

Social suffering and the psychological impact of structural violence and economic oppression in an ongoing conflict setting: The Gaza Strip

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Abstract

Structural violence and economic oppression (e.g. control over resources, politically engineered poverty and unemployment) are common features of warfare, yet there is a lack of research exploring the impact this has on civilian wellbeing in conflict-affected areas. This study, embedded within a human rights and community liberation psychology framework, aims to address this need by studying young Palestinian university graduates living under military blockade and occupation in the Gaza Strip. Semi-structured interviews were conducted. Thematic analysis indicated that economic and political domains adversely affected multiple aspects of civilian life and wellbeing. The findings revealed the deleterious effects of structural violence and economic oppression which created: human insecurity; poor psychological wellbeing and quality of life; existential, psychological and social suffering; humiliation; injuries to dignity; multiple losses; and led to life being experienced as 'on hold'. Local expressions and idioms to express distress were identified. The findings contributed to unique insights regarding how continual, systemic, and structural oppression can be potentially more psychologically detrimental than

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specific incidents of conflict and violence. The implications and the relevance of the findings to mental health and disaster relief are considered. Interventions providing human security and economic security should be prioritised.

KEYWORDS

economic oppression, occupied Palestinian territories, political conflict, psychosocial wellbeing, structural violence

1 | INTRODUCTION

The occupied Palestinian territories (oPt; Gaza Strip, West Bank and East Jerusalem) have been under an Israeli military occupation for over five decades which involves control over land, movement of people, access to resources (e.g. water, food) and employment (Amnesty International, 2018; Amnesty International UK et al., 2010). The Gaza Strip has been under an economic embargo (United Nations, 2010) and, contrary to international law, an illegal Israeli military blockade (sea, land and air) since 2007 (Amnesty International, 2018). Palestinians have prohibited freedom of movement to travel, work, study and visit family members outside of the Gaza Strip, with rare exceptions (B'Tselem, 2017; Gisha, 2018; United Nations, 2015). The provision of electricity is, on average, 2 to 4 hr per day (Amnesty International, 2018; Oxfam, 2019). According to the United Nations, Gaza will become uninhabitable by 2020 due to rapidly deteriorating living conditions (United Nations Country Team in the oPt, 2012).

In 2002, before the blockade, when the economy was functioning relatively normally, only 10% of Gazans were dependent on aid (United Nations Relief & Works Agency [UNRWA], 2012). In 2018, 11 years after the blockade was first enforced, 80% of Gazans were dependent on aid (Oxfam, 2019; UNRWA, 2018a). The population are struggling to survive (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2010) because of the blockade and the severe restrictions which are imposed on the movement of goods and people entering and exiting Gaza. This has resulted in widespread food insecurity, severe poverty and high levels of aid dependency and unemployment (Amnesty International, 2016; UNRWA, 2018b); 62% of the population is food insecure (OCHA oPt, 2020) and 53% live in poverty, despite humanitarian assistance (OCHA oPt, 2018b). As a result of this, situationally induced malnourishment has also been found in the Gaza Strip (Gilbert, 2014).

Historically, Gaza had not been a poor region; however, the blockade 'has devastated Gaza's economy' (Oxfam, 2019, para. 2) and decades of conflict and occupation have shattered Gaza's industries (Oxfam, 2019). The blockade has also increased unemployment because Palestinians from Gaza cannot look for work outside the Gaza Strip, and the opportunities to earn a livelihood inside the Gaza Strip are limited (Oxfam, 2019; UNRWA, 2018b, 2018c) due to restricted access to raw materials (Amnesty International UK et al., 2010; Oxfam, 2019; UNRWA, 2018b), bans on exports (Oxfam, 2019; UNRWA, 2018b), poor infrastructure (United Nations Country Team in oPt, 2011; United Nations Development Fund, 2017; UNRWA, 2018a), and Israeli-imposed control over access to agricultural land and fishing waters (Amnesty International UK et al., 2010; OCHA oPt, 2011; Oxfam, 2019; UNRWA, 2016). In 2000, before the blockade, youth unemployment was 28% (UNRWA, 2015), whereas in 2018, 11 years after the blockade had been first enforced, youth unemployment had risen to 70% (OCHA oPt, 2018a). Gaza has one of the highest levels of unemployment in the world (International Labour Office, 2018; UNRWA, 2015, 2018c). The next section details the potential psychological impacts of this context.

1.1 | The psychological impact of living under military occupation and military blockade in the oPt

The majority of the research conducted in the oPt has focused on the impact of direct acute violence in the form of military attacks (e.g. airstrikes, shelling) and physical violence from military personnel and settlers. During political conflicts resources and land are often tightly controlled and are used as a weapon of war (e.g. McNeely et al., 2014). Despite economic oppression being a common weapon of war (e.g. through the destruction and control over resources and control over the movement of people and goods), there is a paucity of research exploring the psychological impact of structural violence, economic oppression, the military blockade, control over resources and freedom of movement of people, or the poverty and restricted livelihood opportunities stemming from political conflict, particularly in the oPt. There have been calls for psychologists to examine the systems that maintain poverty and social injustice in low income countries (Evans, Rosen, & Nelson, 2014; Martín-Baró, 1994). This study aims to explore the impact of structural violence in the form of economic oppression (e.g. imposed situational poverty and restricted livelihood opportunities) on civilians living under military occupation and blockade in the Gaza Strip.

In the last decade, research has increasingly focused on the impact of repressive Israeli military policies and practices on the wellbeing of Palestinians from a public health perspective, which is presented below. Public health is considered a subdiscipline of community psychology (Orford, 2008). However, the public health research on Palestinians has been primarily carried out in the West Bank. In stark contrast, such research is noticeably lacking in the Gaza Strip (e.g. Makkawi, 2014). This may well reflect the difficulties for researchers in accessing the population in Gaza to carry out research, due to the military blockade and the closure of borders, which create difficulties in entering and exiting Gaza.

