return to [his] family and [his] homeland, and to make contributions that mattered.”

Limitations of the Study

We were mindful of the limitations of the study. First, the whole study was about the lived experiences of a single individual, a Palestinian

inhabitants are collectively oppressed and traumatized; however, it is argued that different individuals may use different personal and environmental resources to cope with stressful situations (Harvey, 2007). Since there is no detailed empirical research that has investigated university instructors' life-threatening experiences in armed conflicts, this qualitative study seeks to fill a gap in the literature by exploring a Palestinian university instructor's experiences before, during, and after his miraculous survival. Third, the findings of the study have their implications presented in the next section.

Implications of the Study

The present study has certain important implications. The analytic account of the Palestinian university instructor's first-hand experiences would deepen understanding of the diverse impacts that war can have on civilian survivors and how they rebuild their lives, presenting an opportunity to add to resilience literature. In line with this implication, resilience in intellectual elites, especially from a longitudinal perspective, is likely to be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Moreover, the findings of the study may be relevant to mental health and disaster relief. Gaining a deeper insight into resilience and its factors may be useful in empowering those who go through adverse conditions.

Finally, a significant legal implication of the study can be drawn out from a question raised at the end of the narrative, "Can't the international community, especially the American government, make reasonable efforts towards putting an end to the Palestinian suffering?" It is imperative that Israel be held accountable for the crimes it has committed against the Palestinian people over the past seven decades and be compelled to respect human rights laws and United Nations' resolutions. That the international community bears this responsibility will ensure a just and permanent solution to the chronic conflict and "create stability and peace for all nations in the region" (Narrative data).

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