Quality of life was found to be very low in the oPt, with physical, psychological and environmental domains being among the lowest of any population in the world (Mataria et al., 2009; Ziadni et al., 2011). Barber et al. (2014) found that living under an occupation governs and impedes multiple aspects of civilian life including family, employment, psychological wellbeing, economic conditions, education and identity, because according to Barber et al. (2014), to be occupied means to be politically controlled. The study found that life under occupation was marked by violations of justice and equality and that it was rare to find references to mental health that did not also cite the political context. The study also found that participants experienced psychological tension and stress from life under occupation – they felt trapped and controlled by the occupation. They lived in fear, with ongoing safety concerns regarding fears of being arrested and subjected to raids, shelling and shootings. Barber et al.'s study also revealed a marked absence of safety, stability and security due to the occupation, with some participants describing feeling defenceless. In Gaza, some participants described violations of dignity (e.g. 'not living like humans') and a lack of fulfilment.

In a study using a representative sample of Palestinians in the oPt, McNeely et al. (2014) found that human insecurity (feelings of fear for the safety of one's home, family and self) and resource inadequacy (inadequacy of housing, clothing, household amenities, food, recreation and transportation) were linked to feelings of depression, trauma-related stress and limited functioning of wellbeing. Human insecurity strongly predicted both physical and emotional suffering. Human insecurity and resource inadequacy were associated with unemployment or underemployment. Direct exposure to political violence was related only to trauma-related stress. These findings support the increasing recognition that human insecurity and chronic economic constraints in the oPt threaten wellbeing, perhaps more so than direct exposure to violence.

Evidence from recent research (Barber et al., 2014; Barber, McNeely, Allen et al., 2016; Barber, McNeely, El Sarraj et al., 2016) has identified a unique existential form of mental suffering among Palestinians in the oPt, linked to oppressive political and economic conditions, which included feeling that one's spirit, morale, life and/or future was broken or destroyed; emotional and psychological exhaustion; and feeling crushed, shaken up and tired. These aspects of suffering were described in reference to the self or spirit, morale and hopes and

ambitions for the future. Suffering in all of the above aspects was found to be more commonly experienced and distinct from feelings of depression and trauma-related stress. Trauma-related stress and feelings of depression were also found.

The closure and ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip was found to create distress, human insecurity, stress, and suffering for Palestinians and reduced their quality of life because it negatively impacts on their capacity to meet basic and crucial needs (e.g. clean water, continuous electrical supply), and health, economic, social and educational needs (e.g. Abu-Rmeileh et al., 2012; Bseiso & Thabet, 2017; Joma'a & Thabet, 2015; Thabet & Thabet, 2015). The blockade created feelings of being trapped and incarcerated, with 88% of Palestinian participants reporting feelings of living in a 'big prison' (Thabet & Thabet, 2015, p. 1). The next section reviews work conducted specifically on the effects of poverty and unemployment including within the Palestinian context.

1.2 | The psychological impact of poverty and unemployment

Modern warfare is increasingly targeting civilian populations for economic, strategic and political purposes, and is frequently occurring in contexts of extreme poverty (Lykes & Coquillon, 2009). Employment is a human right as set out in Article 23 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, n.d.). Research has found that unemployment and poverty in conflict-affected areas are major stressors that negatively affect the mental health and wellbeing of conflict-affected people (Barber, 2013; Boothby, Crawford, & Mamade, 2009; Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Kagee, 2004; Salih & Galappatti, 2006; Save the Children, 2017; Schafer, Masoud, & Sammour, 2014; Somasundaram & Sivayokan, 2013). Some research studies have suggested that unemployment and the poverty stemming from unemployment were found to cause greater distress than war experiences and other traumas for conflict-affected people (Boothby et al., 2009; Kagee, 2004). In a study with 458 civilians in Syria during the war, Save the Children (2017) found that the increasing poverty and the difficulties in feeding and caring for the family created stress for the majority of parents; 72% cited the absence of jobs and money as their primary worry.

There is ample empirical evidence including several meta-analyses which indicate that unemployment and poverty creates greater psychological distress, poorer wellbeing and poorer mental health in both high-income countries and low and middle-income countries (LMICs), and that re-employment was found to be associated with improved wellbeing and reduced distress (e.g. Howell & Howell, 2008; Karsten & Moser, 2009; Lund et al., 2010; McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005; Murphy & Athanasou, 1999; Patel & Kleinman, 2003). Porter and Haslam (2005) carried out a meta-analysis of 56 research studies on mental health among refugee people (including stateless, asylum seeking and internally displaced people) using a worldwide study sample of 67,294 participants. The findings of the meta-analysis indicated that, among refugee people, greater material welfare was associated with relatively better mental health, and restricted economic opportunities was associated with poorer mental health. It showed that there is a linear relationship between economic opportunity and improved mental health. These findings are further supported by a systemic review of the psychological health of conflict-affected populations in LMICs, which showed that low income and assets, and unemployment, were associated with poorer mental health and psychological wellbeing (Roberts & Browne, 2011).

Although there is a lack of research specifically exploring the impact of poverty and unemployment in Gaza, a number of studies in the oPt have noted a relationship between low income and poorer mental health and wellbeing, greater distress and stress and lower quality of life (Bseiso & Thabet, 2017; Khamis, 2008, 2013; Mataria et al., 2009; Thabet & Thabet, 2015). Research carried out pre-blockade found that young Palestinians in Gaza experienced life in the refugee camps as difficult and unbearable due to poverty, unemployment, difficult living conditions and their total dependency on United Nations donations (Thabet & Abuteya, 2005). The uncertainty of what their future would be like created stress. Chatty (2010) found that Palestinian refugee youths had a life of poverty from which there was no escape because it was politically engineered.

Research carried out in the oPt shows that those with the fewest resources are more likely to be insecure and distressed, and that suffering is associated with greater insecurity (Ziadni et al., 2011). Loss of psychosocial and material resources was associated with higher levels of distress in the oPt (Hobfoll, Mancini, Hall, Canetti, & Bonanno, 2011). Research by the World Bank (2011) has revealed that Palestinians in the oPt conceptualise poverty as stemming from a lack of productive work and unemployment caused by the Israeli occupation and blockade. Hamad and Pavanello's (2012) research revealed that for Palestinians in Gaza, poverty is linked to a loss of dignity, humiliation, frustration and desperation. In the West Bank, Kira, Alawneh, Aboumediene, Lewandowski, and Laddis (2014) found that poverty intersected with political oppression and had significant negative effects on mental and physical health. Given this context and the aims of this study, the theoretical framework taken and the underlying rationale for this are now detailed.

1.3 | Community liberation psychology – theoretical framework and praxis

The principles of community psychology involve taking a critical and contextualised approach to understanding individuals within their social context, including the macro social systems that affect their lives and wellbeing (Kagan, Burton, Duckett, Lawthom, & Siddiquee, 2011). This study utilises this overarching paradigm and considers the daily lived experience of the participants as described by them in relation to the impact of living in the oPt on their wellbeing. Mental health and wellbeing are considered to be intimately connected to social systems, power and oppression (Kagan et al., 2011); hence community psychology endeavours to move away from individualised notions of distress that tend to focus on intrapsychic processes, and aims to examine the ways in which people are affected by social forces, power and oppression, and to use this understanding to help improve wellbeing (Kagan et al., 2011; Orford, 2008; Tribe, 2004). This study looks at the effects of such situational factors and is concerned specifically with looking at how structural violence and economic oppression affect civilian wellbeing in the oPt, and is therefore informed and consistent with this theoretical position.

Liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1994) formed an additional element of the theoretical framework, this focusses on the socio-political context and people and groups who are excluded, oppressed, exploited or treated unjustly by individuals or systems, and it attempts to understand and use their position and perspective to critique and interrogate widely accepted psychological theories and practice. It works to offer psychological theories and practices which promote justice, meet the needs of everyone and contribute to a fairer society. Rather than focussing exclusively on individuals it looks at structural inequalities and contextual factors and foregrounds issues of social justice. The socio-political context of the participants formed an integral part of this study. Liberation psychology also formed part of our theoretical underpinnings and framework. The study was additionally informed by the work of Montero, Sonn, and Burton (2017) who have written on the theoretical and practical synergy between elements of community psychology and liberation psychology, so in summary a community liberation psychology was the theoretical framework for this study.

Community psychologies also endorse policy change, prevention, intervention and social action to challenge the status quo and empower marginalised and oppressed communities. It is recognised that the reduction of distress and difficulties and the promotion of wellbeing requires a change in the economic, environmental, political and social issues that give rise to such problems (Orford, 2008). This study documented the experiences of seven professional university graduates who were living in politically imposed poverty and with severely restricted employability opportunities. Researching these experiences and effects is in line with the theoretical position selected. Promoting social justice, freedom and emancipation and supporting the interests of the oppressed and poor, as well as exposing oppression and endeavouring to eliminate it, are core values in community psychology (Orford, 2008). This perspective also moulded the theoretical approach and research design taken in the study.

Relevant to this study are also the concepts of conscientisation (Freire, 1972, 1998) and epistemic psychopolitical validity (Prilleltensky, 2008), which informed the research. Prilleltensky's (2008) concept of

epistemic psychopolitical validity suggests that research should make clear the role of power in the psychology and politics of liberation, wellness and oppression. Conscientisation refers to reflecting, understanding, and having critical awareness and critical consciousness of how oppression operates and the impact of oppression (Freire, 1972, 1998).

It is important to critique the view sometimes perpetuated that people who are marginalised by context or systems are without voice, autonomy or agency. Researchers can perpetuate inequalities of power by not adequately questioning or deconstructing issues of privilege, hierarchies of power (Lane & Tribe, 2010; Maldonado-Torres, 2017), or claims of legitimacy, authority and autonomy. This applies to all aspects of psychology, including epistemic power and legitimacy attributed within many aspects of research. Maldonado-Torres (2017) draws specific attention to issues relating to colonialism and the importance of decoloniality while drawing on the paradigm shifting work of Frantz Fanon. Bell (2020) has argued that psychology is uniquely placed to understand colonialism and how to decolonalise and to consider issues of power, bystanding and social injustice. Similarly, Lane and Tribe (2010) discuss the issue of power and pseudo consultation/power, or when hierarchies of power are merely replicated. As the researchers live outside of the oPt, this brings a number of issues to bear which required consideration, reflection and discussion. Researchers are rarely an entirely neutral presence. As part of critical community psychology informed research, it is important to locate the researcher's positions in the knowledge production of the research process. The first author is Middle Eastern (Levant region), with family links to historic Palestine and the oPt, and resides in the United Kingdom (UK). The second author resides in the UK. Both authors practice community psychology, have an interest in human rights and civilian wellbeing, and have worked extensively with conflict-affected populations, which informed their interest in this study.

Participants may choose to share with the researcher their experiences (e.g. suffering, oppression) that may reflect a social reality that needs to be named, understood and exposed (Orford, 2008; Willig, 2012), which is in line with what community psychologies (Kagan et al., 2011; Orford, 2008) and liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1994; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010) advocate. This study aimed to understand and adopt the perspective of the oppressed in keeping with both traditions (e.g. Kagan & Burton, 2015). The authors attempted to reflect the human rights position that underpins their work within this study.

This study utilises the epistemological position of critical realism. In summary, critical realism takes the position that the world can be better understood if the underlying and often unseen structures which may not be observable are understood and taken into account (Bhaskar, 1975). A critical realist stance also requires the researcher to consider how the topic of study is understood contextually and in addition to the factors already discussed. The researchers attempted to foreground these unseen and contextual factors and structures (in this context the wider socio-political contextual factors) as detailed earlier in this section. As this study includes the use of two languages, it was also important to consider local idioms of distress as these are likely to inform the participants' descriptions and understanding of their wellbeing and are therefore central to this study.

1.4 | Local expressions and idioms of distress in the oPt

Giacaman et al. (2011) utilise an ease to disease continuum ranging from mental wellbeing to mental disease, which is linked to indicators of quality of life and social wellbeing. The majority of Palestinians in the West Bank are considered to oscillate in the grey areas between ease and disease, as well as back and forth on an ease to disease continuum owing to distress, trauma and suffering from chronic warlike conditions. Local idioms and expressions detail a holistic state of health which incorporates both physical and mental aspects, and convey variations of compromised wellbeing. These expressions include: broken or achy (mkasswar); sick (marid); wilted (dablan); not happy (mish mabsut); low energy (habet); not able (mish qader); down (kayes); no energy to complete daily activities (ma fish mrueh); tired (ta'ban); and ill (ayyan).

Afana, Pedersen, Ronsbo, and Kirmayer (2010) found that various idioms of distress used by Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip were linked to their social context: *assabiah* referred to nervousness, anxious feelings, or jitteriness; *qalaq* described as being anxious or apprehensive - a state of fear of the future and of the unknown; *azma nafsiah* described as a psychological crisis because of the continuous daily environmental stressors experienced; *azamat* (psychological crises); *dagt nafsi* referred to psychological pressure in relation to repetitive and cumulative daily stressors experienced as overwhelming and hindering day-to-day activities; *sarih al fiker* (absent minded), whereby there is no psychological comfort; *araq* refers to interruptions in or inability to sleep, also used to describe the experience of thinking about their unknown and insecure future; and *kaufa* could be associated with various physical symptoms such as fever, headache and general fatigue. In a later study in the Gaza Strip with Palestinians, Afana and colleagues (Afana, Tremblay, Ghannam, Ronsbo, & Veronese, 2018) found further idioms and expressions of distress, which included: fear (*khoufa*); sadness (*hazeen*); irritability (*arak nafsi*); and psychological persecution (*idehad nafsi*).

2 | METHODOLOGY

2.1 | Sample

The sample consisted of seven Palestinian Muslim civilian professional university graduates (four male and three female participants), aged 24–39, living in the Gaza Strip. Participants had taken part in a youth empowerment programme run by a Gazan non-governmental organisation (NGO). Participants were recruited by the NGO. To protect the anonymity of the participants, the name of the NGO will not be disclosed. Participants have lived their entire life under military occupation. At the point of interview, participants had lived under the military blockade for over 7 years, with restricted freedom of movement, a lack of crucial civilian infrastructure and limited post-war reconstruction.

2.2 | Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in April and May 2015, 8 months after the 2014 war ended. Interviews were conducted over the internet in Arabic, with a bilingual native Palestinian interpreter, and were audio-recorded. The interpreter and the researcher were based in the UK because Gaza's borders were closed, therefore it was not possible to travel to Gaza to conduct the interviews face-to-face; the participants were based in the Gaza Strip. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in Arabic, and then translated into English.

2.3 | Data analysis

A thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines was conducted on the English translations of the interviews. The thematic analysis was conducted by the first author. The analysis was reviewed by the second author and an independent psychologist. The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis, listed below.

Phase one: familiarisation with the data – each transcript was read actively, analytically and critically a number of times line by line, notes were made for items of interest and possible themes.

Phase two: generating initial codes – the entire data set was systematically coded on a line-by-line basis, whereby features of interest within the data were identified. Coding was conducted at both levels, semantic and interpretative. The identified coding categories were organised into potential themes, both within the transcript

and across the entire data set using detailed diagrams. Referencing back to the original coded data extracts was conducted to ensure the codes represented what was said.

Phase three: searching for themes – the coded data extracts were organised into provisional broader themes, initially on the computer, followed by manually organising cut out printed data extracts. This was followed by generating an initial thematic map. When developing distinct themes, there was a focus on the relationship between themes, between different levels of themes, and between codes.

Phase four: reviewing potential themes – within each theme, extracts were reread and the themes were reviewed to ensure they were distinct. This resulted in some sub-themes and themes being merged and further refinement and analysis. The dataset was reread to ensure the validity of the proposed themes and whether they captured the data within the transcripts. In doing so, further themes were merged and collapsed into other themes. Various sub-themes were merged and collapsed, and renamed, to better represent the data.

Phase five: defining and naming themes – when defining and naming themes and sub-themes, the aspects of the data that each theme and subtheme captured were identified, and there was an emphasis on capturing the essence of what the theme and subtheme was about.

Phase six: writing the report – the data is coherently summarised in the analysis section to reflect the story of the data being told; numerous data extracts are offered to enable the reader to evaluate whether the theme is representative of the data.

2.4 | Ethics

The University of East London granted ethical approval as did the NGO. Pseudonyms are used in this study.

3 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the impact of structural violence in the form of economic oppression (e.g. politically engineered poverty and unemployment) on civilians living under military occupation and blockade in the Gaza Strip. Community liberation psychology formed part of the theoretical underpinnings of this study. This aims to de-centre dominant narratives that are often thought to be the hegemonic ideological ontological basis of all research, and instead work to centre and privilege the voices of those people which often go unheard or un-listened to and to share their narrative(s). The findings revealed the psychological and social suffering of politically imposed poverty and severely restricted employability opportunities. Three themes were identified: (a) 'the misery of economic oppression – existential suffering'; (b) 'economic oppression, humiliation and injuries to dignity'; and (c) 'economic oppression and lack of future – life on hold'.

The following section explores the psychology of economic oppression under occupation and blockade, and how structural violence and military control and restrictions impact on civilian survival and their psychological wellbeing.

3.1 | Psychological and social suffering of economic oppression

3.1.1 | The misery of economic oppression – existential suffering

Part of the praxis of liberation psychology is exposing and making visible the violence and its perpetrators (Burton & Ordóñez, 2015; Martín-Baró, 1994). As mentioned earlier, the Gaza Strip is under an economic embargo (United Nations, 2010) and an illegal Israeli military blockade (Amnesty International, 2018), which has led to

widespread and severe poverty and unemployment (Amnesty International, 2016; UNRWA, 2018b). Economic insecurity and poverty and the daily chronic suffering and hardship this created featured heavily in the interviews. All participants mentioned the severe lack of job opportunities, which created a challenging environment for people to live with and created human insecurity; as highlighted by Hiba below, participants stressed that a job and means to earn an income were essential for surviving in Gaza.

I have to struggle to survive because if I didn't work, I wouldn't be able to live. Money and work help us live.
(Hiba, F/29)

Consistent with United Nations (OCHA, 2010) reports, all participants described life as challenging to live, or a struggle to survive (okafih) whereby participants described basic and crucial needs as absent, or an ongoing struggle to meet (Abu-Rmeileh et al., 2012; United Nations Country Team in the oPt, 2012, 2017). They described the deleterious effects of structural violence on meeting their basic and crucial needs, by highlighting the control over the freedom of movement of people in the form of border closures, and access to resources (e.g. electricity) and employment (Abu-Rmeileh et al., 2012; Amnesty International, 2018; United Nations Country Team in the oPt, 2017), as highlighted below:

...There's nothing of our needs available here in Gaza, borders are closed. The simplest thing which is electricity is not available; there's no work. Gaza is closed. A lot of our needs aren't available.
(Zahra, F/28)

Participants described limited opportunities to work their way out of poverty, and being unable to leave Gaza to seek work elsewhere because the borders were closed, which led to participants suffering, struggling to survive and living insecurely. Civilians' being trapped in poverty and being denied opportunities to improve their impoverished living conditions is another feature of warfare, because it imposes control over people's lives and creates chronic daily suffering that they cannot escape, as illustrated in this study. As outlined below by Waleed, participants described how they felt oppressed (maqhome), unhappy, that they do not feel relaxed, safe or stable, and they lack the psychological comfort (al raaha al nafsiah mesh mawjudah) because in reality they can never have full control and autonomy over their lives and future, as they live under a military blockade and occupation. They live under the occupier's (Israel's) power which, through oppressive Israeli military policies and practices, controls what is possible, as reflected by the lack of choice the participants have over their lives.

...We don't think about being destroyed or something like this. However, we are ambitious to live a better life with all its details; our situation forces us to adapt with it even when we are internally unsatisfied. Internally we don't feel happy although we look like normal people who live a normal life but we don't feel relaxed, safe or stable. We lack the psychological comfort but we're forced to live. The obligation point is really hard, you feel oppressed and you feel more oppressed when you're forced to work as a cleaner, for example.

(Waleed, M/27)

There were references to life under blockade as living in a 'big prison' (al sijen al wasia'a) (Bseiso & Thabet, 2017; Joma'a & Thabet, 2015), reflecting their reality that they are not free to leave the Gaza Strip, as well as symbolising feelings of punishment and entrapment. Under international law the military blockade is considered as 'collective punishment' (Amnesty International, 2018, p. 207).

Participants linked their psychological wellbeing and distress to the political and economic domains, referring to life 'under violations...politics and the destroyed economy' as 'extremely painful and hurtful' (mojea'a molem), and that civilians 'pay the price of the political tension'. The study indicated that poverty and political oppression

intersect in the oPt and lead to poorer psychological wellbeing (Kira et al., 2014), and that the political domain governs and impedes on multiple aspects of civilian life and wellbeing (Barber et al., 2014).

Material deprivation can be an actual threat to survival (Salih & Galapatti, 2006). The military blockade, the structural violence and economic oppression in the form of restricted economic opportunities to earn a living was described as making the situation very hard (al wada'a sa'ab jiddan) and 'unbearable', which 'no human could bear' (al thoroof saabah fouq ma tatahammaloh ma tatahammaloh taqah ai bani Adam), being killed slowly, and violating their human right to family life, stability, dignity, safety and a future, which led to inescapable suffering (al mua'anah), loss of hope, feelings of not being able to go on (mesh qader akammil), exhaustion, feeling broken, low morale and losses for participants. Hossam and Waleed discuss below, the detrimental impact economic oppression has on their wellbeing and lives:

...People in Gaza are killed by a blunt knife and we don't feel it; the lack of job opportunities psychologically destroyed us. This should be part of human nature; the natural human rights like safety, stability and job opportunities. No one mentions these in the whole world except for us because we lack them. We don't seek money, cars, villas, no, no. The normal person thinks of a small house, small family and a permanent income. That's it. We're not greedy to have something, however, the siege from which we suffer has cut all the ropes between us and safety, building a future or living peacefully.

(Waleed, M/27)

...I swear to God there's no amusement in the current situation; not in the Gaza Strip, it's not there because of the suffering we face. Even if you wanted to move from one place to another, it'd be all the same. There is no happiness...the situation is very hard in Gaza...

(Hossam, M/27)

These findings provide support for studies (Barber et al., 2014; Barber, McNeely, Allen et al., 2016; Barber, McNeely, El Sarraj et al., 2016) that have similarly identified a unique type of existential form of mental suffering among Palestinians in the oPt linked to oppressive political and economic conditions. In addition, there was a marked absence of stability and safety due to the occupation, which adversely led to psychological and social suffering for participants (Barber et al., 2014). Waleed's use of the local expression: 'the siege from which we suffer has cut all the ropes between us and safety' (al hesar illi benmor feeh ihna qata'a kul ahbal al aman) refers to the blockade as having destroyed hopes of safety.

The study's findings also add to the growing body of literature documenting how poverty and lack of livelihood opportunities are major stressors that negatively affect civilian wellbeing and mental health, and creates psychological suffering and hardship in conflict-affected areas (e.g. Barber, 2013; Chatty, 2010; McNeely et al., 2014; Salih & Galapatti, 2006; Save the Children, 2017; Schafer et al., 2014; Somasundaram & Sivayokan, 2013; Thabet & Abuteya, 2005). This study has highlighted how Israeli military practices and policies create and maintain oppression in a colonial context (Fisher, Sonn, & Evans, 2007; Martín-Baró, 1994) and that human suffering is intrinsically linked to injustice and is preventable (Burton, Kagan, & Duckett, 2012; Martín-Baró, 1994; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

The participants' experience of continual, systemic and structural oppression could possibly be more psychologically detrimental than specific incidents of conflict and violence, which is a unique finding of this study. These findings provide support for McNeely's et al. (2014) study, which found that human insecurity and chronic economic constraints in the oPt threaten wellbeing, perhaps more so than does direct exposure to violence. It has been highlighted that in the oPt 'poverty and powerlessness are just as salient as war events in shaping experiences of trauma' (Almedom & Summerfield, 2004, p. 385). Structural poverty and oppression can compound the trauma of warfare because it is the nexus of social suffering (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Lykes & Coquillon, 2009).

Elsewhere, some research studies have suggested that unemployment and the poverty stemming from unemployment were found to cause greater distress than war experiences and other traumas for conflict-affected people (Boothby et al., 2009; Kagee, 2004). Research conducted in Syria during the war indicated that civilians' primary worries were the lack of jobs and money (Save the Children, 2017). Miller and Rasmussen's (2010) model states how poverty mediates the relationship between armed conflict and mental health and psychological wellbeing. Empirical support for this model was demonstrated in Jordans, Semrau, Thornicroft, and van Ommeren's (2012) study, which assessed the perceived needs of displaced Iraqi people living in Jordan and Bhutanese refugee people living in Nepal. A significant linear correlation between traumatic exposure to common conflict related incidents and distress was found. When perceived unmet needs were added to the model, significant mediation effect was found for Iraqis to the extent where the correlation between trauma exposure and distress was no longer significant. In the Bhutanese group, the direct effect of trauma exposure and distress remained significant but reduced its power, indicating that unmet needs were still contributing significantly to overall distress.

The next section explores specifically the distinct psychological dimensions of humiliation and debasement stemming from politically induced poverty and structural violence.

3.1.2 | Economic oppression, humiliation and injuries to dignity

Consistent with Barber's et al. (2014) findings, the political and economic domains were primary concerns and unemployment was considered to lead to poverty, human suffering, psychological problems and reliance on charity in the oPt. The findings indicated the importance of having a means to generate an income, to be independent, have autonomy over their lives, and to live in a dignified manner with a basic standard of living. Participants expressed wanting to support themselves and their family through working, and that they did not want to be financially dependent and live insecurely, as highlighted below:

...I want to work and to maintain my family from my work, labour and effort. I want to achieve my dreams. I don't want to live depending on charitable assistance and donations.

(Salma, F/39)

In line with Barber's et al. (2014) findings, participants similarly described violations of dignity (e.g. 'not living like humans'). Salma draws attention to how the living standards are dehumanising; she asserts her human right to have autonomy over her life and basic living standards:

Interviewer: What are your needs?

To live in a standard that doesn't go against human life, to be offered a basic level of living standards.... I want to live in a respectful level in my house, this is the human's right of managing his own affairs; it's one of the simple rights guaranteed by the international organisations for human rights at least.

(Salma, F/39)

Consistent with the research literature in conflict-affected areas, although a research subject rarely explored in Gaza, economic insecurity and financial dependence on others due to poverty and unemployment stemming from economic oppression and structural violence was found to make them feel debased, 'humiliated' (akser ine), 'ashamed' (bekhajal), vulnerable and injured their dignity, as they relied on donations to survive (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Hamad & Pavanello, 2012; Narayan, Patel, Schafft, & Koch-Schulte, 2000), as illustrated by Salma and Waleed below:

He [landlord] donated the rent. I told him that this goes against my dignity; I don't beg. It's not my fault that I became a widow or that my life conditions turned to be like this...therefore, I had to look for alternatives and not to wait to take charity and alms [handouts] from people. I passed through another situation that I can never forget. When my husband passed away, I saw people collecting charity which they put it in an envelope to send. Of course, this thing shook me deeply to the extent that I returned the envelope and told them that I don't take charity from anyone, only from my effort and labour; I'm not ready to let myself or my children be humiliated ('akser ine') by anyone whoever he is. Therefore, I looked for a job.

(Salma, F/39)

Sometimes, a person has no money, so he asks his dad, or his mother secretly puts some money in his closet in his room. I mean, secretly without making him feel that they help him to strengthen his personality and power. She aims to show him that he's a man not a weak person who gave up his cards (sallam awraqoh) and left his family to spend over him.

(Waleed, M/27)

The following idioms of distress were newly identified in the study and were used in the context of economic insecurity and restricted livelihood opportunities under blockade. 'Akser ine' (humiliation) describes the self/soul as having been humiliated and psychologically broken by the humiliation. 'Sallam awraqoh' (the individual gave up their cards) describes the lack of power and surrendered position they hold due to their lack of money.

Narayan et al. (2000) carried out a large-scale international study investigating the realities of the poor, not specific to conflict induced poverty. A review of 81 participatory poverty assessment reports was conducted in 50 LMICs, with over 40,000 poor people from around the world (South Asia, East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, North Africa, Latin America, Caribbean and the former Soviet Union). The study's findings revealed that poverty creates three different layers of suffering and pain: (a) physical pain from working long hours and having insufficient food; (b) emotional pain from the lack of power and autonomy and daily humiliations of dependency that come with being poor; and (c) the moral pain of being forced to make difficult life decisions with the limited funds available. The layer of emotional pain described by Narayan et al. is noted in our study. In addition to the underlying themes they identified relating to poverty, which included powerlessness, violations of dignity and deprivation. Eggerman and Panter-Brick (2010) similarly found asking others for financial assistance and the inability to provide a stable household income induced shame in conflict-affected Afghanistan.

Similar to findings in our study, Narayan et al. (2000) found that people in Pakistan reported that receiving charity was humiliating because they would rather work for a living than be in receipt of charity. There are additional cultural and religious considerations that may further compound experiences of humiliation connected to reliance on charity reported by participants. For example, Arab cultures and Islamic understandings encourage people where viable to earn a living and not to rely on charity, and that it is better for the individual to give in charity rather than to be the recipient of charity. Furthermore, culturally and religiously there is a strong emphasis on fulfilling responsibilities towards others including taking care of the family, as well as the wider community. A lack of a stable income affects their ability to take care of their own and their family's material needs, alongside increasing their vulnerability. In addition, financial independence from parents/family and/or contributing to the household's living costs may be considered to mark the transition into adulthood, as alluded to by Waleed below and in earlier quotes. Being unable to uphold social norms and cultural values and identity due to poverty have indeed been found to create humiliation (Narayan et al., 2000).

I'm aware that my family spent over me so far and I wish to spend over them as I've started to feel ashamed because I couldn't afford myself an income at this age.

(Waleed, M/27)

Humiliation is considered an invisible trauma of war (Giacaman, Abu-Rmeileh, Husseini, Saab, & Boyce, 2007). Humiliation that is embedded in political systems that interfere with people meeting their needs is considered structural violence because humiliation creates injury for people (Barber, McNeely, Olsen, Belli, & Doty, 2016). Illustrated in this study, humiliation was embedded in political systems that interfered with civilians meeting their needs; these political systems created poverty that ordinary people struggled to escape from; this poverty created humiliation, shame and injuries to dignity. Other studies have found that humiliation and threats to dignity related to the occupation have ill effects on Palestinians (Barber, McNeely, Olsen et al., 2016; Giacaman et al., 2007); although these studies did not focus on economic oppression, the findings from our study add to the growing body of literature on humiliation induced by conflict by drawing attention to the role of economic oppression and structural violence in creating humiliation and injuries to dignity.

Previous sections have explored the threats to survival and psychological suffering stemming from structural violence and economic oppression. This next section explores the different layers of multiple losses and interruptions in the progression to the next life stage civilians experience as a result of economic oppression and subjugation.

3.1.3 | Economic oppression and lack of future – life on hold

All participants reported valuing and seeking economic security. Despite being professional university graduates, participants reported having 'no hope' (al amal daeef) in finding a job under the blockade, 'sitting idle' (benoqa'ad), and struggling to pay for crucial needs (e.g. food). There is a gap between reality and the hopes and expectations of young people, as acknowledged elsewhere (Giacaman et al., 2007; Hammad & Tribe, 2020a). There is a focus on daily survival, with an awareness that the capacity to progress is limited because they live under occupation (Hammad & Tribe, 2020a). UNRWA (2012) highlights how the blockade's destruction of livelihoods has led to the de-development of a well-educated and highly skilled society. Education is highly valued in the oPt and is typically equated with attaining a master's or PhD degree (Barber et al., 2014). Salma described how the lack of jobs has forced her to put her future plans and ambitions on hold, as she struggles to ensure her family's survival:

...I try to afford the minimum needs of my house, life requirements, the basics; to eat, to drink, to get dressed...I studied a Master's Degree, but I had to quit it, I wish to continue of course. You live, you eat and drink...you divide your responsibilities and dreams...I have many dreams and wishes, but it was very difficult to achieve them in light of the situation in Gaza...the Palestinian women's condition is very difficult due to the lack of job opportunities.

(Salma, F/39)

As noted elsewhere, the military occupation impedes on livelihoods (Hammad & Tribe, 2020b). Besieged in the Gaza Strip, Hiba discusses how they are locked in with access to education but a lack of jobs, similarly making reference to their lack of choice in this matter:

Everything is locked. No borders, no jobs and nothing. We have nothing but education... We have no choice but to learn. We study and sit idle, we learn and sit idle.

(Hiba, F/29)

The participants' lives appeared to be on hold; the lack of income interrupted transitioning to the next life stage, and being able to maintain and plan for a satisfying life and future (Fryer, 1986, 1995; Save the Children, 2015; Sharek Youth Forum, 2013). The findings indicate that there are multiple layers of loss connected to poverty and the lack of job opportunities that civilians face, which created social suffering, and a negative psychological impact. Losses included: stability, career, roles, autonomy, decision-making, agency, ability to plan their life and future, ability to settle down, get married and establish a family, opportunities to pursue their career, develop, self-actualise and

achieve their dreams and ambitions. Our study's findings are in line with other studies that have similarly found the pervasive negative impact poverty has on multiple domains of life, and how poverty impedes on autonomy, independence and the capacity to exercise control and choice in one's life (e.g. Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Narayan et al., 2000). Sharek Youth Forum's (2009) report draws attention to how high unemployment and poverty rates in the oPt puts young people's lives on hold at a crucial time of transitioning into adulthood. Without an independent income, young people lack the funds to buy or rent a house, get married, and establish a family and an independent household (Sharek Youth Forum, 2009). Waleed eloquently summarises the losses he encounters as a young person at a key transitional stage in his life, and the psychological impact this has on his very being, as he is not able to escape the politically imposed poverty and unemployment in Gaza:

The human is an energy and I can't go on. I'd like to have an MA degree abroad, to continue my life and to establish my future.

(Waleed, M/27)

The first point is related to the prison, the big prison where we live in Gaza. As a young person ...I dream about owning a project to offer me an income, because our age is passing quickly; after the age of thirty, in a specific period, you establish yourself, you settle down and you have an income. In the current situation, however, you have to start from the very beginning. The situation is hard...sorry to say this, I can't get married because I have no income.

(Waleed, M/27)

Consistent with Barber and colleagues' (Barber et al., 2014; Barber, McNeely, Allen et al., 2016; Barber, McNeely, El Sarraj et al., 2016) findings, aspects of existential mental suffering linked to oppressive political and economic conditions in the oPt were described in reference to one's spirit, morale, life and/or future as broken or destroyed; emotional and psychological exhaustion; and feeling tired. Suffering was described in reference to the self or spirit, morale and hopes and ambitions for the future, which was also found in this study.

Material deprivation frustrates the human desire for self-determination and agency, which eventually leads to disempowerment and poor psychological wellbeing (Fryer, 1995, 1997). According to community psychologies, poverty and unemployment is linked to wellbeing because wellbeing is negatively affected by a lack of power, and access to an income privileges the individual with greater power to fulfil their needs (Orford, 2008) and interests, establish and maintain a family, and to reduce human insecurity, livelihood dilemmas, financial stress and dependency (e.g. Narayan et al., 2000; Sharek Youth Forum, 2013).

Despite projected gender norms/expectations, there appeared to be little difference between identified women and men of this age group, who report the same lack of fulfilment regarding futurity and job security. This finding shows how women in this sample were able to access university level qualifications, this is not in line with the assumptions frequently made about Muslim Arab women, which is that they are ascribed restricted options in comparison to Muslim Arab men. The findings also challenge the stereotype that poverty and unemployment is due to a lack of access to education.

The next section summarises the main and unique findings of the study, and discusses implications.

4 | CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Contextualised understandings are emphasised throughout this study as opposed to the individual psychology of conflict-affected people, in keeping with community psychology and liberation psychology traditions (e.g. Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). Furthermore, the underpinning of community liberation psychology principles in this

study is reflected by the fact that (a) there has been a partnership with an NGO (which supports social justice); (b) it involved working with a hard-to-reach, marginalised and beleaguered community (e.g. Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010); (c) it implicitly promotes social justice by focusing on issues of collective importance and human rights (e.g. structural violence, economic oppression, poverty and unemployment); and (d) it contributes to the voice of underrepresented Palestinians in Gaza in sharing their experiences of economic oppression and structural violence (e.g. Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). The partnership with the NGO and the relevant acts stated above may challenge the dominance of individually focused models of psychology in conflict-affected areas, which is an important aspect of what community liberation psychology advocates.

This study draws attention to the use of economic oppression and Gaza's closure in the maintenance and extension of economic violence to maintain political domination/hegemony. This study privileges attention to the ways in which the Israeli military occupation creates and maintains power, structural violence and economic oppression (e.g. military blockade, politically imposed poverty and restricted livelihood opportunities) for Palestinian civilians in their day to day lives in the oPt. It challenges the traditional approaches and taxonomies conceptualising violence as employing direct infliction of physical force or physical damage (Bulhan, 1985). Oppression in conflict settings rarely comprises of physical force or physical damage alone, but utilises systematic, social, ethnic, economic and structural oppression as part of the strategy of violence (Bulhan, 1985).

Structural violence is considered the most lethal form of violence due to it being more difficult to discern, causing a greater number of deaths among the population, whilst presented as a routine order of life (Bulhan, 1985). The findings illustrated the deleterious effects of structural violence and economic oppression on participants meeting their basic and crucial needs. Through the imposition of the military blockade, and Israeli military control over land, movement of people, access to resources and employment, it has highlighted how professional university graduate civilians struggle to survive, are trapped in inescapable politically imposed poverty, and denied the opportunities to improve their impoverished living conditions and work their way out poverty. It has highlighted how economic oppression and structural violence limits their human rights, freedom, self-determination, autonomy, and futurity, which adversely affects their wellbeing, dignity, human security, and creates multiple losses, social and psychological suffering, and poor quality of life for the participants; thus providing support for community psychologies (e.g. Kagan et al., 2011; Orford, 2008) and liberation psychology theory (Martín-Baró, 1994).

This study challenges the medicalisation of distress and misery (Burton et al., 2012) and has contributed to unique insights regarding how continual, systemic and structural oppression can be potentially more psychologically detrimental than specific incidents of conflict and violence. It has also identified local expressions and idioms to express distress, humiliation and powerlessness in the context of economic insecurity.

The continuous stress and psychological and social suffering from the ongoing Israeli military occupation, within a colonial context of protracted conflict, calls into question the medicalisation and de-politicisation of Palestinian distress, and the need to move beyond the use of the posttraumatic stress disorder model used in the oPt (e.g. Giacaman et al., 2007, 2011; Tawil, 2013; Ziadni et al., 2011). In keeping with community liberation psychology, these findings instigate the need for a contextualised understanding of mental health in the oPt, which emphasises the importance of political stability, security, freedom, self-determination, poverty alleviation, social justice and human rights as the foundation of wellbeing (Kagan et al., 2011; Martín-Baró, 1994; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).

It highlights the need to decolonise mental health responses in disaster and conflict settings, and to adopt a mental health model embedded in a human rights social justice framework (e.g. Giacaman et al., 2007, 2011; Hammad & Tribe, 2020a; Tawil, 2013; Ziadni et al., 2011) that locates the causes of distress in the context of human rights violations and social injustice, and meets the mental health needs of Palestinians by addressing the root causes of their distress (Tawil, 2013). Indeed, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (2007) humanitarian guidelines reinforce that the promotion of human rights goes hand-in-hand with promoting mental health.

5 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Due to the small sample size, there are limitations on the generalisability of the findings, however, it is hoped that this is balanced out by the validity gained by the detailed attention given to the accounts of a few, particularly as this study has accessed a hard-to-reach community and provided an idiographic and contextualised understanding in an under-researched area. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study conducted in the Gaza Strip during the blockade which has explicitly examined the impact of structural, economic and systemic oppression from a community liberation psychology perspective.

Further research is needed to examine the different features of political conflict, beyond acute military violence and war, which affect mental health, such as politically engineered poverty. It is important to understand how people suffer, as it can guide practices and policies to minimise suffering (Barber, McNeely, El Sarraj et al., 2016). This study has conducted research into under-researched areas that are important for mental health and could help inform interventions offered in this context. It is recognised that the reduction of distress and difficulties, and the promotion of wellbeing, requires a change in the economic, political, environmental and social issues that give rise to such problems (Orford, 2008). Until a political solution to end the blockade is achieved, economic interventions are urgently needed to reduce poverty and unemployment, and to improve the living conditions of civilians.

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